Sermon

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Sunday, May 5th, 2024

Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [ACTS 10:44-48; PSALM 98; 1 JOHN 5:1-6; JOHN 15:9-17](https://lectionary.anglican.ca/nrsv/?date=2024-05-05&submit=show+new+date)

How big is your soul? Do you have a fat soul?

Some of you may have heard me speak about the idea of having a fat soul. I first came across the idea in a novel called “Fat Soul Fridays”. In it, Patricia Adams Farmer uses the characters to live out a “Fat Soul Philosophy” of life.

The idea of a “Fat Soul” was born out of process theologian Bernard Loomer’s lectures and essays on the size of our souls. When Loomer talks about size, he means the range and depth of our love, and our capacity for relationships. He means the volume of life we can take in without compromising our integrity and individuality, and the variety of perspectives we can entertain without feeling defensive or insecure. He means the strength of our spirits to encourage others in diversity. He means the depth of our concern and our desire to help others increase the size of their souls by creating conditions that allow others to be free to develop their uniqueness and live into their diversity.

Our society encourages a lot of “thin” thinking. Thin thinking focuses on power and wealth and keeps “us” and “them” categories nice and neat. Thin thinking shies away from shared power. Thin thinking doesn’t waste time on the “least of these”, or on climate change or on discrimination or violence and oppression in our world. Thin thinking keeps the focus on money, on unilateral power, on the idea that we are separate from nature, and on an “us-versus-them” approach to life.

A Fat Soul – fat thinking – is the opposite of this. Fat Soul is a metaphor for inclusiveness, love, and generosity of spirit. “Fat Soul Philosophy” sees the soul as the cumulative flow of all of our relationships with everything and everyone around us. The difference between a “fat” soul, and a “big” soul is that a “Fat Soul” dares to be bigger than society might deem proper. A Fat Soul gets bigger and bigger, absorbing experiences in relationship with God, with others, with the world.

In Eastertide the Sunday lectionary offers us Resurrection stories. Stories of wonder and amazement and mystery. Then we switch gears, moving to stories about living. Stories about *how to live*, in relationship with God, and with each other. We’ve had the story of the Good Shepherd. We’ve been given the metaphor of the vine and branches – both offering us lessons in how to live. Lessons in love and care and protection. Lessons in living a relational life, where all our interactions and experiences intertwine and intersect like branches. That “how to live” continues today. And, that “how to live” invites us into a “Fat Soul” way of life.

We move further into John’s Gospel, and Jesus continues to speak to the disciples of love and abiding. We heard the verse: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Some of you will be familiar with Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible – called “The Message” – in which he uses so-called “modern language” to help us better understand the original Hebrew and Greek texts. His translation of this verse I’ve just read is particularly interesting. Unlike other translations, he has not chosen the word “complete”. Instead, he translates this same verse: “I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature.” Wholly mature joy. There is a difference between “complete” and “wholly mature”, isn’t there? A wholly mature joy continues to grow. That joy gets bigger. That joy gets fatter!

Jesus says: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Laying down one’s life *for one’s friends*. The issue is not whether we will lay down our lives. We are all laying down our lives – minute by minute, hour by hour. But what – and how and who – is that laying down for? For one’s friends. For relationship. For connections, intersecting and intertwining like vine and branches. That’s what for! This is *abiding in love*. It is seeing that nothing we do is separate from any other person, place or thing. *This is having a “Fat Soul”.* It is seeing that we are made to be open to more than one “right way” of living and loving and believing. That we are made to be open to diversity and uniqueness. That we are made to lift up and support and love others: not only the “others” who look and sound and live the way we do, but all others. We are made to love and cherish our world. This is the way that Jesus calls us to “lay down our lives”. This is the way we are *made* to “lay down our lives”.

In the passage we heard from Acts there is astonishment that the Holy Spirit could be poured out “even on the Gentiles”. Peter says: “"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" There is a particular energy to astonishment. It’s a mix of belief and disbelief that opens our hearts and minds. A “Fat Soul” uses the energy of astonishment to be open to possibility and potential. A “Fat Soul” would never withhold that water. A “Fat Soul” lets that water overflow, absorbing that experience, soaking in the relationship with God, and others and the world, knowing that we are all of a piece, deeply interwoven and connected.

A “Fat Soul” calls us to continually widen our circle of compassion and empathy and understanding. Patricia Adams Farmer writes that striving for a bigger soul – a fat soul – “…does not diminish one’s own identity, uniqueness, or beauty; rather, it strengthens individual identity and uniqueness in the way a single color is brought to life in a painting by the splash of a contrasting color next to it.” One of her fictional characters in the book “Fat Soul Fridays”, says: “A beautiful soul is a large soul, one that can overcome the smallness and pettiness of our human condition. A really fat soul can welcome diverse people, ideas, and ways of being in the world without feeling threatened. A fat soul experiences the intensity of life in its fullness, even the painful side of life, and knows there is something still bigger . . .”

Experiencing the intensity of life in its fullness, knowing that there is something still bigger even in the painful side of life – fattening our souls – there is a stretching in this. We are stretched as we widen our circle of compassion. We are stretched as we absorb experiences in relationship with God, and each other and our world. That stretching can be uncomfortable, but if we are willing to hold the stretch, trusting that God is with us in it, we will get to that something bigger, our souls will get fatter.

Sam Wells says that we should not be called human beings, but rather “human becomings”. He reminds us that “…every plant, every person, every continent, every planet, every star is changing all the time. Every time you or I do something, we change. Our history changes and our experience changes, and we become a person whose identity is subtly altered. We are changing every second of every day.” For the whole of this earthly life, we are in a state of “becoming”, and for the whole of this earthly life, there is the potential for our souls to become fatter!

May this time we share here this morning serve as a feast for our souls. May we leave here having feasted on love, and compassion, and empathy and generosity of spirit. And, may our souls grow fatter today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.