

When Leaders Lose Their Souls



by Ruth Haley Barton, 04/09/2018

"For what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?"

Matthew 16:26 (NLT)

I want to talk to you about the soul—your soul, my soul, and the soul of our leadership.

When I refer to the soul, I am not talking about some ill-defined, amorphous, soft-around-the-edges sort of thing. I am talking about the part of you that is most real—the very essence of you that God knew before he brought you forth in physical form, the part that will exist after your body goes into the ground. This is the “you” that exists beyond any role that you play, any job that you perform, any relationship that seems to define you, or any notoriety or success you may have achieved. It is the part of you that longs for more of God than you have right now and that may, even now, be aware of “missing” God amid the challenges of life in ministry.

As our teacher, Bob Mulholland, used to say, “It is the place where God is present to you.”

When the Shekinah is Gone

Jesus indicates that it is possible to gain the whole world but lose your own soul. If he were talking to us as leaders today, he might point out that it is possible to gain the whole world—including the world of ministry success—and lose your own soul in the midst of it all. He might remind us that it is possible to find your soul, after so much seeking, only to lose it again.

He might also point out that when leaders lose their souls, so do the churches and organizations they lead. “Soul slips away easily from a church or an institution,” Gordon Cosby, founding pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., observes. “You may go to any of these places and find that the Spirit has departed and the Shekinah is gone...When a local church loses its soul it begins to slip into mediocrity and is unable to give life. The average person doesn’t even know when a church begins to lose its soul. It takes unusual deeper wisdom to see it, and then when we see it, it is costly beyond words to retrieve it.”

A Loss Too Great

Losing your soul is sort of like losing a credit card. You think it’s in your wallet or purse so you don’t give it much thought until one day you reach for it and you can’t find it. The minute you realize it’s gone, you start scrambling to find it, trying to remember when you last used it or at least had it in your possession. No matter what is going on in your life, you have to stop and look for it because otherwise there could be major damage done. Oh, that we would feel the same sense of urgency when we become aware that we have lost our souls!

In her book, *Leaving Church*, parish priest and award-winning preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, described what it was like to feel her soul slipping away. She says:

“Many of the things that were happening inside of me seemed too shameful to talk about out loud. Laid low by what was happening at Grace-Calvary, I did not have the energy to put a positive spin on anything...beyond my luminous images of Sunday mornings I saw the committee meetings, the numbing routines, and the chronically difficult people

who took up a large part of my time. Behind my heroic image of myself I saw my tiresome perfectionism, my resentment of those who did not try as hard as I did, and my huge appetite for approval. I saw the forgiving faces of my family, left behind every holiday for the last fifteen years, while I went to conduct services for other people and their families.

"Above all, I saw that my desire to draw as near to God as I could had backfired on me somehow. Drawn to care for hurt things, I had ended up with compassion fatigue. Drawn to a life of servanthood, I had ended up a service provider. Drawn to marry the Divine Presence, I had ended up estranged...Like the bluebirds that sat on my windowsills, pecking at the reflections they saw in the glass, I could not reach the greenness for which my soul longed. For years I had believed that if I just kept at it, the glass would finally disappear. Now for the first time, I wondered if I had devoted myself to an illusion."

Something Not Quite Right

Sometimes our sense that all is not well at the soul level is more subtle—like it was for this young pastor who came for spiritual direction. With keen self-awareness he observed, "I find [leadership] conferences to be very exciting on one level but there is something darker that happens as well. Sometimes they leave me feeling competitive towards other churches and what they are accomplishing. I leave the conference feeling dissatisfied with my own situation—my own staff, my own resources, my own gifts and abilities. My ego gets ramped up to do bigger and better things and then I go home and drive everyone crazy. Three months later, the conference notebook is on a bookshelf somewhere and I have returned to life as usual with a vague feeling of uneasiness about my effectiveness as a leader, never quite sure if I am measuring up."

This was not a critique of any particular conference; rather, he was courageously naming *in God's presence* and in the presence of another person what was taking place inside his soul in the context of his leadership. His desire was to hear from God in that place. He knew that in order for his soul to be well, he could not afford to live his life driven blindly by unexamined inner dynamics.

When it is NOT Well With Your Soul

Some of us know that we are losing bits and pieces of our souls every day and we are scared to death that we might be very close to going over an edge. Others of us are still hanging in there fairly well but we are not sure how long we will last. All of us have watched ministry friends and colleagues endure heartbreak, failure or betrayal that was so profound they left ministry and are now selling real estate.

Those of us who have been in ministry for any length of time at all are under no illusion that we are exempt from such outcomes. Even the young ones know better these days. One emerging leader wrote, "I feel the call of God to move deeper and deeper into service through preaching and leadership. At the same time I am keenly aware of what ministry is doing to the personal spiritual lives of almost everyone I know on staff or in key volunteer positions in the church. I am increasingly unsure about how one is supposed to navigate the time commitments of ministry and one's personal journey towards growth and wholeness. I find myself wondering if the two aren't mutually exclusive."

Paying attention to such uncomfortable admissions requires a certain kind of courage because we never know where such honest reflections will take us. However, if we are willing to listen to our uneasiness, it might lead us to important questions that are lurking under the surface of our Christian busyness. "How does spiritual leadership differ from other models of how we lead?"

We might find ourselves wondering, "And how can I be strengthened at the soul level to provide such leadership? What would it look like for me to lead more consistently from my soul—the place of my own encounter with God—rather than leading primarily from my head, my unbridled activism, or my performance oriented driven-ness. What would it be like to find God in the context of my leadership rather than miss God in the context of my leadership?"

How is it With Your Soul?

When the Wesleyan bands of Christ-followers got together for their small group meetings, their first question to each other was, "How is it with your soul?" This is the best possible question for us as leaders in light of Jesus' warning and in light of what we witness in and around us.

So, *how is it with your soul?* Take a few moments in quiet to listen to this question in God's presence and see what comes. Allow the following prayer from pastor Ted Loder to lead you into an honest moment of speaking with God about the condition of your soul these days.

*O God of such truth as sweeps away all lies,
of such grace as shrivels all excuses,
come now to find us
for we have lost ourselves
in a shuffle of disguises
and in the rattle of empty words.*

*Let your Spirit move mercifully
To recreate us from
The chaos of our lives.*

*We have been careless of our days
our loves our gifts
our chances...*

*Our prayer is to change, O God,
not out of despair of self
but for love of you,
and the selves we long to become
before we simply waste away.*

Let your mercy move in and through us now...

Amen.