

SOUL-MENDING IN A TORN WORLD

Church of the Servant

Lent, 2017

Last week, we examined the soul of our nation in terms of our social, political, and economic priorities. There are some marvelous characteristics of our national soul identity, but we also pointed at some dispositions and attitudes that ought to give us pause.

This week, we turn to our soul as human beings. We begin by considering a prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep

I pray thee Lord my soul to keep

If I should die before I wake

I pray thee Lord my soul to take

Were you taught that prayer as a child? I was, and I prayed it every night with my boys when they were young, and I tucked them into bed . . . but I changed the words: *If you should come before I wake, I pray thee Lord my soul to take.*

Somehow, it never occurred to me that God taking their soul might be even more scary to them than the notion of dying. The writer Anne Lamott says, "That prayer did not work for me as a child. Don't be taking my soul from me. Leave my soul right here in my 50-pound body."

My philosopher friend at Duke, Owen Flanagan, has been quoted to assert that there is no place in science for the notion of a soul. "De-souling is the primary operation of the scientific image." It is a world view in which we are simply material beings.

Most of us operate with a Looney Tunes notion of the soul:

If Daffy Duck were blown up with dynamite, then there would be a transparent image of Daffy Duck that would float up from the dead body. The translucent image would have wings and carry a harp. From the air the apparition would speak down to Bugs Bunny, who had set off the dynamite.

In all of the above, there is an assumption that the soul is a ‘something’ that can be separated from our being. But what if we are a soul in our integrated essence? In the second creation hymn in Genesis 2:7, we read:

*Then the Lord God formed a human of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and that human became a living **nephesh** [a living soul.]*

In Western philosophy, shaped as it were by Greek thought, we think about separate entities: body, mind, soul, and spirit. And in Scripture, Luke 10:27, we read these words: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.*”

OUR MACHIVELLIAN SELVES IN A DE-SOULED SOCIETY

One of our Board members at Duke Divinity School signed all our board to a membership in The Trinity Forum, and I am privileged to still be a participating member of the Forum.

Why Means Matter

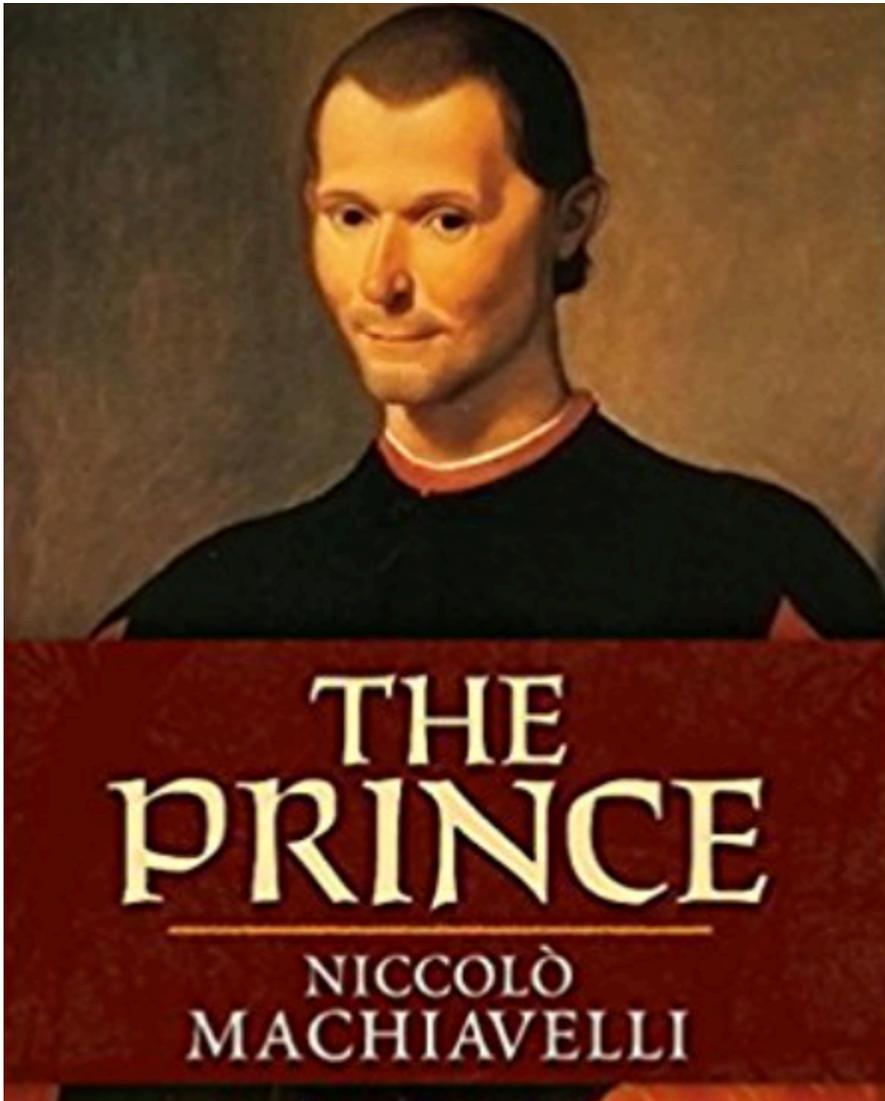
Thu, Feb 22 2018 by: Cherie Harder

One of the most significant recent shifts in public attitudes is the crumbling of trust in bedrock institutions – ranging from Congress to academia, law enforcement, finance, the media, business, health providers, even the church. As respect for such institutions, along with the norms and limits that defined them has eroded, popular adulation has been redirected to those who seem to stand “outside the system” – the strongman leader, the brainiac innovator, the entrepreneur-explorer, or the media-manipulating celebrity.



Not surprisingly, the result is increasing disdain for the rules and restraints that stand in the way of “getting things done.” Such impatience can be seen everywhere from the famously toxic environments of some of the “hottest” tech companies, to the tolerance of decades of abusive, even criminal behavior on the part of entertainment moguls (so long as they produce blockbusters), to the change of mind, following years of political frustration, of some social and religious conservatives about the importance of character in public life, with one family values leader offering “mulligans” for immoral behavior so long as they had “someone on the playground willing to punch the bully.” Worse, some have claimed that a history of rule-breaking or mistreatment of others (euphemistically referred to as “toughness” or “passion”) is part of what makes for success – as if sin were a strength.

There is a long history to such a stream of thought, perhaps best articulated by the political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli, who held that politics (and by extrapolation, other forms of leadership) was by nature grubby enough that an adept practitioner would often need to be unjust, deceitful or vicious in his methods if he were to successfully achieve his goals, but that the end result justifies the dirty work. He argued: “How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his word and live with integrity rather than craftiness, everyone understands; yet we see from recent experience that those princes have accomplished most who paid little heed to keeping their promises, but who knew how craftily to manipulate the minds of men. In the end, they won out over those who tried to act honestly.”



While there is often short-term advantage in dishonesty and manipulation, Machiavelli's conclusions are debatable. (Presumably the master practitioner of his own philosophy, he spent much of his life exiled, imprisoned, and disgraced.) But part of the great challenge of the Christian faith to such *realpolitik* is a required concern for not only what we do, but how we do it – a call to follow the way that Jesus lived, regardless of whether it confers advantage. As Eugene Peterson wrote in *The Jesus Way*:

“To follow Jesus implies that we enter into a way of life that is given character and shape and direction by the one who calls us. To follow Jesus means picking up rhythms and ways of doing things that are often unsaid but always derivative from Jesus, formed by the influence of Jesus. To follow Jesus means that we can't separate what Jesus is saying from

what Jesus is doing and the way that he is doing it.” He continued: “The devil is content to leave the matter of ends – the goal, the purpose, the grand work of salvation – uncontested. His tempting is devoted exclusively to ways, to the means that are best suited to accomplish the end...”

If following the example of Jesus leads us to consider carefully not only our goals, but our means and methods, it also leads us to a wiser understanding of human nature and the need for limits, as well as a more humble and restful reliance upon the One whose path is sure, whose knowledge is complete, whose ends and means are perfect and united.

In other words, we should love God with all our being, our whole selves. What I do with my body is not separate from my mind, and my mind and body are not separate from my soul. In this biblical anthropology we are understood to be a corporate personality – indissolubly connected. Indeed, the body will wither and die, but both Judaism and Christianity posit a future resurrection. The death of the body is not viewed as the final word, because we are more than a mere body.

There is much to unpack here, but before we move on to consider our soul, let's first examine what we mean by "mind" when we quote loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In Western thought, our mind is basically a rational capacity by which we make decisions, as reflected in the expression, "I have changed my mind about that." We assume that we take in information in an objective manner; we weigh the pro and con of the information received; and we make an informed decision.

Across the medical and larger scientific community, this segmentation of mind from body and the whole self is being radically examined and re-thought. Perhaps it is time for the Church to do a little re-thinking, and it seems to me that the Bible is not a bad place to begin for an ethical and theological perspective. In Scriptural thought, the mind is not merely a rational capacity for decision making. It is more like that composite which defines our disposition – the inclination of our character.

Philippians 2:4-7

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not a thing to be grasped to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the

form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Then in verse 8, The Apostle Paul sets out his expanded delineation of what should be part and parcel of this disposition, this attitude, this mindset:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

All of the above leads me to say that whatever my soul is as a human being, made in the image of God and called into increasing God-likeness, at its deepest level it should be akin to this attitude and disposition. A God-inclined Soul is a beautiful thing. It has been my privilege in the course of ministry to be in the presence of some beautiful souls. At some point, our bodies will begin to fail us, but even then a beautiful soul can be discerned. In his book, ***Soul Keeping***, John Ortberg tells a powerful story. Ortberg operates under an assumption that I believe is biblical and theologically sound: “The soul is what connects all those innermost parts [of our being], connects them with God, and was made for harmony all the way through. Notice how the Psalmist writes: ‘Bless the LORD, O my soul: and *all that is within me, bless his Holy Name*’.” We are designed to be integrated beings, but as Parker Palmer so aptly observes, there are so many things that would tear us asunder: “The Divided life is a wounded life, and the soul keeps calling us to heal the wound.”

So, here is the story about a ‘beautiful soul.’ Ortberg gets the story from a Yale professor of psychiatry, Jeffrey Boyd. The beautiful soul is a woman named Patricia. Patricia suffered from the effects of diabetes, a heart attack, and two strokes; she went blind, went into renal failure (which required dialysis), and eventually had both her legs amputated – all while only in her thirties. Patricia was placed in a nursing home, except for those several times a year when she had to be hospitalized, frequently drifting into a coma for one or two weeks at a time.

Pat was part of a church in Washington, D.C., that wanted to create a homeless shelter. They searched in vain for someone with the leadership skills to pull it off . . . so Pat volunteered to take it on. She could not do it all, but she took the leadership role. In between dialysis and amputations and comas, she pulled together the team and got the zoning changes. She lined up the architects and led the successful fund-raising drive. She then helped the team figure out the rules for the homeless people who used the shelter, and she recruited and trained the staff who ran it. She was relentless in her determination to make the homeless shelter a reality.

When Pat died after the shelter's first successful year in operation, homeless people stood next to U.S. Cabinet members and Secretary of State James Baker at her funeral. They were one and all in the presence of a beautiful soul: *The soul knows a glory that the body cannot rob*. Hear these words from Pat before she died: "The only thing I can depend on with my body is that it will fail me. Somehow my body is mine, but it is not me."

I would say to Pat, "You are right. Your body is not you. Your soul is you."

I must confess to you that for the most part in my life I have been too busy with other things to practice good soul-care. Although at times I have lived my life "in the shallows," I hope I was not quite as superficially self-centered as some subjects of a Duke study. Along with colleagues at UNC-Chapel Hill and Harvard these scholars studied the impact of "fake-adornment" on our ethics.

The women in this study were given a pair of very expensive Chloe sunglasses to wear. They were all given the exact same pair of expensive eye glasses, BUT half the women were told that their glasses were 'knock offs,' not the real thing. Even though they were assigned at random, in follow-up studies, the knock-off group turned out to be more than twice as likely to both cheat and steal. The women who believe they had received really expensive eyewear actually

behaved with measurably greater degrees of honesty. Another subsequent study revealed that the knock-off group participants were measurably more cynical in their attitudes toward other people. Those who believed they were wearing world-class sunglasses felt themselves to be world-class individuals. So exquisitely sensitive is the need of the soul to be whole that even a pair of sun glasses can evidently be a difference-maker. We even fake it in order to bolster our ego.

It is easy for us to gloss this over with reference to sociology and psychology, but if I read Jesus and the N T with anything even close to clarity, this dis-integrating of the wholeness of our soul is what we used to call "sin." It is the starving children we don't want to look at, the volunteering we avoid, the poor we don't want to serve, and the money we don't want to give. In our previous session, I referenced the piece in the Daily Oklahoman by Jim Priest (CEO of Sunbeam Family Services) about how Oklahoma is not so OK in terms of the vital signs of our OK Soul.

The net of social wellbeing in our society is in the process of disintegrating before our eyes.

1. We rank 2nd in the nation for births to unwed teen mothers.
2. Oklahoma is tied for 4th in the nation in the highest child death rate, and we are tied for 6th in the death rate of teens.
3. We have per capita the second-highest incidence of mental health issues in the USA.
4. Jim has a long list, but let me share just a couple more **encouraging** tidbits: "Financial giving to charitable organizations (defined as \$25.00 per year) dropped from 60+ percent in 2004 to 41.9% in 2016.
5. More than 1 in 5 children below the age 18 live below the poverty line – defined as a gross income of \$24,600 for a family of 4.

My point in repeating these points about the soul of our society is to ask another pointed question about the soul: “Should we pause as a people and ask whether we believe that there is any connection to this state of affairs in our society and the mending of our own souls?”

Years ago, I read the book by Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*. Don’t start reading that book at 10:00 p.m. unless you plan to stay awake all night. My colleague at Duke, Dan Ariely, has done some research on the lying behavior of students. Dan says, “Over the course of many years of teaching, I have noticed that there typically seems to be a rash of death among students’ relatives at the end of the semester. Grandma’s tend to be the relative to die most often. Some of them died several times during the course of a student’s career.” Mike Adams at Eastern Connecticut States has done a detailed statistical study and concluded:

“Grandmothers are ten times more likely to die before a mid-term and 19 times more likely to die before a final exam. Students who are failing or who are likely to fail, the grandmothers of those students are 50x more likely to die during finals week than the grandmothers of B+ and A students. The moral of all of this is that if you are a grandmother, and wish to live a long life, do no let your grandchild who is a marginal student academically go to college. It can kill you.”

If a pair of fake Chloe sunglasses can lower your self-esteem, just imagine what a failing grade at university can do to you!

One of my favorite talks to give to college and university students is about simple mathematics. It is about the word **integer**. Pretty simple really, an integer is a single number. In base-10 math, that is a **1**. And from this, we get our word **integrity**. Of course, we also get “integrated thinking,” thinking in which a multiplicity of perspectives are brought to a degree of harmonious wholeness. You see where I am going here! If I am a person of integrity, then there is a harmony in my soul. There is a “one-ness” to who I am. What you see is what you get.

We were created for Integrity and our souls were formed for wholeness. There are forces in the world, some in which we are complicit, but many of which we are unaware – forces that are rending our souls. The only viable path back to wholeness is soul-mending. The poet John Keats said, “Call this world if you please, ‘The vale of soul-making’.” I am discovering that I need to talk to my soul.

This is not the same thing as talking to myself. I used to make fun of my Granny Gunter for walking around talking to herself. Ruth Ann just looks at me with a wry smile when I do that. I am pleased to say that Ruthie is too kind to make fun of me for it. But talking to my soul is not the same as talking to myself. When I talk to my soul during the winter in the front of the fireplace at 6:00 a.m., or in the Spring and Summer on the back patio watching the ducks on our little lake, I remember that in the Bible people talked to their souls and were conscious that they were in the presence of God. When you talk to your soul, you are aware that you are in the presence of God. It is a conversation of integrity and wholeness. I can lie to myself, but I can't lie to God. When you converse with your soul, it naturally becomes a prayer. In soul talk, God is always present. Soul-conversation is like soul food. It nourishes. It makes us whole.

We all know the expression from literature: “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” Pure hubris. Both parts. Addressing the hubris of “Master of my fate” is another talk altogether. For now, let it suffice to observe: I am not the captain of my soul, but I am the keeper of my soul. As a matter of fact, there is no one else who can care for and keep my soul.

Matthew 5:37 New King James Version (NKJV)

³⁷But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

No double-speak. No gossip. No false witness.

Proverbs 16:28

A perverse man spreads strife, And a slanderer separates intimate friends.

When writing these lines, I tried to remember a public setting (other than church) where the rhetoric of our society was characterized by gentleness, kindness, and respect. The rhetoric of our public debate is tearing our souls asunder.

And this is the hard truth, “If my soul disintegrates, there is not a single other soul to blame.”

Soul-mending is not for the faint of heart, but our hearts will be strengthened if we care for our soul. In our Wesleyan Tradition, acts of piety and deeds of mercy are part of our growth in holiness and going on to perfection. They are fundamental to this soul care:

*Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.*

John Wesley