

September 15th: Holistic Spirituality

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. In the past, we’ve followed a lectionary—or a predetermined set of texts that take us through the Old and New Testaments—but this time, we’ll be creating our own path through the scriptures. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. We will identify certain stories, songs, and wisdom from the Bible that can teach us more about these needs, conditions, and experiences, and help us connect with God and with each other. This first month, we will be introducing some foundational themes that will guide us through the rest of the year, so that we can enter into these conversations with a similar mindset, and a common vocabulary. Then we’ll launch into more specific meditations, focused on experiences such as loneliness, family dysfunction, anxiety, addiction, and more. We won’t be able to cover everything, but we hope that what we do share will raise awareness, build relationships, and connect you with resources in our larger community.

If that sounds good to you, we’re so glad that you are here. Before we launch into our topic for today, I invite you to pray with me.

God Who Is Three in One, we come to you from the fragmented lives we lead, and we are ready to be whole. We go about our days in a broken world, but we know that you have a better way for us, a way where we can rest in the fullness of who we are. Be with us now in the silence of our hearts and the meditations of our minds so that we might come to know you more. Amen.

For those of you who joined us last week, we answered the question: “why soulcare,” by reminding ourselves that God created each of our souls out of the dust of earth, and the breath of God lives inside each of us. Therefore, it only makes sense that we should take care of our souls, because our souls are how we remain deeply connected to our Creator. So if we’re not already doing that important work, it might be time for us as individuals, and us a congregation to ask ourselves, “why not?”

I’m hoping that this series will help us to learn new things about ourselves, so that we can grow and heal as God leads, but I’m also hoping that these topics and themes help to learn new things about God and what it means to be a person of faith.

For example, did you know that when God was planning for the creation of humans, we get a clue about God’s own character? Yup, these passages about human beings help us see God more clearly, because our text uses pretty specific language to describe God’s plans and intentions for creation.

You might remember from last week that we referenced Genesis 1:26-27, which is the moment when we first hear about God’s design for humanity. Those verses say this, “Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Did you catch that clue in verse 26—our biblical authors wrote that God intended to create human beings “in our image, in our likeness,” and in fact the Hebrew words behind our English translation are not singular like we might expect, but plural. That’s right, in this passage, God uses plural pronouns! The God who created the universe and everything in it describes themselves in the plural, on purpose.

Now this doesn't mean that there are multiple gods, like you might encounter in other religions, but that the true identity of God includes multiple pieces or parts that act in collaboration with each other. Theologians call this concept "the Trinity," and while it's a pretty difficult idea to wrap our brains around, I'm going to do my best to briefly summarize it for us.

In the Trinity—which is composed of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—each of these unique identities within God is distinct from each other, but together they share in one singular purpose and character. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit might move and be perceived independently of each other, but they are always joined together by the same goals and essential nature. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit might be separated from each other in some ways and referenced separately in some stories in our Bible, but at their core, they are what we call "three in one."

We could spend hours trying to parse out the specific biblical and theological implications of this trinitarian identity, but we won't, because the most important part of this whole concept is that God's multifaceted character can encourage us to see ourselves the same way. After all, didn't God make us in God's own image and likeness?

Well, our text for this morning, from Genesis chapter 2, has sometimes been intentionally or unintentionally misinterpreted in an attempt to keep us from seeing ourselves this way. Verse 18 begins with this oft-quoted line, "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" And then in verse 20, the story continues, "But for the man no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man." This part of the creation narrative ends with this statement: "The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man.'"

You've probably heard this kind of language before, at least in some capacity. This idea that one half of humanity was created from a piece of another has been used to subjugate and diminish women since well, the dawn of time. This concept of a rib being taken out and then used to form something else is a fractured attempt to make men seem like the blueprint and women like the reproduction, rather than seeing God's image as the model for both. And I think some religious leaders have misused this passage as evidence that women are less than in the eyes of God and therefore should be seen as less than in our human world, but this could not be further from the truth.

If you take a closer look at the Hebrew word that is used in these verses, commonly translated as "helper" in English, you'll see that God didn't intend to find a subordinate for the first human, but rather an equal. The Hebrew phrase "ezer kenegdo," is only used a few times in scripture, but when they do show up, it's in a place of importance—even reverence. In fact, the word "ezer," is most directly translated as "to rescue" or "to save," and when this word is used in the context of God, it often refers to God's protective action towards Israel. In these passages, God saves his people as a warrior would, and rescues them from the harm that threatens them.

The woman that is created saves the man from his solitude—humans save each from our solitude, because the fullness of God is revealed in our plurality.

Put more simply: what our biblical authors were likely trying to communicate is that humanity has always existed in deep connection with each other. Our bodies and our souls are intertwined in ways that we don't always understand—we are both distinct and separate in some ways, but also brought together and made whole in others. Our biblical authors were also probably reminding themselves that part of our spiritual origins is rooted in our need for each other—we need each other just as much as we need God's breath in our lungs. We need the care and support of our fellow humans just like we need God's love. We need to be reminded of our common dignity and purpose, so that we can live as God intended. And this is true when we think about our individual, internal reality too.

Sometimes when we think about human beings or what it means to be human, we divide ourselves up into completely separate categories—with our bodies, minds, and spirits virtually in opposition to each other. Sometimes the language of our culture pits these pieces of ourselves against each other, which I find very frustrating. In some ways, it's almost like our society expects our brains and our bodies to be natural enemies—at war with each other, fighting for control.

We might have heard certain philosophical arguments, even religious arguments, claiming that our bodies are inherently bad or sinful, and only our spirits are good or loved by God. We might hear people say things like “mind over matter,” as a way to describe using their brain or mental willpower to control themselves in either healthy or unhealthy ways, or we might hear certain voices in diet culture or the wellness industry tell us that we can't trust the signals that our bodies give us, because our mental discipline is more important. Or we might feel like certain forms of mental illness mean that our brains are conspiring against our bodies, and driving us to act in ways that harm ourselves.

But is that what God wants for us? Well no, I don't think it is. Is any of that divisive and shaming language the truth about God's design for humanity? Again, I don't think so.

I think this passage from Genesis tells us that God designed us for both plurality and wholeness. Like God, we've always been meant to have multiple parts. We were designed to be a multifaceted being, because our Creator is also multifaceted. Every part of us, every piece of the puzzle that is our complex bodies, minds, and souls, is created good, and every part is loved by God. Like God's vision for the first humans, we're also designed to be in collaboration, to exist in harmony and act in ways that are true to our essential character and divine purpose.

So how do we get to that point? How do we find the balance between being composed of different pieces and being whole?

Well, I'd like to encourage us to start this journey of self discovery and growth by leaning into what I'm going to call "holistic spirituality." I know that sounds like a "new age," or "woo-woo" concept, but I promise that it's something we see time and time again in our Bible—both modeled for us by God, and something that human beings can work towards as we navigate this life of faith.

Holistic spirituality is a kind of faith that seeks intentional integration—integration between parts of ourselves as individuals, and integration between ourselves and others in sacred community. Holistic spirituality sees all parts of ourselves—body, mind, spirit—as essential and trustworthy pieces of our spiritual practice.

Our bodies can and should be part of how we engage with God—just like we use our brains to engage with God through practices like prayer.

We can and should be intentional about taking time to care for our bodies just like we take care of our mental health.

We can and should trust the information that we get from different pieces of ourselves—and see that information as wisdom rather than as competing data.

We should allow ourselves to have different seasons, and to undergo changes, and to see ourselves as part of something bigger.

Holistic spirituality gives us the opportunity to value the multifaceted nature of our fellow humans—we can look for chances to learn from and connect with people that bring different insights and experiences to the table. And when we partner with others in our spiritual journey, we participate in the integration that God designed us for.

So I have some questions for you to ponder as you enter another week. As you think about this idea of holistic spirituality and what it might mean to focus on integration as an individual and community—here's what I want to offer you to reflect on:

What would it look like for you to have your body and mind be brought together as allies united in the common goal of greater health?

What would it look like for you to begin to trust that both your body and your brain have an important role to play in your spiritual growth?

If you imagined a peaceful and whole relationship between different pieces of yourself, what would change about your mindset and your behavior?

What would it look like for you to break down any patterns or thoughts that keep you from being the fullness of who God created you to be?

You don't need to have the answers right now, God knows that I don't have all the answers myself, but I invite you to consider what wholeness in the midst of complexity might feel like for you. I invite you to think about how you might be able to work towards the peace that God has intended for you.

I invite you to start thinking about spirituality as a holistic practice—because trying to achieve greater health or a deeper faith is a soul-full endeavor. And that's what God wants for each of us—our Creator wants for our souls to be full.

Amen.