

Your Soul – and Bart Simpson’s

Matthew 16: 21-26

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

When you have a question about your faith, or want help with a Bible passage, where do you turn? Where would you go? Perhaps you are a part of a Bible study group. You’ve learned to trust the leaders and the other learners, and you might want to raise your question to see how your fellow believers are led by God’s Word and their experience to respond to a matter that’s unclear to you.

Or you might want to try to talk to your elder, or a trusted leader who is known to you to have the gift of discernment and understanding. They have assisted fellow believers before. They may very well lend their understanding and counsel to you.

It’s certainly natural for us to think of our pastor as a special spiritual resource and counselor. Pastors have years of seminary education and experience in hearing, and responding, and guiding people with the kinds of issues and questions we are facing, or are curious about. And if the pastor doesn’t already know the answer, he has the tools and the skills to dig the answer out.

Then there’s the media – online sources, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. The communication channels are filled with messages, mostly popular ones that appeal to a broad spectrum of the people in our nation and around the world. Television has been called a vast wasteland, because there is so much of it, and so much of the

programming is mindless, vapid, empty entertainment, and so much of it is sinful and even blasphemous.

While there are some television programs that deal with matters of faith and religion -- many of them sponsored by churches or ministries -- there is precious little network programming that dare to even tiptoe into the field of biblical issues that matter to people. Most television writers and directors avoid Christian and biblical issues like the plague.

But there is program that has dealt with them over the past 28 years, and it is a rather surprising one: the Simpsons, an emmy award-winning animated program, has been recognized, even by scholars and theologians, as the program that most frequently deals with religious issues, sometimes even in a thoughtful way. The Simpsons don’t come up with the same answer we might find in Luther’s Small Catechism, or in the Lutheran Study Bible, but they are bold enough, at least in a few episodes, to raise issues of faith and relationship with God, issues that are raised by Jesus himself.

In 1995, a controversial episode was broadcast, titled “Bart Sells His Soul.” The star of the episode is, of course, Bart Simpson, a ten-year-old, known for his sarcasm, wise cracks, self-centeredness, practical jokes, and a worldliness far beyond his tender age.

When Bart is scolded for a disruption at Church, Millhouse snitches on him. Bart asked “How could you tell on me? Millhouse responded that he didn’t want the preacher’s threat of hungry birds pecking at his soul forever, to come true.

Bart replies: Soul? Come on, Milhouse, there is no such thing as a soul. It’s just something they made up to scare kids, like the boogeyman, or Michael Jackson.

Milhouse replies: But every religion says there’s a soul, Bart. Why would they lie? What would they have to gain?

Bart replies: Well, if your soul is real, where is it?

Milhouse says: It’s kind of in here – in your chest. And when you sneeze, that’s your soul trying to escape. Saying “God Bless you? Crams it back in –

back up your nose. And when you die, it squirms out and flies away.

Bart: Uh huh. What if you die in a submarine at the bottom of the ocean?

Milhouse: Oh, it can swim. It's even got wheels in case you die in the desert, and it has to drive to the cemetery.

Bart sighs. "How can someone with glasses that thick be so stupid? Listen: you don't have a soul, I don't have a soul, there's no such thing as a soul!"

Milhouse responds: If you're so sure about that, why don't you sell your soul to me?

Bart: How much you got?

Milhouse had five bucks, and Bart struck the deal.

Bart writes BART SIMPSON'S SOUL on a piece of paper, and exchanges it with Milhouse for \$5.

Milhouse says slyly, "Pleasure doing business with you."

Later, Bart tells his sister Lisa that he sold his soul to Milhouse.

Lisa gasps: What? How could you do that? Your soul is the most valuable part of you!

Bart: You believe in that junk?

Lisa: Well, whether or not the soul is physically real, Bart, it's the symbol of everything fine inside us. Your soul is the only part of you that lasts forever. For five dollars, Milhouse could own you for a zillion years.

Bart replies: Well, if you think he got such a good deal, I'll sell you my conscience for \$4.50. I'll throw in my sense of decency, too. It's a Bart sales event. Everything about me must go!

But Bart thinks more and more about his soul, and approaches Milhouse to buy it back. Milhouse is willing -- for \$50 -- but Bart is not.

After becoming more and more worried, Bart tries to buy a replacement soul for a buck, but is unsuccessful.

He finally finds Milhouse and pleads to buy his soul back, but Milhouse has traded it for some pogs. The pog dealer had sold it again.

Bart is desperate and that night, like an atheist in a foxhole, he prays:

"Are you there, God? It's me, Bart Simpson. I know I never paid too much attention in church, but I could really use some of that good stuff now. I'm afraid. I'm afraid some weirdo's got my soul and I don't know what they're doing to it. I just want it back. Please? I hope you can hear this?"

It turned out that his sister Lisa had redeemed it with the change in her piggy bank.

Bart is very relieved, but true to his character, we don't know how long his repentance will result in changed living, or even a change of heart.

Bart, and Milhouse, and Lisa were dealing with the same question posed by Jesus in our Gospel. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

For people who know the Word of God, with its light and its promise, the answer is clear: nothing. Nothing good can happen if a person gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul. A person can give nothing in exchange for her soul -- or at least she or he should not be ready to accept anything for it.

Explaining and defining the soul is hard -- almost like trying to define and explain what God is like. A soul is given only to human beings, and so it distinguishes us from all the rest of God's creation. Even believers have argued for centuries how many there are, and when a newly conceived person gets one, and whether they are ever noticeable or visible. We know, from the Scriptures, that the soul of a believer, at death, enjoys eternal life immediately, and that the souls of unbelievers suffer in total separation from God, also at death.

We speak of a Christian congregation as

having 347 souls, and in the Lutheran Church, we think of pastors as caring for our souls. It is a part of us that is spiritual and not physical. With our limited human capacity, when we speak of our souls, we sort of know what we are talking about without being able to explain it very well.

Perhaps it is helpful to think of our soul as an indicator of what is in our heart and in our future. When we know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, our soul is at peace with God, and we are confident in God's promise that both our souls and our bodies will someday be with God for all eternity.

For those who do not know Jesus, the soul is lost and listless. It does not know peace with God because it does not know the forgiveness that Jesus Christ has won by his death and resurrection. God says in his word: the soul that sinneth – it shall die. The soul, apart from Christ, sense this to be true, and without God's graceful intervention, the soul will suffer in hell, eternally separate from God.

Is the soul something that we can sell, or buy? Does Bart Simpson, or anyone else, have the right to sell a soul – the thing that makes them unique, a part of them that will never cease to exist?

Without writing it on a piece of paper, we see people doing it all the time. We see people who are not ready to deny themselves. Instead of loving the Lord God with all their heart, soul, and mind, they love themselves. It is natural. It's what we expect. But it's not what God wants.

We see people who are not ready to take up their crosses. They believe that a God who is kind and loving should never permit violence, or hunger, or famine, or flood, or betrayal by friends, or disaster, or war, or terror, or sickness, or disability, or joblessness, or family tension, or stress at work or school. They have come to believe that God owes them only happiness, health, and wealth, and they disagree violently that the sufferings of this world are not worthy to be compared to the glory that will be revealed. They want to live in heaven's mansions for eternity, and they want to live in Pleasantville or on Easy Street while still here on earth.

We see people who are not ready to follow Jesus. Some of them have heard the commands of the Shepherd and are not ready to go where He leads. Some see the rejection that Jesus endured, and are not ready to stand out in the crowd as a saint – one who is called out – one who is different –

because they have love Jesus and they desire to do what he says.

We see people who are trying to save themselves. It's all they know. Especially in this country, where we take such pride in being self-made men and women, we want to do it for ourselves. It is natural to do these things. It comes to us naturally in our inherited, sinful condition.

When Jesus told his disciples that the pathway to salvation would involve suffering, alienation, and even death, Peter took Jesus aside and said, "Not if I have anything to say about it! This shall never happen to you!"

With bluntness and a personal focus, Jesus told Peter that he was thinking like a human being. God's plan is so radical, it has not yet sunken in to an apostle who still slips into thinking like a normal member of the human race. It must all happen to Jesus, just as the prophets had foretold. It must all happen to Jesus, so that God's law can be kept perfectly. Even the gruesome stuff must happen, because it is essential that one who is innocent must die for the guilty.

When our first parents, Adam and Eve, fell into sin, there was a huge transaction made that day. They had sold their souls, and the souls of all human beings to follow, to the Devil himself. But God be praise, the transaction was not final.

By the intervention of a gracious and loving God, it became possible for our souls to be redeemed – to be bought back. If only the Son of God would be willing to suffer many things. If only the Son of God would lay down his life and be killed. If only the Son of God would be raised to life on the third day.

It happened. Praise God it happened! Your soul, and the souls of every human being on every continent and at every time in history, has been redeemed with the blood of the lamb of God.

They don't all know it. They don't all embrace him in faith. So it is our joy and our privilege to proclaim loudly and share personally – that your soul – and every soul has been sold – and bought back by this Jesus, who invites us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him.

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