

“The search for the soul”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
February 19, 2023 – Transfiguration Sunday

2 Peter 1:16-19 and Matthew 17:1-9

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I want to begin with an acknowledgment that my sermon starts with a story that makes reference to child loss, which is painful for some of us. I don't want anyone to feel ambushed by that. If you need to step away, we understand.

Imagine: you're a mom. You live far in the future. Your first child died. Now your second child is sick, maybe dying. She's fourteen. Bright, curious. She loves to draw. She has good days, and some really bad days. Like any mother-daughter relationship at fourteen, your relationship is complicated. But you love her fiercely, and you are desperate to save her. Because this is the future, your daughter has an Artificial Friend. All the rich kids have them. They are robots with artificial intelligence. And this Artificial Friend, Klara, knows your daughter intimately, has lived with her, observed her, can anticipate her thoughts, her feelings, her movements. A question has been posed to you by the emerging science of the day: What if your daughter didn't have to die? What if this Artificial Friend could *become* your daughter?

That is the question raised by the novel *Klara and the Sun* by Nobel-winning author Kazuo Ishiguro. And it speaks to all that we've been hearing recently in the news about AI-powered chat and search engines, and AI that can write a poem or paint a picture. But in this novel, Klara isn't a robot bound to overthrow her human creators. She loves Josie, the daughter. Like really loves her. She has developed a morality, a system of religious beliefs, a capacity for complicated human emotions, that were never programmed into her. She feels grief, fear, joy, wonder. And she has her own plan to save Josie.

Meanwhile, a scientist has proposed downloading Klara into a body he has designed to look exactly like Josie. Klara would use everything she knows about Josie to become her. The mother isn't so sure. Would this really be her daughter?

The scientist says, “A part of us refuses to let go. The part that wants to keep believing there's something unreachable inside each of us. Something that's unique and won't transfer. But there's nothing like that, we know that now... The new Josie won't be an imitation. *She really will be Josie. A continuation of Josie.*”

The question in the book becomes: Does Josie have a soul? Does Klara?

Do we?

We read about the soul in Scripture. Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd... he restores my soul.” We talk about it here in worship. But rarely is it defined. Maybe, because it's something that cannot be defined. It's an intuition, a mystery. Defining it would be to reduce it. But still it

would be helpful to know what we're talking about and whether it even exists. It touches everything, this question of the soul: how we understand ourselves and each other, how we think of salvation and our relationship with God, how we behave toward one another.

Traverse the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Greek philosophy and Homeric literature, ancient China and Egypt, Hinduism and Islam, modern fiction and poetry, and the soul—across all these times and places—becomes shorthand for the core of who we are: our deepest feelings, our capacity for morality and thought, the force within us that animates our bodies.

The soul is where Job says he hurts the most. The Psalmist says the soul is what thirsts for God. It's the breath of life, thrust by God into Adam, turning dust into humanity. The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of our "immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness after [God's] own image, having the law of God written in their hearts" (6.023). For Ralph Waldo Emerson, it is the "light that shines through us." The soul is where "there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall... where the person, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins."

Oh there are profound philosophical debates and differences among all these religions and systems of thought, but all insist that there is more to life—more to you and me—than is perceptible, calculable, reducible. There's something in us that can't just be copied and transferred. Something like a soul.

When Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up that mountain, he does so in order to show them who he really is—to share with them *his* soul. Jesus is transfigured; his face shines like the sun: the Light of the world. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. The soul of Jesus is manifold. It includes those who have come before him: Moses the liberator and lawgiver, Elijah the prophet and healer. A voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!"

It is a miraculous scene, and yet what strikes me more than anything is that the Transfiguration was not private; it was among friends. Every verse emphasizes the presence of the disciples. Even the divine voice emphasizes relationship (*This is my Son*), love (*my Beloved*), and connection (*listen to him*). And when the disciples do not understand, when their thinking is too literal or too individualistic, when Peter proposes building dwellings for Moses and Elijah (completely missing the point), or when they crouch in fear, Jesus kneels, touches them, and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." When they look up, they no longer see Moses or Elijah; they no longer hear the divine voice; they see only Jesus. But Moses and Elijah and that divine voice are still there, in Jesus—just as Jesus says in John 14 that there will come a time when the world will not see Jesus (for he will have died) but he will remain in his disciples; they will see him in themselves through the Spirit, or the soul. For Jesus has shined his light on the disciples. His light has entered them. Now his soul includes them too. He's a part of them, and they a part of him.

Again in John 14, Jesus says, "Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (20).

We tend to think of the soul as this little thing inside each of us; it's ours. It can be saved or damned. Individual souls lead us to think of individual salvation: "Brother, have you been saved yet? Sister, have you accepted Jesus as your *personal* Lord and Savior?" But what if the soul is bigger than that, and salvation too?

Jesus said he came to save *the world*, not just some pious individuals. Paul is constantly speaking of interconnection, describing us as the body of Christ, he our mind (or soul?), and we the many parts, which grieve and rejoice together. And now we've witnessed the multiplicity of the soul on the mountain of Transfiguration.

At the end of the novel *Klara and the Sun*, Klara says, "Mr. Capaldi believed there was nothing special inside Josie that couldn't be continued. He told the Mother he'd searched and searched and found nothing like that. But I believe now he was searching in the wrong place. There *was* something very special, but it wasn't inside Josie. It was inside those who loved her. That's why I think now Mr. Capaldi was wrong and I wouldn't have succeeded."

I have been shaken by that line ever since I read it. What an amazing thought—that the soul isn't an object we carry within us, like some gem we are called to polish and lock away, but rather exists in the exchange, the transfiguration, of love between us, like light that infuses a room and cannot be contained but must be shared.

Suddenly the soul goes from this discrete, static object whose personal salvation is our primary (and selfish) concern, to a complex, dynamic, and plural existence whose primary concern and being are love.

Think of someone you love. I bet you cannot separate the truth of who they are from your love for them. Now compound that by all the relationships that exist in a person's life, from family to church, from romance to friendship, from the art and places they love, to God. Suddenly, it becomes clear: a person—dare we say a soul—doesn't just exist in one place; they are spread out in all these aspects of love.

The scientist wasn't wrong: Josie could continue, even after death. But not because she was replaceable. Because Love made her eternal.

Maybe when you love, a piece of you goes into them and they into you. Maybe that's what's happening on that Mountain of Transfiguration, between Jesus and his disciples. Maybe that's what happens on the cross and on the day of resurrection, when Love is at its brightest. It's like the positive doppelgänger of the Horcruxes in *Harry Potter*: your soul multiples; you cannot be killed.

Walt Whitman wrote, "I am large, I contain multitudes." Indeed.

Scripture makes this connection between love and souls. It's there in the Greatest Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God... with all your soul" (Matt. 22:37). It's there in the Song of Songs, where the beloved is called the one "whom my soul loves" (1:7, 3:2,

3:3, 3:4). It's there in 1 Samuel, where it is written that "Jonathan loved [David] as his own soul" (18:1, 3).

Indeed, if the soul is from God and is what returns to God, and if, as 1 John tells us, God is Love, then it makes sense that the soul would consist of Love. John says, "Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16).

Your soul is within, but it's out there too, spread out among all the people who love you and whom you love, God foremost among them. Your soul, their souls, God's soul, all intertwined. It is a miracle, irreplaceable, special. You. Us. God. The infinite and uncontainable love that made this universe and in every moment spills into existence, breathing life.

Now think of the implications: suddenly my salvation is tied into yours. We bear responsibility for one another. Suddenly, my identity isn't only individualistic; it's relational. I am not static. I am changing. I am being changed by you. Transfigured. By you, and by God. All of us in a mutual transfiguration inaugurated by our mutual love, by souls crashing into each other and delighting in the surprise of just how beautiful each of us is. Maybe we'd treat each other better.

To love and be loved, this is the soul. **Amen.**