***GOOD FOR THE SOUL***

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Texts: Psalm 62 and Mark 1:14-20

A woman tells of taking her children to a restaurant for lunch one day. As they prepared to eat, her six-year-old son asked if he could say grace, so they all bowed their heads and he prayed:

*God is good. God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would thank you even more if mom gets us ice cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen*

Several customers at adjoining tables chuckled at that prayer, but one woman was incensed and remarked:

*That’s what’s wrong with this country. Kids today don’t even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why, I never!*

Hearing her comment, the child burst into tears and asked, “Did I do it wrong?” As the boy’s mother comforted him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at the boy and said, “I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer.”

“Really?” asked the boy.

“Cross my heart,” said the man. And then he added in a theatrical whisper with a nod toward the incensed woman, “Too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes.”

After the meal, the mother bought ice cream for all her children. Her six-year-old son just stared at his sundae for a moment, then picked it up, carried it over to the table of the woman who had been so offended by his prayer, and placed it in front of her. With a big smile he told her: “Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes, and my soul is good already.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes, and so too is the prayer to God that asks for ice cream or for daily bread or for less tasty needs. Prayer is good

for the nurturing of your soul,

for the healing of your soul,

for the lifting of your soul,

for the strengthening of your soul,

for the enlightening of your soul.

It is good for the soul of the young child and the curious teen, the expectant parent and the doting grandparent, the tired teacher and her students, the judge and those judged. Prayer is good for the soul – for yours and for mine and for the soul of your neighbor who you’re not really convinced has a soul at all. It is better than ice cream, better even than chicken soup! There is a place and a time for chicken soup and for ice cream, but prayer is good for your soul in every place and time.

In his book *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel tells the story of a boy and a tiger who are shipwrecked and find themselves clinging to a small lifeboat adrift on the sea. The boy is still searching for a faith amid Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions; he believes in a God though he is still seeking to understand the God in whom he believes. His day-to-day life as a castaway is lived out in the rhythms of prayer to that God. As he describes it, he

awakes and prays,

eats breakfast, does chores until mid-morning, then prays,

eats lunch, rests until late afternoon, then prays,

fishes and tends to the catch, prepares dinner and eats, inspects

the boat and water supply at sunset, prepares for the night, and then prays,

sleeps fitfully and prays.

One might well imagine that a boy stranded on a lifeboat in the middle of the sea with a tiger would pray morning, noon, and night – and maybe more! But the rhythm of his prayers derives less from desperation than from that Muslim tradition of stopping throughout the day to pause and pray to the God of Abraham. It is a discipline that marks time in relationship to God, and in all times, remembers God. It is a tradition that knows that prayer is good for the soul!

If prayer is good for the soul, then for what should you pray when you pray – if you pray – to the Lord? Classical traditions suggest that prayers should include praise, confession, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession. We see those elements in our own prayers throughout worship. Yet, not every prayer embraces all of these elements. Watching the glory of a sunrise on the Blue Ridge, a prayer is sometimes just: “Wow, Lord!” And that is enough. When I acknowledge the sins I have committed, sometimes “Lord, have mercy upon me!” pretty much says it all. When we are lost, alone and have nowhere else to turn, “Help me, Jesus!” can be prayer enough. And sometimes the prayer is simply a sigh too deep for words – a sigh of the heart, a sigh of the soul, that is every bit as much a prayer as any words that were ever uttered. Prayer does not have to be eloquent to be effective. It need only express the stirrings of your heart, for God hears and understands even those stirrings that we struggle to grasp.

In his book *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore suggests that care of the soul is a continuous process concerned

*with attending to the small details of everyday life, as well as to major decisions and changes… Its goal is not to make life problem-free, but to give ordinary life the depth and value that come with soulfulness… [I]t has to do with cultivating a richly expressive and meaningful life at home and in society.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

Moore’s description of what care of our souls is about is helpful, for it affirms that care of the soul is part of everyday life. It is not about preparation of the soul for some eternal life. It is about the here and now, about how we live this day. In Hebrew, the word for *soul* and *self* (*nefesh*) are one and the same. You and your soul are one. So when the psalmist says, *for God alone* ***my soul*** *waits in silence*, he is saying, *for God alone* ***I*** *wait in silence*. The stillness is quiet assurance with peace like a river in his soul! From whence does that peace come? It comes from this, says the psalmist: *from God comes my salvation!*

The quiet assurance of the soul in the midst of chaos or suffering, trouble or change, comes from faith in the God who is our salvation. It comes from knowing that God is in charge, not us – and that is a good thing! It comes from believing that in life and in death we belong to God. It comes from the assurance that God loves us without end and is always near. Today we will ordain and install elders who are responding to God’s call to serve in this church; but their service to the church is not about them, it is about what God will do through them and with the assurance that God will guide them all along the way. Their service is an act of faith and faithfulness, and this is how some of them express their faith:

*Because I am saved, I can go forth with gratitude for this gift from God, and lead a life of faithfulness, helping others come to believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit by the way I lead my life. I feel the freedom this belief brings to my soul. (Melissa Druff)*

*From the beginning of our existence we have been given the miracle of choice. God has given us gifts and resources, brains to think with and imaginations to create with…and choice. Every day and every step along the journey of our individual lives we are given the gift, and responsibility of choice. It is this miracle that shapes us the most and gives us the freedom and ability to grow into the creation of God that we are meant to be…. I thank God for guiding me toward the choices I have made. (Tom Bellamy)*

*When I got to the hospital doors, I couldn’t go in. I froze. I heard “trust me” in my head so I prayed at that door. I prayed for strength to go to my dad and for the strength to leave this completely in God’s hands. I trusted and God gave me what I needed to sit with dad while he moved on to his new beginning. Since that day, my trust has continued to grow. Yes, I have to ask for the strength to leave things with God from time to time, but I know now that God will supply that strength whenever I ask…. God’s mercy and grace fill me with a joy I cannot begin to understand. (Jacki Dull)*

*I believe that my God is bigger, stronger, smarter, and kinder that I can ever be. I believe I am called to serve others, and that God has given me opportunities and abilities to do so…. I believe I am forgiven by my Redeemer’s grace, not because of anything I have said or done, not because I deserve it, but because that is the nature of my God. (Sam Hostetter)*

*I believe that Jesus was the incarnation of God’s desire to redeem, commune and guide us back to full and complete harmony with God and the original creation as God always intended and is intending. Jesus’ message and his life was a call to aloof us to learn to love God with all our Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength, and our Neighbor as ourselves. It’s not that difficult to understand, BUT it is much more for humans with free will, a strong instinct for self-preservation and a huge expectation for personal ease and comfort to follow! (David Stahl)*

*Challenging me, guiding me, and blessing me as God leads me to step out of my comfort zone and use the gifts God has placed upon me helps me to shine a beacon of light for others. I just need to listen and follow the bright light that God has in place for me. God is my powerful “lighthouse.” (Donna Hamric)*

*My belief in God centers around His freely given grace and love. I trust that God goes before us and is constantly present, even in the most difficult circumstances.*

*I believe that faith is not static; it requires action…. Action, in turn, deepens our faith creating a cycle of spiritual development that hopefully never stops changing and evolving. (Mandy Drumheller)*

*Even though we want to make excuses…we want to say we cannot do it…God continues to say to us…as he did to Philip…”Follow me!” Answering this call takes faith. Sometimes we have to say yes, even though we don’t know how it will all work out…. May we all find the faith to answer that call. (Tom Brooks)*

May we all find faith to answer God’s call, that is our prayer among all our prayers, for we all are called to ministry in some shape or form. We may feel unprepared, as Andrew, Peter, James, and John certainly did in leaving their fishing nets to become disciples of Jesus, but they went anyway, and they were glad they did. The challenge for us – for all of us – then is this: how will you respond to God’s call to whatever it is God calls you to? Perhaps you might respond with prayer, with faith, with confidence in God’s presence along the way, and with the words of that treasured hymn: *Here, I am, Lord! I will go if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.* For, in doing just that, in following where God leads you, you just may find that following too is good for the soul! Amen

1. Author anonymous [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*, HarperCollins: New York, 1992, pp.3-4 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)