

TEXT: One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.’ Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ ‘Teacher,’ he replied, ‘speak.’ ‘A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’ Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’ Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

“I REGRET to inform you, we are out of sole.”

That is how the waiter greeted us at the restaurant last Friday night.

Oddly enough, isn’t that how we left things last week? We looked at how often and how easy it is to sell your soul, bit by bit, until sooner or later, “I regret to inform you that you are out of soul.” This week’s lessons give us some insights on how to prevent that from happening. Quite possibly, the theological churchy word for this is “salvation”!

So, how do we care for our souls? First of all, we probably should decide what, exactly, is the soul? A task easier said than done! Theologian Shirley Guthrie says that to name soul as the spiritual side of human nature is too simplistic. In the Bible, human beings are not essentially spiritual or physical, rather an inseparable interrelatedness: body and soul. Soul is literally the breath of life, the very image of God in which we have been made.

John Sanford, in *Kingdom Within*, reminds us that soul looms large in the sacred scriptures. In the Hebrew Testament there are some 450 references to *nephesh*, or soul; in the New Testament there are well over 50 references to *psyche*, Greek for soul – a word which also means butterfly. Our early church founders didn’t hesitate to say that the home of Divine Logos, the indwelling or experience of Christ, was the human soul.

Some years ago, our Book Group read Thomas Moore’s *The Care of the Soul* – Moore adds that Tradition teaches that the soul lies midway between understanding and unconscious, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body but the imagination. Fulfilling work, rewarding relationships, joy in nature, and personal power are all gifts of the soul. Soul, says Moore, has to do with genuineness and depth.

She is tied to an embrace of life in all its particulars, colors and textures, good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. She is revealed in attachment, love, community, and compassion.

Perhaps the best we can say is that Soul is the experience of being one with God; “I in you and you in me,” said Jesus. As the animating principle, Soul is the moral and emotional nature of human beings, the center of imagination, a person's total integrated self. Soul is our unique identity, our touchstone for authenticity, our capacity for deep moments of despair and of joy. Without attention to the soul, God is a deity of ego-made happiness, not sufferings; and soul is denied the depth of experience that is her natural course of life.

Thus, She is all too easily the victim of modern egocentricity. She is the casualty of our pursuit of more power, the quest for domination of nature, our overvaluation of intellect and insistence on logic and precision, our undervaluation of the mystical side of life

All of this is graphically illustrated in our Gospel reading. Jesus is approached by a man of wealth and power. He purports to be a friend, and Jesus is invited to be his guest. But it is a tainted invitation. The Pharisee Simon apparently wants to display this interesting, quaint, rural rabbi for his affluent guests. Who knows what entertainment his presence will bring? Simon is in the act of selling part of his soul; Jesus is a guest under false pretenses. He is not welcomed in the customary way.

As a Pharisee, Simon is bound by rules; everything is done according to the "rule book," the 613 commandments. It's rigid, lacking compassion. When the woman of the street pushes her way through the waiting petitioners and wait staff; when she throws herself upon Jesus; the Pharisee sees his world of safe assumptions and domination turn upside down. Her actions shatter every social custom of the day. It seems that she has had an experience with Jesus previously, and that now, just the sight of Jesus makes her weep. Her gratitude flows from deep within her. Her tears fall upon his feet as he reclines at the table and so she kneels beside him and begins wiping the tears away with her hair. The poignancy of the scene is striking—she lavishes everything she can on this man, despite what must have been an incredibly awkward situation, not only for her, but for Jesus.

All of this is hard on Simon. He sees in the woman not as a child of God but a threat to his goodness. He is blind to how he and this woman are connected at the deepest level. Simon talks to himself: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Yet we see so clearly in this story how well Jesus knows us all. He tries to help the Pharisee see what generous love is all about. The woman loves so much, because she has been forgiven so much. The Pharisee, like many of us, is left to ponder his own stingy response to Jesus.

Simeon and his kind are so convinced of their own righteousness that they do not feel in need of forgiveness. They have no access to the soul. Parts of the soul are chipped and lost.

I know a young girl whose name is Allison. The day I met her, she was 7, she weighed about 50 pounds, and her Dad was pushing her in a stroller. I was introduced, and she immediately

got up and latched onto me in a hug that would not end. During lunch she gazed at me and chattered and winked, and when necessary, she demanded that I, not her Dad, escort her to the bathroom. Allison is a child with Down's syndrome. Frankly, the meal was not easy. She grabbed at me, pulled apart my bracelet, spilled milk, interrupted and offered disjointed comments at inopportune times. She demanded full attention. And yet, she was funny and cheerful and oh so full of love. As challenging as she was, I sometimes long for Allison on the days that I am pouting or sad or weary. It is impossible to stay blue or angry in Allison's exuberant presence. And the word unselfish was made for her. I wonder what our world would look like if we were all like Allison. It was as if she does not know how not to love.

I think Jesus wants us to see that God is like that, only greater. In God's view, Allison's loving nature is what is normal: living with abandon, with neither caution nor calculation. It's how the woman from the city loves Jesus with her tears, her kisses, her costly ointment.

It is so easy to poke fun at those Pharisees of long ago. They allow us to feel pretty good about our own response, until each of us asks seriously, "Am I ready to love Jesus wholeheartedly, without counting the cost? Am I ready to go into my soulful self, to go forward unselfconsciously and unselfishly, to nurture my instinctual being, my genuine faithful joyous and free inner being?" I asked a Bible Study once which character he or she was more like, and too many answered "The Pharisee because it is hard not to be selfish." One said, "I like to think I love Jesus like that woman, so joyfully and unselfishly. But don't ask me about loving real people like that. Then for sure I am the selfish, in-control Pharisee."

Ah, there's the rub, getting down to practical, real people. Why is it that we think so much, that we hoard so much, that we fear so much? Like little Allison, the woman in the story, shows me how to care for my soul. For Allison, there is nothing but the real thing, and loving seems so natural.

Do any of you know the term *grok*? It comes from the 1961 book *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Author Heinlein's writes "Grok means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed." To *grok* is to understand intuitively, to establish rapport with the world, to experience enjoyment. The novel associates it with imagery of "water," "drink," and "life"— which brings to mind our Living Water, the experience and way of Christ. To *grok* is to claim and tend our souls, to be open to all of life not only through thoughts and words, but through silence, through music, through art, through movement, through sighs and tears and anger and compassion and joy-- and yes, forgiveness.

Earlier I said that soul might well have to do with salvation. The Hebrew word for "salvation" literally means "to make sufficient." Salvation is the discovery that life without God is insufficient, and that God's grace makes sense of life. Salvation is the experience of God's grace. If that's not caring for the soul, I don't know what is!

In the name of Jesus the Christ, AMEN