

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

THE WORSHIP OF GOD • AUGUST 2, 2020

“IT’S ALL ABOUT SOUL”

**The Scripture
Matthew 22:34-40**

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

**The Message
It’s All About Soul: Love
Ed Varnum**

Synopsis: The language of the soul and love in the Bible is just remarkable. There is the soul love of friends in the story of David and Jonathan. They get attached. *“Jonathan loved David as his own soul.”* That’s love. There is the soul love of a parent and child seen in Genesis where we learn that Jacob’s soul is closely bound up with Benjamin’s soul. In the Song of Solomon, the bride says, *“My soul went out to him, the one I love, because of his words.”* Souls get all connected like that. Getting “soul deep” with God is the ultimate connection... and just might change the way we see the souls of others, too.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37)



It’s one of those stories that shape a family. Perhaps you had them growing up. You heard them from your parents. Stories that were so much a part of you, you swear you can remember when they happened, even if you were an infant at the time. Here’s one from the Varnum family – the elevator version.

My father was at work, my mother at home with my sister and me when she got a call that my father had been in a terrible accident. Dropping us off at the neighbors, mom rushed to the hospital where the doctor pulled no punches. He was in a coma with massive head injuries. Little hope. Time would tell.

She could stay with him in the room, they said. So, she stayed there, constantly at his bedside. She said one thing kept repeating itself in her mind, over and over, over, and over. She couldn't stop it. She tried! But it was always there . . . in her thoughts . . . on her lips . . . repeating from beginning to end.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters, he restoreth my soul.”

My father survived, later to even thrive. He lived the rest of his life with somewhat impaired hearing and no senses of taste or smell. But the rest was there. And also, there was the Twenty-third Psalm. It would be my mother's strength in struggle and comfort in grief, her “go to” Scripture for the rest of her life.

Sometimes they're called life verses, these important scriptures. “The Lord is my shepherd.” “God so loved the world.” “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” They're not magical. My father did not get better because my mother kept repeating the right words. But she found strength, hope, comfort, and guidance through that dark valley.

Not all Bible verses are created equal. Just hear the question in our text today. *“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment?”* Do you hear the assumption in that question? There are great commandments and not so great commandments. Have you read through Leviticus? Deuteronomy, perhaps?

So, what is the greatest commandment? It's an important question. But not all motives behind important questions are created equal either.

Matthew 22:15 says, *“The Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words. And they joined with the Herodians to trick him.”* Now, Pharisees and Herodians were not exactly best buds, but they decided Jesus was a common problem, and they teamed up to use the Bible to attack him. But he foiled them with his answer, so the Sadducees came that same day, trying the same trick, and again left befuddled by his answer.

Verse 34 says, *“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together and one of them, an expert in religious law, tested him with this question.”* And

then we have it, after all the tricks and traps, yet one more ... a test! What will he say we can use to make him look bad?

“Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?”

And Jesus answers, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

That’s what Jesus said, but in my imagination, I picture him saying more, adding something like, “Sadducees, Pharisees, hypocrites, with your games using Scripture: aren’t you clever! But even if you win, you lose. All your tricks show that have missed the point of it all.”

They missed it all! And it’s happened over and over throughout the history of religion. It started early in the church. In the Book of Revelation chapter two, the Resurrected Christ appears to John on the Isle of Patmos, saying, *“Write a letter to the church in Ephesus, saying, I know you works, your do good stuff! You say the right things and look so good in your religion. But you’re missing it, Ephesus. You have left your first love.”*

The church at Ephesus looked so good, they did it by the book. But leaving their first love, they became like a body of religion without the essence which is their very soul. Perhaps you’ve wondered how truly religious people can be incredibly horrible in the name of God. They have forgotten the Great Commandment on which all the rest must hang.

Without the Great Commandment, something in the religion or the tradition or the culture rises to most important. For some that will be a point of doctrine or a rule of behavior. For some it will be the way we worship or getting more people in the building . . . or the building! Or the budget. Something becomes the main thing.

That’s the first thing that happens when the Great Commandment no longer is at the center of our faith. The second is that religion becomes a tool to benefit MY self and MY group. And from there, it is a small step to religion becoming a weapon to be used against those “others.” After all, THOSE people aren’t like US! They don’t have our beliefs or values. They have a different religion or culture or language or color or orientation or ... you fill in the gaps.

But the Great Commandment confronts us with the truth that each person, every person, is created in the image of God, breathed by the Spirit to be a living soul, not a thing to be used or tricked or manipulated or “fixed,” but a child of God to be LOVED!

I have a friend who likes to say, “The Christ in me loves the Christ in you.” I loved hearing that. It was an amazing connection between us, bypassing any difference, greater than any doctrine, the soul of our faith. *The Christ in me loves the Christ in you.*

When Mark announced this new series, “It’s All About Soul,” it made me think of a book I read early in my ministry called *Soul Talk*, by Larry Crabb, a professor of pastoral counseling and later an author and lecturer. Dr. Crabb wrote the book after suffering and nearly dying of cancer. The experience transformed his life, causing him to rethink everything he previously thought and taught about pastoral counseling. Reading the book had the same effect on me. It was transformative!

The basic message of the book to those who pastor and counsel and desire to help others in personal crises is . . . “Shut up!” Shut up and start listening. We need to slow down our efforts to give answers and “fix” this person before us, and listen to their story, listen for where God is already at work in their lives.

That’s just touching on the core of his message, but that much judged me. Too much of what I did as a pastor in one on one conversation was not about listening, focusing on their story, learning who they are, loving that person before me. It was thinking about what I should say or do, or what they need to do to get “right.” And, to be brutally honest, it was also to “get this job done, thinking about the next thing I had to do. I mean, I had things to do: people to visit, meetings to plan, sermons to prepare, classes to teach.

For instance, I taught discipleship classes. I was discipling people! Here is how. I made lesson plans of what they needed to know, then I would (figuratively speaking) open the top of students’ heads and pour that information in! . . . “Ah, we finished session the course of lessons. You’re a Christian now.”

But discipleship is not information, it is FORMATION! It is creating an ongoing relationship in Christ where we can serve and learn and grow, teacher and student, experiencing the love of God in action. It is allowing that relationship to free the Christ in me to love the Christ in you.

The Christ in me loves the Christ in you.

The Christ in me is growing in influence and direction through an encounter with the Christ in you.

The depth and joy of our faith, the healing of our souls is not through information but formation within encounter . . . God, neighbor, self through love. I have found the most profound experiences that filled my soul and grew my faith were in those moments of

encounter with another, getting self out of the way in openness and love. It is nothing short of life changing.

I can tell you the single greatest moment of heart and mind and soul I have ever experienced was through a moment of greatest connection and love. I was standing by my mother as she lay in the ICU of a Phoenix hospital nearing the close of her life. We both knew. She even told me and said, "I am ready."

Looking there at my mother, still so alert but oh so very frail, my thoughts turned to a story I had heard her tell so many times through my youth. I knelt by her bed, took her hand, and leaned forward, saying softly, "*The Lord is my shepherd.*"

She whispered, "*I shall not want.*" And together, looking into each other's eyes, soul embracing soul, we continued through the psalm. Would you join me?

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Listening. Loving. Soul touching soul. It really is all about soul, isn't it? It's all about the essence of your very life that loves ... God above all ... and others in a way that doesn't use them as objects but in communing with what is important to them, to listen, to know as a human of importance and value, as you know you, yourself, to be precious and valued. May all other things, as valuable and important as they may be, may all else rest on this.

Amen.