



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Restoring the Soul of the City
Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B, Psalm 23
April 21, 2024
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is the soul? I used to think of the soul as the purest part of ourselves –the other-worldly part that will someday drift to heaven. But I read a book about 30 years ago that invited me to see the soul in a whole new way. The book was *Care of the Soul* by Thomas Moore. Not the Thomas More who dared to challenge King Henry VIII and was made famous by the play and movie, 'A Man for All Seasons.' No, this Thomas Moore is a monk-turned therapist-turned spiritual author who is still writing books at age 83.

He describes the soul as dynamic, sticky, and messy – often forming earthly attachments that don't always make sense. He sees the soul as the very heart of who we are at the core of our embodied lives here on earth. Granted, Moore's understanding of the soul is more psychological than religious, but I wonder if it gives us a better starting point to begin to understand what Psalm 23 means by, 'He restores my soul.' God seems less interested in taking our souls to heaven and more interested in restoring our souls on earth. And is this just about restoring individual souls? Does our city have a soul that is also in need of restoration?

Many years ago, a boy named Joe and his brother built a little boat to float across Rainbow Lake in Overton Park. They often played there with their next-door neighbor - a skinny preacher's kid named Charlie. Joe reflected back on those days toward the end of his life: "Lucky boys we were, for we lived adjacent to Overton Park and The Old Forest. Sounds of lions roaring and peacocks howling at the Zoo filled the night air. We played baseball and football on the Greensward, fished in Rainbow Lake, and drank our fill of wonderful hours spent roaming in the shade of The Old Forest canopy. The park has matured through the years. It seems a bit more crowded and busier now, but it still maintains that same charm and allure that I have experienced through the three-quarters of a century since I first visited The Old Forest."

The souls of Joe and Charlie made early attachments to the sights, sounds, and smells of the Old Forest in Overton Park. And those attachments not only stuck, they became deeper and more profound over the years. Joe Sullivan went on to become a caring physician, a faithful usher at our 8:00 service, and an amateur wildlife photographer. He loved taking and sharing photos of the wide variety of birds and wildlife in the Old Forest. It was the place where his soul was refreshed and renewed as he basked in the creative imagination of God. Joe's love for the Old Forest kindled a flame in others, especially his daughter-in-law Tina who now leads the Overton Park Conservancy.

Joe's childhood friend Charlie Newman became an attorney who successfully challenged the Federal Government in stopping the Interstate Highway from going through and destroying the very heart of the Old Forest and Overton Park. Charlie humbly shares the credit for this with a small band of determined volunteers in yellow T-shirts who would simply not give up, even after 20 years of fighting as underdogs. Through the grace of God and a Supreme Court decision written by Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American justice and an underdog himself, the Old Forest, the soul in the heart of our city, was preserved and restored.

In reading or singing of the beautiful imagery of Psalm 23, we may be too quick to enter the realm of metaphor and not appreciate the real places being described. Just as young Joe and Charlie were blessed to grow up in and then fall in love with the Old Forest, we are blessed to have real places to go to in our city to lie down in green pastures, and reflect beside still waters.

God has provided us with places of refreshment, literal places that restore our souls. In addition to Overton Park, I can think of several. The walkway above Tom Lee Park where you can hear the insect sounds along the Mississippi River. Hyde Park at Shelby Farms Park where you can see ducks and geese preen themselves in the water and along the shoreline. The back deck of Otherlands Coffee Bar where you can listen to birds and feel the breeze as you enjoy a cup of tea with a friend. I bet you can name a hundred more.

These places have a way of unblocking our minds and opening our hearts to see people, situations, and the world from a new perspective as we bask in God's creative imagination. Jesus often took time out to go, pray, and reflect along streams, in the wilderness, atop mountains, and in the midst of gardens. There were times when he too longed for soul restoration.

Notice how the language in Psalm 23 changes from 'The Lord' to 'Thou' or 'You' It moves from talking about God to talking and walking *with* God. Time walking in green pastures and sitting alongside still waters can bring us into a deeper intimacy with God. We can cling to God's rod and staff as we walk together through the valley of the shadow of death. We can let go of our fears as we embrace God's comforting protection, anointing touch, and overflowing hospitality.

Just like Joe and Charlie, we are invited to join our Good Shepherd in preserving and creating the natural soul of our city. These spots have the power to become the sacred spaces that restore our souls. *Amen.*