**Soul Keeping**

**FBC Albemarle**

**September 10, 2017**

In 2016, we adopted our strategic plan that has driven our ministries over the past year and a half. The first in the plan is to focus on the food we eat in plenty even as we meet the needs of those who are food insecure in our community. The second initiative is to be a family of families by caring for one another within the body of Christ and reaching out to those who are vulnerable and lonely. As we try to address both of these foci of the church, a Health Ministry Team was created over the past year to help provide leadership in pushing us forward to meet our goals. Our Faith Community Nurses, Betty Mauldin and Liz Peele, who have been a tremendous asset to our care ministry, are leading this team to achieve our goals.

For the next several weeks, we will consider how our faith is connected to our general wellness. It is important that we have a holistic perspective on wellness. To experience true wellness, we need to have a healthy soul, body, mind and heart. Today, we begin with our soul.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* cited a study that indicates that in the 20th century, people who lived in each generation were three times more likely to experience depression than folks in the previous generation. Despite the rise of the mental health profession, people are becoming increasingly vulnerable to depression.

One theory behind why this is happening is because we have replaced faith, church and community with self. *Self* is a stand-alone, do-it-yourself unit, while the *soul* reminds us we were not made for ourselves. The soul always exists before God. The soul needs to be in relationship with God and with God’s people.

But what exactly is the soul? Dallas Willard explains it with concentric circles.[[1]](#footnote-1) The innermost circle is the human will – our capacity to choose. Our will is what separates us from all other living beings. We have the ability to reason and choose for ourselves. Next outer circle is the mind. The mind refers to our thoughts and feelings. We know that we are to set our minds on the things above, not on earthly things. The third circle is the body. The body is our little kingdom where our will and mind have an opportunity to be in charge. Finally, the last circle that encompasses all of the other circles is the soul. Willard said, “The soul is the capacity to integrate all the parts into a single, whole life. It is something like the operating system that runs a computer; you don’t usually notice it unless it messes up.” The human soul seeks to bring together our will and our mind and our body into an integral person. (or a person of integrity or genuineness) A soul is healthy – well-ordered – when there is harmony between all three entities.

So, if a healthy soul is integration of our will, mind and body, then an unhealthy soul is one that experiences *dis-integration*, and sin always causes disintegration of the soul. “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (v. 37-38) Often we read this passage and think that Jesus is teaching that there isn’t enough money, power and possessions in the world to save a person from Hell. Though that is true, it isn’t just referring to the life here-after. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life (soul) will lose it, but whoever loses his life (soul) for me and for the gospel will save it.” (v. 34-35) Jesus is saying that if you have a ruined soul – where the will and the mind and the body are disintegrated, disconnected from God, and living at odds with the way God made life in the universe to run – acquiring the whole world cannot produce enough satisfaction, meaning and goodness in life. Jesus was teaching about life today, not just life here-after.

So how do we keep our souls healthy? How do we keep our souls integrated with our will, mind and body? We start by acknowledging our basic neediness. Our flesh is weak. We give way to temptations and we often live life for ourselves rather than for God’s kingdom. We fill our soul’s desires with everything that opposes our true image while trying to convince ourselves that everything is well with our souls. It isn’t. We should stop trying so hard. We have to acknowledge that our souls cannot be healthy without the grace of God. We cannot have a healthy soul without being in fellowship with God and with God’s people consistently. We are needy!

Second, we need to learn to be content with God. Dallas Willard said, “You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy and confidence in your everyday life with God.” Certainly, Willard understood the value of scripture reading, daily devotions and a consistent prayer life. Yet often, these things in our lives become something to check off our list more than a meaningful time with our Lord. In addition to the 15 or 30 minutes we spend with God in scripture reading and prayer, we need to order the rest of the 23.5 hours to be God-centered filled with contentment, joy and confidence.

What Willard was trying to get across is that we need to find our identity in God rather than in the world. When we put God’s kingdom behind our own kingdom, our soul is disintegrated. When we our content living in God’s kingdom, our soul fully integrates our will, mind and body.

Finally, in order to keep our souls healthy, we need to remove anything that is hindering our soul. What good is it if we gain the whole world, yet forfeit our soul? What is hindering you in having an integrated soul? Is it materialism and consumerism? Having material possessions is not a bad thing in itself. It is more about where our heart is. Do we value our stuff more than we value our soul?

What about our accomplishments? Do you put your self-worth in what you have accomplished at work or what you have done in your career? Do you find self-worth in how others see you? Our value is secure in God. We are children of God in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

A simple way to guard our souls is to ask, “Will this situation block my soul’s connection to God?” We need to be disciplined in renouncing whatever does not lead to God. We need to remind ourselves that the world does not have the power to control our soul. External circumstances cannot keep us from God.

There once was a town high in the Alps that straddled the banks of a beautiful stream. The stream was fed by springs that had crystal clear water. Children laughed while playing beside it. Birds and geese swam in it. The rainbow trout were plentiful in the stream.

High in the hills, far beyond anyone’s sight, lived an old man who served as the Keeper of the Springs. He had been hired many years ago to keep the springs clean. He would travel from one spring to another to remove branches or fallen leaves or debris that might pollute the water. But his work was unseen.

One year, the town council decided they had more pressing needs than to employ an old man as a spring-cleaner. The town had roads to repair, taxes to collect and other services to provide. The money could be put to better use they thought.

So the old man left his post. High in the mountains, the springs went untended; twigs and branches and worse muddied the stream. Mud and silt compacted the creek bed; farm wastes turned part of the stream into stagnant pools.

For a time no one in the village noticed. But after a while, the water was not the same. It began to look different. The geese left to find other places to live. The children no longer played in the streams. The fish was no longer jumping. Everyone began to notice the loss of the beautiful stream that used to flow beside the village.

The city council reconvened and the decision was reversed. The old man was rehired. After a short while, the springs were cleaned and the streams were clear once again. The children played, wildlife returned, and the village came back to life. The life of the village depended on the stream and the life of the stream depended on the keeper.

**The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper.**

1. John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 40-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)