

The Embodied Soul

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Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy

First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
145 Capital Ave., NE
Battle Creek, MI 49017
269·965·1225
www.fccb.org

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**Ephesians 4 and 5
The Embodied Soul**

I don't know if Tom and I have done a decent enough job marketing our current worship resource. So I'm going to begin my sermon by making a shameless plug for this book: "A Hidden Wholeness." Now it isn't often that a secular book can make spiritual concepts come alive in both simple and profound ways. And it certainly isn't often that topics as nebulous as the soul and community can be tackled with accessible clarity.

And that's exactly what Parker Palmer has done with this book. Please buy it and read it, for the sake of your soul and for the sake of this community.

Palmer courageously asks this question: "Why is it that so many of us are walking around divided within ourselves and why as a human species are we so disgustingly divided among each other?" He uses the phrase "divided" to describe the skin of sin currently layering our bodies and our eco system. Divided: set apart. Divided: split up. Divided: damned in our differences. Divided: despairing over the grueling gaps we cannot seem to close within ourselves, hopeless with the grueling gaps we cannot seem to bridge between our communities. And he identifies the source of the "great divide" in Chapter 3.

His answer, in a nutshell, is that some of us—WAY TOO MANY OF US--have forgotten the soul. We are divided, he says, because we have forgotten (or perhaps temporarily misplaced) the soul.

Yes, the soul. I did say this topic is usually quite nebulous, right? The soul...the thing theologians and philosophers and doctors and poets have been fighting brilliantly about since before Socrates opened his mouth, since before the Garden of Eden even crossed the mythical mind. The soul. Palmer says we're divided because

we've forgotten the soul.

Palmer calls the soul "Spiritual DNA"—I like that. Spiritual DNA, the soul, the stuff of our lives easily moved in times of profound joy and easily stilled in moments of breath-taking beauty.

Spiritual DNA, the soul: that thing inside that's mysterious yet rooted, connected yet free, truthful yet humble, simultaneously life-receiver and life-giver. That thing inside. You know, right? That thing that leaps when your favorite song from back in the day unexpectedly comes on the radio. That thing that moves you to tears in the most authentic moments of prayer. Spiritual DNA, the soul, the stuff inside that hangs on for dear life when doors are closing and roads are flooding and the future looks like nothing but rocks and hard places. The stuff that hangs on for dear life in times like those because it just cannot give up on life itself. That's soul stuff. That's Spiritual DNA.

Palmer says we're so divided because we've forgotten about the soul. Forgotten that I have a soul, that you have a soul that we have a soul that they have a soul.

In Chapters 1, 2, & 3 of this book he raises questions about the soul and points to examples of where it's gotten lost. For the rest of the book, starting with Chapter 4 he teaches us how to get it back. He suggests that in order to get the soul back, we've first and foremost got to make room for the soul in our own lives and I'll give you a very specific sneak-preview: making room for the soul in our own lives has everything to do with community. Palmer says the soul's ability to thrive depends on our ability to be in community with one another. And not just any kind of community, because - let's keep it real - there are plenty of communities where the soul is shut down, shut out, shut off, and shut up.

The community that welcomes the soul is the community that never fails to hold two basic things in tension with each other:

#1: Human beings are unique, distinct, totally different one from the other.

#2: We are diverse that way on purpose because we are created *for*

each other.

Now in case you thought my shameless plug for this book was going to be an entire sermon, you're right. And here's why: because the kind of community laid out in this book is the kind of community we inherit as disciples of the Hebrew Scriptures and Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the kind of community that takes seriously the Psalmist's affirmation that God has wonderfully and fearfully shaped our individual and common humanity. It is the kind of community referenced by the Apostle Paul in Romans and First Corinthians: community that honors *every- single-body* but never sees those bodies as separate from the corporate Body of Christ.

This is a radically Christian conception of community: one that embodies a scandalous belief that each and every one of us is created in God's image and so each and every one of us must be 100% ourselves, in order for God to reign supreme on Earth. This radically Christian conception of community also embodies the scandalous belief that in order for me to be 100% me, I need people around me who encourage me to be 100% me while always remaining 100% themselves. The radical and scandalous community is the community that lets me be me and you be you while recognizing that we are not ends unto ourselves, but rather many members of one Body and therefore completely dependent upon all the members of the one body.

That Body, for us in this sanctuary, is the Body of Christ. It is the Body of God and we are a part of it, each and every one. If we are living out faithful Christian community and moving beyond the great divide of a soul-less life, then this is our starting place: I have a soul and you have a soul and we have a soul and they have a soul, each soul is different and entirely dependent. This is our starting place.

Two weeks ago I was installed as the Associate Pastor of this Church. That was one of the most profoundly moving days of my young life. There was one moment in that service that stands out to me as an example of the soul-welcoming community. And since all of you weren't able to be here that day, I want to share it with

you. The dancers of our church came into the center circle and taught all the congregation simple choreography to a simple song. The words go like this: "I pray for you. You pray for me. I love you. I need you to survive. I won't harm you with words from my mouth. I love you. I need you to survive." The dancers invited everyone to dance with them and so everyone in this sanctuary - pastors and laity, young and old, visitors and members, male and female - every body became One Body to the words, "I need you to survive." That was a soulful moment, Church. We got it right in that moment.

At one point in the song they invited me into the center of the circle and laid their hands on me. Now I have been through eight years of ministerial training on biblical studies, liturgical studies, pastoral care, Christian history, and theology. But in that moment, those dancing women taught me everything there is to know about my soul and how entirely dependent my soul is upon the Body of Christ. You see pastors are used to being the ones who lay hands on others. And pastors are used to teaching the religious community how to move faithfully. And I love this work, don't get me wrong.

But in that moment I got to be the learner. They taught me about what the Apostle Paul calls "Spiritual Worship." Spiritual worship - where the soul is welcome. Spiritual worship - where we present our bodies to one another in living sacrifice, holy and acceptable. Spiritual worship - where we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. They taught me, in that moment, why worship is the most important event in the life of the community, because worship is the one space where the soul is not only welcome, but joined to other souls in a common affirmation: I need you to survive. If I could bottle up the spiritual wisdom and mastery those women commanded, I would, but I cannot. I can only remember, and tell you, and ask you to join me and them, in this worship service and every other worship service, ask you to join in "striving for the greatest gifts of spiritual worship."

There's one last thing Palmer lifts up in his book that I must mention before closing...and that's the power of silence in the soulful community. He argues that the soul, the image of God

which is inside every living body, is the inner teacher. A teacher, that when surrounded by the right environment, is capable of revealing to us and those in our environment, exactly what it is that we are supposed to know. Now Parker Palmer is a Quaker, and Quakers do silence. They don't do silence at each other; they do silence with each other as a gift. And it's been my experience that Quakers have a depth of spirituality unlike any other Christians.

We've all heard the phrase, "Silence is golden," but there's something nearly impossible about silence too. And I think the impossibility of silence is rooted in a lack of trust that God truly resides in us and will reveal to us what it is we are supposed to know. It's hard to believe that God is in here. I mean, think about it: do you really believe that God takes up residence inside you? It's so much easier to believe that God takes up residence in a book, or a priest, or a building. Because when we believe that, we don't have to listen to ourselves. I mean, really, really, listen. And it's been my experience that those who do not listen to themselves have a hard time listening to others.

It's easier to believe that God is out there, and so it's easy to stop listening and start chasing. But the Psalmist tells us differently. And Genesis tells us differently. Genesis 1:26...God said "let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Genesis 1:27..."So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God He created them, male and female he created them and God blessed them." Genesis 1:31..."God saw everything that He made, and indeed it was very good." And the Psalmist in Chapter 139: 13-16..."It was God who formed my inward parts, God who knit me together in my mother's womb, intricately woven in the depths of the earth." This is biblical evidence that God not only created us, but we are the very image and likeness of God. So again: do you believe it?

I will admit that most days it's a hard theological conviction to hold, given all the fear and insecurity I feel. I hope I'm not the only one in the room who struggles with this belief. But I can tell you the relationships and communities that have most transformed my body and mind have operated from this belief. And those relationships

and communities often operated in the sanctuary of silence. Silence is a gift we give to ourselves and others when we trust the soul, believe in the soul, when we honor the soul, and invite it to speak out. If I could bottle up the salvific silence I've been given from those relationships and communities, I would, but I cannot. I can only remember, and tell you, and ask you to join me and this community in "striving for the greatest gifts, particularly the gift of silence."

I can only appeal to you brothers and sisters, appeal to you apostles and prophets, teachers and healers, preachers and miracle workers, dancers and keepers of silence ... appeal to you: don't live the divided life; don't forget your soul. Bring it here, bring your God-formed soul to this community and honor the other God-formed souls in this community so that together in all our difference and dependency, the Body of Christ, the *One* Body of Christ can thrive. May it be so. Amen.

