



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
February 9, 2020 Sermon

## The Care of the Soul in a Digital Age

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 90, Matthew 16:24-26

Jonathan Edwards once said we should never allow ourselves a thought we would not entertain on our deathbeds. Stark as this standard is, and unattainable as it is, thank God, it does suggest the importance of our thinking as something appropriately disciplined by the brevity of all life, as well as the extraordinary fact of one's being a consciousness capable of shaping and orienting itself. The mind, that most luxuriant flowering of the highest possibilities of the material world, likes to natter and mope and trivialize itself. We let an astonishing fertility run to weeds. I realize this statement is meaningful only if it is first granted that some thoughts, our own and others, are relatively worthy of us, or unworthy on grounds of triviality, or flatly destructive. Not much in contemporary life encourages us to make this kind of distinction. Pathology invites medical or legal intervention, of course. Short of this, we are offered strategies for making ourselves more useful to the economy, for coping with stress or warding off dementia. We have no current language for the culture of the mind, which another generation might have called the care of the soul.—from "Considering the Theological Virtues," an essay from the collection, *What Are We Doing Here?*, by Marilynne Robinson

### Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

You've probably noticed that, most Sundays, I make a practice of prefacing—or setting up—Scripture Lessons before I read them. I do this because I want you to direct your attention to a certain verse or thought or theme in the reading, and later in my sermon. And I do that because I know *I* need it. I sometimes find it hard to focus my attention when I'm reading—even more when I'm hearing—a passage from the Bible.

So for today's First lesson, Psalm 90, I want to focus on one verse, verse 12: "Teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." I want to focus on that verse because I think it focuses us not just on what's important in the Psalm, but on what's important in our lives. So we'll read this responsively. I'll read a part of the Psalm, and then—I'll cue you when—you'll say verse 12: "Teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." It's printed in your bulletins, if you need a crib. Listen—and respond now to God's Word:

### Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

Our Second Scripture Lesson is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16 verses 24-26. Jesus is teaching his followers what it means to be his followers: They must give up their lives in order to gain their lives. Their lives—their souls—are worth more, far more, infinitely more, than anything the world can offer. The priority of the human soul. Listen now for God's Word:

### Sermon:

It was one of those sentences that pulls you up short. It was a week ago yesterday, a cold, rainy, winter afternoon. I was sitting in the living room, Graham, our 16-year old son, and his dog, Medli, were curled up on on the couch. I could hear the frozen rain falling on the porch outside the window. I was reading an essay by Marilynne Robinson.

Marilynne Robinson is an American novelist and writer. You might well add "prominent," or "award-winning" to that description. She's won any number of literary prizes, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction. She's been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and been awarded any number of honorary degrees, including from Oxford and Yale. She taught for years at the University of Iowa's MFA program in Creative Writing, the first and most prestigious program of its kind in America. And, as you'd expect from someone with such credentials, her prose and prose style is widely praised: Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hailed her as "one of the world's most compelling English-speaking novelists." So you might add "acclaimed" to that description, too. In short, in academic and intellectual circles, Marilynne Robinson has street "cred."

And she's a Calvinist. Yes, that's right: she was born and raised a Presbyterian, and to this day regularly attends and occasionally preaches at the United Church of Christ in Iowa City. More than that, she identifies herself as a devoted follower of John Calvin, the 16th-century Reformer who is the founding figure of Presbyterianism. More than that, she is an unabashed and vocal defender and proponent of Calvin's writings and teachings. And even more than that, her religious faith—her Calvinism!—informs all her work, in any number of ways, some obvious, some more subtle.

All of which, in academic and intellectual circles, causes no end of cognitive dissonance. One writer, a writer for *Slate* writing in *The New Yorker* (neither known as house organs for orthodox Christianity), one who identifies himself as “a fully paid-up atheist,” nonetheless in tones both amazed and appreciative, calls her novels “masterpieces.” And he adds that, Yes, “she's a Calvinist, *but* her spiritual sensibility is richly inclusive and non-dogmatic.”

It's that last sentence that would rile Robinson, specifically the “but”: as if having a richly inclusive and non-dogmatic spiritual sensibility somehow makes her an exception to the Calvinist rule. Robinson would insist—indeed she *does* insist, in many of her essays—that John Calvin *himself* had a richly inclusive and non-dogmatic spiritual sensibility.

In those essays, Robinson frequently takes aim at academics and intellectuals, who dismiss Calvin not by engaging his writings but simply by attaching certain well-worn adjectives to the words, “Calvin” and “Calvinism,” adjectives such as, “bleak and barren,” “dark and dour,” “gloomy and grim,” “harsh and hard-hearted,” “severe and stern.” And in her essays, Robinson takes pains—and clearly some pleasure—in showing that many of these dismissers have clearly never read a word of Calvin.

And what Robinson does for Calvin, she also does for Calvin's spiritual inheritors, the English and American Puritans. And here again, I have to say, I think she has a point. Let me ask you: Do you have any positive associations with the words, “Puritan” or “puritanical”? I didn't think so. Now let me ask you again: have you ever read any Puritan writers?

So there I was reading one of Robinson's essays, and it was this sentence, about the 17th-century American Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, that pulled me up short:  
“Jonathan Edwards once said we should never allow ourselves a thought we would not entertain on our deathbeds.”

“Uh-oh,” I thought, “I'm in trouble.”

So I took quick stock: what kinds of thoughts usually revolve in my head?: “Can I cut three minutes off my drive time? What about that Super Bowl halftime show? Do my socks match? Can the Reds make the playoffs this year?” All revolving to the tune of . . . well, usually to the tune of some 1970's sitcom theme song: “Here's the story of man named Baker . . .”

“I'm in *big* trouble,” I thought.

Now let me be clear: Edwards is NOT saying that our last thoughts must be holy ones for us to gain entree into heaven. Not at all. As a follower of John Calvin, he knew that our salvation depends on God's grace, and *not* on our merits, including the merits—or lack thereof—of our thoughts. No, what Edwards was saying was . . . well, what he was saying was: “Teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.”

The human mind—the human mind we all have—is a wonderful gift, and a terrible thing to waste. Life is short, and if we are to honor both God and ourselves, we should make the most of it, put it to the best uses possible. Yet we are prone to wasteful ways, or as the old hymn puts it, “prone to wander, Lord, I know it, prone to leave the God I love. Robinson, for her part, puts it this way:

*The mind, that most luxuriant flowering of the highest possibilities of the material world, likes to natter and mope and trivialize itself. We let an astonishing fertility run to weeds.* This propensity to wander, to natter, mope and trivialize ourselves, to go to seed,—to waste ourselves in distractions and distractions from our distractions—is a perennial of our fallen human condition. Yet it may be different in a digital age, maybe even more difficult, especially more difficult not to trivialize ourselves, but in any case, different, and those differences are worth attending to.

That we have a mind, or a soul, or a spirit or a self—call it what you will—is undeniable: yes, we all have the experience of having one, of being one; but I mean *literally* undeniable: if you try to deny it, if you try to say for example, that it's all nothing but synapses firing in the brain, you contradict yourself in the very act of saying it . . . Who or what is saying this? To whom or what? And to what end? In other words, the very act of human communication presupposes human beings (selves, spirits, souls, minds whatever) formulating, expressing, considering and judging things. And it also presupposes that such formulating, expressing, considering and judging is worth doing. None of which would be true if “we” were nothing but synapses firing.

No, the more interesting and pressing question is the nature and value of the human self. So here let me quote an author who shall go unnamed for the moment, who stresses god-given goodness, and grandeur of the humanity in general, and in particular of the human soul. The author writes:

*There can be no question that a human consists of a body and a soul; meaning by soul, an immortal though created essence, which is the nobler part, sometimes called a spirit. Thus, there can be no question that humans were created in the image of God. For though the divine glory is displayed in humanity's outward appearance, it cannot be doubted that the proper seat of the image is in the soul.*

The soul more than anything else about us, this author says, bears the image of God. And this is how the soul reflects, and relates, to the divine glory. The author continues:

*The swiftness with which the human mind glances from heaven to earth, grasps the secrets of nature and the movements of history and, then takes all this in in its proper order, clearly shows that there lurks in humans something separate from the body. We are able to conceive of the invisible God and angels; We have ideas of righteousness, justice, and honesty—ideas which the bodily senses cannot reach. The seat of these ideas must therefore be a spirit.*

And yet for all these actions, according to this unnamed author, the human soul has one principal action. The author writes: “The principal action of the soul is to aspire to happiness, the perfection of which is being united with God.”

We were made to love and be loved, to love and be loved by God. Even while we sleep, our souls are still performing this, their principal action. One more passage from this author:

*SLEEP itself, which stupefying the person, seems even to deprive him of life, is not an obscure, but a manifest, evidence of immortality; not only suggesting thoughts of things which never existed, but foreboding future events.* Yes, even as we snooze away—our souls still reflect and relate to the divine glory.

Who is this unnamed author with such a grand and glorious, such an exalted and exalting view of both God and humanity, you ask? That's right, none other than the bleak and barren, gloomy and grim, etc. John Calvin. If we mainline, Reformed Protestants disown Calvin, stop reading him, simply in deference to the prevailing winds of intellectual fashion, then we sell our birthright for a pottage of well-worn adjectives.

Yes, of course, of course, Calvin does talk about sin—here and there. But even then, he emphasizes that “the vestiges of the divine glory can be seen even in our very vices.” For example (Calvin's example): Our unrestrained lust for personal glory, springs from a secret shame about ourselves, but that shame itself stems from an respect for what is honorable and a sense that we were born to cultivate righteousness. (Calvin wasn't too bad a psychologist either—apply this point where you will). Or to put it in a larger context, the best things, when corrupted, become the very worst.

The best things when corrupted become the very worst. We can see this in individual human beings: when the most gifted person takes a turn for the worse, it is terrifying. But we can also see it in humanity in general, the crown jewel of creation: we human beings are capable of acts of such goodness and kindness so as to make the angels weep in joy for their beauty; and we are capable of acts of such baseness and cruelty so as to make the beasts weep in horror, if they could conceive of such acts, which blessedly, they cannot. And sometimes I'm capable of both kinds of acts—in the same day.

Our being both so gifted and yes so susceptible to sin makes God's redeeming act of love in Jesus Christ—God's act to restore our souls, to restore the image of God in us—the crux of all history. And that makes the care of our souls of paramount importance for us, especially in a digital age.

Sometimes I feel like Dug, you know, Dug, d-u-g-, the talking dog from the animated Pixar movie, UP. You remember, Dug, don't you?—he wore special collar translator that allowed him to communicate,—SQUIRREL!— ? Everything in the movie—the whole plot—hinges on Dug. It is Dug who befriends Carl—the lonely, curmudgeonly old widower, who has just flown his entire house by helium balloons to South America—“I have just met you and I love you.” Dug who saves Russell, the 9-year-old Explorer Scout and accidental stowaway who had been hanging around Carl's house hoping to earn his wilderness patch for “Assisting the Elderly” Dug who saves Kevin, the rare and exotic bird and reunites her with her children (Kevin is actually a girl bird)—saves them both from the evil clutches of the mad scientist, the evil Charles Muntz. Dug who saves all the other dogs from their cruel leader the Doberman Pinscher, Alpha, and becomes their leader himself.

It is Dug who saves Carl, who loves Carl (I have just met you and I love you.”), and thereby teaches him to love again—and to live again. Dug has all the makings of a true hero. Oh, he may wear the cone of shame (that's the the big plastic cone they put over the dog's head so he won't scratch himself) but he nonetheless has all the makings of a true hero: he was made to love and be loved. (Those Pixar writers were pretty good psychologists too).

The problem is that Dug is easily distracted: SQUIRREL! Or BALL, BALL, BALL! Every time he sees one or the other—and its always a moment of great dramatic import—off and running he goes, forgetting all about what he's doing there, forgetting all about the cosmic struggle of good versus evil.

That's me when I go on line: BRADY BUNCH—whatever happened to Marcia? REDS—Should they extend Trevor Bauer? J-LO is her workout routine at age 50? I can distract myself for hours—distract myself from my distractions, clicking on click bait, left, right, and center screen, going down one rabbit hole after another, forgetting all about why I went online in the first place, forgetting all about the care of my soul, never once entertaining a thought worthy of having on my deathbed.

“Teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.”

And the thing is that God does. Teach us, that is. Two weeks ago (you may remember), I was talking about God as our one true teacher, in the person of the Holy Spirit, underwriting and overseeing all genuine learning. And one place that happens, in my experience, is in prayer.

I can't be the only one here who finds himself with new, better thoughts during or right after prayer: “I should to call her—she had that doctor's appointment yesterday. ”or just a new better thought of kindness (“I suppose God loves him too, go figure”) or of confidence (“we can do this”) or of justice (“I need to do something about this”). Or maybe I find myself humming last Sunday's anthem. Like a good teacher, God often refocuses my attention in prayer.

Martin Luther wrote this: *If thoughts come to us while we pray, we ought to stop saying the prayer and make room for such thoughts, listen to them in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit preaches to us here in prayer, and one word of the Holy Spirit's sermon is far better than a thousand of ours.*

And it's not only in prayer. It can happen anytime and anywhere, in any number of different ways—that God directs us to new and better thoughts. Talking to a friend, taking a walk, preparing and enjoying a meal, exercising, maybe even coming to church. It can happen anytime and anywhere, in any number of different ways: maybe when you're reading a book, or when you read one of those sentences that pulls you up short. Maybe even, as Calvin says, it can happen while we sleep.

I had been thinking about how beautiful the frozen rain sounded as it bounced off the front porch, thinking about, how even winter has its own beauty, even in February, and the warmth of the living room, and the blessing of my son, and the beauty of Marilynne Robinson's finely honed prose—When the next thing I knew: “MEDLI! MEDLI! MEDLI!” I must have fallen asleep because there Medli was on my lap licking my face, and Marilynne Robinson was on the floor.

“Teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.” A thought, I think, that is worthy of our entertaining on our deathbeds: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.”

God is with us—still.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.