

## Soulfull

Genesis 2:7; Matthew 16:26; 22:34-38; 26:36-38; Luke 1:39-56

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“My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Mary’s soul was FULL. She knew she was pregnant by the time she traveled alone to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant, with the child who would be known as John the Baptist. Cousin Elizabeth greeted Mary with a blessing that is well known to Roman Catholics, who call this greeting the “Hail Mary,” because Elizabeth “hailed” or said “hello” to Mary: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Mary’s soul was FULL as she sang this psalm which has become known as the “Magnificat.”<sup>1</sup> But, Mary was not the first to sing this song. Mary sings the song of Hannah, from the Hebrew Scriptures, for Hannah sang this song when *she* was rejoicing over the birth of *her* son, Samuel. (I Sam. 2:1)

“My soul magnifies the Lord.”

What is a “soul”?

We read in the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version of the Bible) that “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a **living being**.” The translation could also be: “the human became a **living soul**.” There is a clever use of words in this significant passage. The word “humus” means “earth,” or “dust.” The word that has been translated into English as “man” was “Adam” which actually means “human.” So the Bible really reads: HUMAN was made from HUMUS, that is, Human was made from earth. How did humans emerge from humus? This creation story says God breathed into the humus, and then humans became living *souls*.<sup>2</sup>

*Soul*. We don’t use that term much today. If someone said “soul,” many of us would think of soul music. When we say something is “soulful,” we may mean it is done with feeling or that it is profound.

Thirty six years ago I was a chaplain at a hospital in downtown L.A. for a year. I was on-call every four days, so it was not surprising that I was the only other person in the room of several people, when a patient died. These were intense times, as I sat, holding a person’s hand, as they died. I sought to represent all the people who had loved them during their years in this world. *Just as* several of those people died, it seemed to me at the time that “something left.” A couple years ago there was a movie which I did not see entitled *21 Grams*. Evidently 21 Grams is the weight that a body tends to shed at the moment of death. It’s about the weight of a hummingbird. Is it possible that the “soul” weighs about that? Their breath?

Today’s sermon title, “Soulfull,” is difficult to make it through spell-checks, with its 2 “l’s” intact. Soulfull. Mary’s soul was full. One of my favorite theologians speaks of people who are able to take in the lives of others with compassion as “fat souls.” I think that Mary’s soul was “fat.” Her soul was filled with compassion, joy, something we might call *relatedness*.

Perhaps every single living soul, or human, does not experience “fat soul” moments, but it seems to me that many of us do occasionally experience these soul-full times. I’ve been on a soul-full hunt recently and found many examples. I encourage you to notice people who are joyous in their work or play, with compassion for others. There are many such fat-souled people. I’ll share three examples.

A minister and his wife from the Southeast United States, while traveling in Guatemala, were told to “catch Bus 82.” The bus they were riding on, they knew, would go only part way to their destination. They had not realized it would stop in a completely unfamiliar barrio. The driver said, “Exit” in Spanish, so they did. On the dark street corner in this completely unknown place where they waited for Bus 82, they noticed two older women. Those two women tried to communicate with this American couple, but neither American understood Spanish. The older two women realized that they were unable to be understood, so they waited alongside the Americans silently at the bus stop. When a bus finally came, the American couple hesitated, not sure whether it was the correct bus to take. The two Guatemalan women said, “No, no.” Then a bus came, and the women said, “Si, si.” The U.S. couple boarded the bus, saying, “Gracias” and “Feliz Navidad,” assuming that the women were waiting for yet another bus. But as the couple looked out their bus window, they realized that the Guatemalan women were walking away from the bus stop. They had stayed there solely to help this couple. I would describe both the couple inside the bus as well as the couple walking away from the bus stop as “soulfull.”<sup>3</sup>

Probably every single one of us has read and seen *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. In one famous scene Mrs. Cratchit asks her husband about their son, “And how did Tiny Tim behave?” Mr. Cratchit answers, “As good as gold. And better, somehow, he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest thoughts you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember, upon Christmas day, who it was who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.” Tiny Tim seemed to have a “Fat Soul.” As his parents reflected upon Tim, so, too, were their souls “full.”

Uri Zhivago waxes soulfull in my favorite scene in the book *Dr. Zhivago*, when Uri is thinking about his beloved Tanya, who is now pregnant. He comments, “It has always seemed to me that every conception is immaculate, and that this dogma concerning the Mother of God expresses the idea of all motherhood. . . ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God. . .’ Any woman could say it, for every one of them God is in her child. Mothers of great men must have been familiar with this feeling, but then in the beginning all are mothers of great men--or women--it isn’t their fault if life disappoints them later.”<sup>4</sup>

The Americans in Guatemala being helped so graciously by the two older women, Tiny Tim, transcending his own limits to consider how his presence might lead others to think of Jesus, and Dr. Uri Zhivago, reflecting upon all mothers, all seem to be having “fat-soul” or “soul-full” moments. Yet, my soul can get pretty fat when I look up at the mountains surrounding Redlands . . . where I can so easily sense the vastness of God’s created beauty and the depth of the relatedness of all things.

Once we start paying attention to the soul, we realize that it can, in addition to being full and fat, also can be very sad. We might accurately describe ourselves at times as having “soul pain.” When we experience deep rejection, or when we painfully

question something we had thought was an absolute truth, or if we have to face grief, or if we sink down, disappointed in the behavior of humankind, or when our faith is challenged, or if we are enduring physical pain to the point of utter exhaustion--then we likely could have what it makes sense to me to call "soul pain."

Bishop Melvin Wheatley wrote "The celebration gap between the happy and the sad tends to grow wider during Advent and Christmas than at any other time of the year. As the spirits of some people soar, the spirits of others, instead of soaring, tend to diminish and to depress. When all you feel like doing is crying it hurts deeply to be expected to laugh." Poetically he wrote:

"What is there to celebrate?  
in the midst of affluence, if you are poor? . . .  
What is there to celebrate  
about the sparkling eyes of children when you're trying to deal with the deep scars of your own  
childhood?  
What is there to celebrate about preacher-talk of 'goodwill on earth' when you have just lost your  
job?"

After waxing poetic, Bishop Wheatley pondered, "Could it be that in a world of tears, having a place to cry is something to celebrate? --especially when that place celebrates Christmas and what Christmas celebrates is a heritage not of undiluted happiness but of indomitable hope?"

Jesus experienced soul pain. He was in the garden of Gethsemane, praying that the events which he watched unfolding might turn out differently. Yet, his friends were falling asleep. He said to his friends, at that low point in his journey, "My *soul* is exceedingly sorrowful . . . tarry here, and watch with me."

Soul pain does not have to remain. Souls can be cured; souls can heal. Souls can rejoice again. The discipline that I taught in seminary was called "Pastoral Counseling," or "Pastoral Care." We all know that term, as we even might go across the street to the Christian Counseling Center seeking "pastoral counseling." That term has just been used since about the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a number of centuries before that the discipline itself was called "The Cure of Souls."

Sometimes we are soul-full--our living beingness radiates God breathing through us vibrantly.

Other times we have an emptiness that is best described as having a *soul in pain*.

Jesus was not a scribe and not a rabbi; not a teacher and not master of wisdom. What people found in him was exactly this: *he was a healer of souls*.

I want our worship and our times together to be places where people can become acquainted with soulfulness. And I want us to be a place where those who have pain in their soul can find compassion and healing. To the latter we can ask, in effect, "What can we do to help your soul want to magnify God?"

At Christmastime, when we speak of all sorts of miracles and things inhabiting the sky like bright stars and angels and flying reindeer, the time is ripe not only for souls to feel full and fat, but also for soul pain to be healed. The time is ripe to reveal the deep relatedness of all things, and as that occurs we are revealed to be humans, from humus—that is, *living souls*--aware of the Divine Breath pulsing through us that makes us truly live, soul-fully.

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<sup>1</sup> Magnificat gained the name because it is the first word in the Latin translation.

<sup>2</sup> In Genesis 2:7 the word “nephesh” is translated “soul” in the KJV and “being” in the RSV. Nephesh, soul denotes the whole person. Humans became a living nephesh.

<sup>3</sup> *Celebrate and Witness: Devotional Stories, Prayers and Poems of United Methodists*, p. 18 by rev. M. Ervin Dailey.

<sup>4</sup> *Dr. Zhivago*