

## **“LIVING A WHOLE LIFE”**

Psalm 33:1-5, 13-22; Mark 12:28-34

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I love our Westminster Intention Statement. It's been a real gift to us as a congregation, I think, in the way it articulates the vision of Christian faith and practice we aspire to. I love every line of it, but from the first, it was “we live a whole life” that especially struck a chord with me.

If you've never been part of a religious tradition which focused more narrowly on getting into heaven and avoiding eternal punishment in hell, you might not be able to fully appreciate what a big deal that is. Every time we say it, I feel it as an invitation into an expansive place, with freedom to breath and *be*. It means so much to claim a faith in which all the beauty in the world, and all the brokenness, too, *matter*. In which we see that God loves trees and rivers and mountains, birds and insects, ... and people, no matter who they are. In which art and music, science and medicine, learning and fun, and the incredible diversity of human culture all have value, in themselves. In which our kindness and our questions and our work and our relationships and our hurts and our passions and our efforts to make the world a better place and our weird quirky interests and all the other things that make us who we are don't have to be seen as separate or lesser than our Christian beliefs. All of that can be *part* of our living as faithful people, part of how we love God and follow Jesus.

This idea has roots in our Reformed tradition's belief in the sovereignty of God... which is just a fancy way of saying that there is no part of the world God made, and no facet of human life that's outside of God's concern. It helps us understand that God cares as much about the integrity we bring to our work as about the sincerity of our worship... as much about how we enact justice as about how we pray ... as much about the quality of our relationships as about the things we believe. It's a call, really, yield to God's Spirit in all that we do, as well as to see God's gifts and presence everywhere.

I'd venture to say that this perspective is a big part of why many of us are Presbyterians. We want to live a whole life.

Just lately, I've found that the meaning of that phrase has been opening up for me in some new ways. I've been thinking about how “living a whole life” might urge us to attend to what it means to live a whole life *as a whole person*. I've been thinking about this mostly because I've also been thinking about the commandment Jesus identified as the most important: to love God with all one's heart, and all one's soul, and all one's mind, and all one's strength.

I've notice these word coming up a lot lately – in sermon preparations, in things I've read, in the Adult Education conversations we had about Biblical interpretation. I know that when something like this happens, I need to pay attention. And as I did, I began to realize that this

call to engage heart, soul, mind, and strength is essentially about being whole persons, and bringing these different aspects of who we are as human beings to the way we go about loving God and living faithful lives in the world. “Heart, soul, mind, and strength” isn’t just a phrase that means “enthusiastically” or “with commitment.” These words call us to attend to and exercise these different aspects of our humanity... and to ask ourselves if we may sometimes be excluding or ignoring some part of ourselves.

This might seem very simple and obvious – and I guess it is. But sometimes the simple is also profound and important, and I think that might be true here. Because no matter what we’re doing, we are going to do it more faithfully if we don’t leave out a part of who we are.

Heart, soul, mind, strength. Let me say a little something about each of those:

To bring all your “heart” is to pay attention to your feelings, not to ignore or discount them. To not be afraid of emotions (even the hard ones like grief and anger). To be as honest as you can be about how you feel, what you long for, what you love. To be openhearted to others, to risk vulnerability. To be led by compassion, by what hurts your heart or by what brings you joy.

It’s not easy to define “soul” but this is a reminder not to ignore your spiritual self. This is about asking what following Jesus might look like for you in a particular moment, attending to the promptings of God’s Spirit, prayer, gratitude, praise, listening.

“Mind” is easier to understand: Intelligence, curiosity, critical thinking, ethical thinking, the ability to learn, imagination and creativity... these are wonderful gifts from God, which (despite what some may say) can help us draw closer to God and to serve God well.

When I think about “strength” in this context, I’m thinking about our bodies and our physical strength (whether that be a little or a lot), but also energy and courage... the qualities that make up our ability to act, serve, love, in response to Christ’s call.

All are important, and together they offer wholeness and balance.

Heart helps us be aware of our own deepest needs and opens us up to receiving the love God wants to give. It helps us discover our gifts, gives us empathy and connection with the pain or joy of others, and leads us to our own best ways of caring. It keeps our service from being mere busyness. It keeps us from over-intellectualizing.

Soul leads us into a place where we can seek the grace we need, and grounds us in awareness that our lives are in God. Soul enables us to wait and trust, and to hold our emotions and ideas up to the God’s light. Sometimes it leads us to awareness of a call we hadn’t felt, thought of, or expected.

Mind helps bring knowledge and intention to our caring, our faith, and our energy. Mind keeps us from being ruled by feelings alone. It keeps us from oversimplifying complex realities. It

enables the understanding we need to unite justice with our compassion. It keeps us from fuzzy sentimentality and platitudes.

Strength is about putting our faith into commitments, concrete actions, words that matter. Strength helps us persevere when we aren't feeling it, keeps us from falling back on "thoughts and prayers" when our bodies and energy are needed, gives us courage to do the right thing even if we're fearful.

I don't think it's too hard to see how easily we can be let astray  
when we are guided only by our gut feelings,  
or when faith becomes simply private spirituality,  
or when our focus is on getting the theology just right,  
or when we expend a lot of energy without a clear purpose.

It's almost common sense, right? Practical. Useful. Yes. Simple, but there is profound truth here. And what I especially want us to notice is exactly what the text says: that this is how we love God. This is a way to understand what it means to bring our whole selves to whatever it is we're doing, as we live whole lives in God's presence

Some examples:

We can bring heart, soul, mind, and strength to our study of the Bible: Ask "Does this text make me sad, spark compassion, comfort my heart, make me love God more?" Listen to what God might be saying or pray for understanding. Research context, ask questions, discuss ideas with someone else. Consider what action or commitment is called for. Heart, soul, mind, strength.

We can bring heart, soul, mind, and strength to our encounter with news of violence in the world, like what's happening now in Israel and Gaza. That probably means compassion and empathy with those living with grief and fear. It means praying for peace and changed hearts. It means working hard to understand a complex situation and resisting over-simplified explanations. It means asking "Can I do something to help the suffering? Can I do something to promote peace?"

Heart, soul, mind, strength.

We can bring heart, soul, mind, strength to a troubled relationship.  
to a difficult decision.  
to something we're trying to learn.  
to our family commitments.  
to the plans we make for our future.  
to... *anything* we do.

We can bring heart, soul, mind, strength to our decisions about financial stewardship:

What ministries of the church bring you joy, stir your compassion, use your gifts in a fulfilling way?

How do you sense God's presence in our midst? Can you take a little time to just sit quietly and listen to the Spirit, ask for guidance?

What in Westminster's ministry and mission do you want to learn more about, and how might you find answers? What considerations and other commitments do you need to reflect on as you think your resources for giving?

What is God calling you to? In what ways can your resources, energy, presence, and courage build up our community of faith?

Heart, soul, mind, strength.

This is how we live lives that are faithful – not perfect, but faithful – in the big things and little things, individually and together. This is how we live a whole life, as whole persons. This is how we love our neighbors. This is how we love God, with who we are... with all that we are.

Amen.