

AUGUST 1, 2021

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON: It Is Well with My Soul, Psalm 46:1, Psalm 56:1-13

Our hymn this week, *It Is Well With My Soul*, was written in the 1800s by Horatio Spafford. Born in New York, Spafford settled in Chicago where he had a reputation as intelligent and faithful. Different than most of the other hymn writers we've seen, Horatio was neither clergy nor did he spend time in the pulpit. He was an extraordinary layperson who nevertheless rubbed elbows with some of the significant evangelical leaders of his day including D.L. Moody.

Spafford invested a great deal in holdings on the front of Lake Michigan. Unfortunately, in the great Chicago fire, all of his holdings quite literally went up in smoke. While this was a great tragedy, it paled in comparison to what would come not long after. As he worked to rebuild, he and his wife decided the family needed a vacation. They planned a trip across the sea to Europe. As the trip came close, some hiccups in business forced Horatio to send his wife and four children on ahead of him, planning to follow a few days later once he'd finished tying things up. As his family voyaged, they were struck by another vessel. The ship sank quickly. From Wales, where survivors were taken, his wife sent a message. "Saved alone." All four of their children had perished in the wreck. Horatio went and met up with his grieving wife. As he made his way, near the spot where his children had drowned, he wrote the words "when sorrows like sea billows roll."

The couple made their way back to Chicago where they had two more children. At around 52 years old, the Spaffords and some friends made their way to the Holy Land, a place they'd longed to visit. In Jerusalem they stayed, and founded a mission called the America Colony. This mission cared for the sick and poor of the area. Spafford served here for 8 years until his death at 60 years old. After his passing, family and friends continued the work of the mission.

Knowing the story makes this hymn all the more powerful, and those words "when sorrows like sea billows roll" never sung the same way again.

In the write up of this hymn it is noted that the tone of it is truly remarkable. Yes, trials and sorrow are acknowledged, but the hymn doesn't dwell there. Instead, the tone of the hymn is wonderfully hopeful and assuring, focusing far more on the grace and redeeming work of Jesus, and the hope that He will one day return. To be able to write this in the midst of such tragedy is amazing, inspiring, and humbling.

Working through the message this week, I realized something that I had been mistaken about for a long time, and from conversations I've had many others have been as well. I'll begin with what may seem a strange question.

Have you ever been in a place, whether for an hour, a week, month, whatever, that you were ready to give up? You felt so helpless, hopeless, angry, frustrated, or disillusioned that you said to yourself "I'm done, it's not worth it to even try anymore, I'm throwing in the towel." I've been there. I imagine I'm not alone. The next question is this.

Can you be in that state, and still have it be well with your soul? I suggest that yes, we can. We can because wellness of soul is not the same as having peace of mind/heart/spirit. Wellness of soul is far more foundational, and actually is what allows us to endure those moments when we are broken.

This message is so important in a time and place when some strains of the faith suggest that if our faith is strong, we should never be rattled. We should never get to a place where we are truly broken. To be overcome with sorrow, anger, confusion, brokenness, etc. is to reveal a deficient faith. True Christians face everything with a smile and never get too far down because faith lifts us up.

This idea is dangerous to the health of our mind and spirit. In fact, it is not only foolish, it is downright unbiblical.

Consider so many of the Psalms. The one we read today is a prime example. It is this back and forth of misery, frustration, perhaps even anger at how life has gone awry and how enemies are out to get the writer. Yet at the same time, there is unflinching reliance and trust in God. There is emotion and brokenness mixed with a depth of faith. The writing is expressive, communicating that the writer doesn't necessarily have peace inside, but does have a bedrock of faith and God that makes it well with the soul.

Consider the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is clearly broken and in anguish. He weeps and sweats and asks God to let Him off the hook. Still, His trust in God is unflinching. If He must go through with the work of the cross, He will. There is brokenness here, yet do we accuse it of every being unwell with Jesus' soul? Of course not. The two can exist at the same time. They are in tension with one another. We've spoken of the necessity of tension before. It is no less necessary here. To be in touch with our brokenness, past and present, is to confront it honestly. It drives us to deeper depths of faith. It also connects us with others experiencing their own similar brokenness. We can hear and feel them, and respond in a genuinely Christlike fashion.

To assume that brokenness and wellness of soul can't exist, and to deny our own suffering as a result, is to close us off from people who may need us to be present the most. Avoiding brokenness is the source of cliches and platitudes in the presence of someone genuinely hurting. "God will get you through this." "We'll pray you to the other side." "Don't let this robe you of your joy." What if the person I'm talking to doesn't believe in God? Suddenly none of that matters.

Don't misunderstand, I'm not saying those things aren't true. God DOES get us through things. People DO pray us through hardship. We MUST guard our joy from theft in the trials and tragedies of life. What must be remembered is that these are only comforting if someone believes, and even then if this is all that is offered may still be too little. If someone doesn't believe, simply a pat on the back with a platitude looks like we refuse to traffic in reality. In the depths of despair, talking about joy sounds ridiculous. "How can you possibly understand what I'm going through if all you want me to do is be joyful right now?" We shut down connection, and more importantly the opportunity to truly model Jesus.

Modeling Jesus is far more than pithy, simple sayings. Modeling Jesus is acting in love. Fully acting. It is meeting the genuine need rather than glossing over it. Love may look like simply sitting in the space with someone. It may be encouraging them to speak about what is happening, and truly listening. It may be inviting them to a meal to distract for a while or have a reason to get together and feel cared for. It is in this gritty reality, recognizing that humanity includes dark times and emotion, that we often either meet Jesus more deeply or have opportunity to share Christ more fully.

In fact, it is in opening ourselves to the truth of our condition, confronting it and embracing it in all of its darkness, that our soul is strengthened and made more well. Doing so demonstrates that we truly believe that "God works all things together for the good of those that believe and are called according to His purpose." This doesn't mean that we have to be dismissive of our brokenness because "God caused it for our own good." That turns God into some form of sadist. Rather we embrace our brokenness, seeking God in the midst of it, not because God caused it, but because we know that God can use it.

The fires of brokenness forge wellness of soul.

This idea of "wellness" is certainly attached to the notion of strength. A well soul is a strong soul. How do we improve strength/wellness of mind and body? We challenge them. Our bodies through movement and activity are challenged and become healthier and stronger. Our minds through reading, puzzles, debate, opening up to new thoughts and ideas grow and become healthier and stronger. Challenge. Why would our souls be any different?

Challenge cultivates strength of soul. Though it occurs differently than the body and mind. So often it is when something challenges the strength and wellness of our body or mind that the soul actually gains strength. Injury, disease, tragedy, relationships all can affect the wellness and strength of body and mind. We realize we are compromised or may not be able to get through on our own. Where do we turn? We turn to God. We turn to the soul. The soul makes up the difference in hope and purpose even when body or mind fail us. The hardship of the flesh is what makes for the ideal circumstances to strengthen the soul. It is in these moments that the scripture "God's strength is made perfect in my weakness" is truly and most fully realized.

So what is wellness of soul? It's rather simple.

Wellness of soul is that no matter what circumstances are pushing in on us, our bedrock is that the circumstances don't change that God is there with us, loving us, guiding us, strengthening us, redeeming us, and desiring us. No matter what, we know that we can rely on God to hold us, and so we can in all of our brokenness fall into God's hands. Adam Hamilton has a saying you've heard me quote often. "The last thing is never the worst thing." In fact, for those in Christ, the last thing is the best thing. We fall into the Kingdom of God and life everlasting.

So long as we have this, even if it is stormy in our hearts, we can still say it is well with our soul. Horatio Spafford knew this. His tragedies I'm sure gave him his own times of brokenness, yet in all of it, he could say it was well with his soul.

The tension between our pain and wellness of soul is at the heart of an old expression we all know. "Don't forget where you came from." Why? The idea is that if we are to treat people with genuine compassion and grace, we can't dismiss or forget our own trials and challenges. Sometimes this is difficult because they are so far in the rearview mirror. Yet we dare not remove too far from being able to access those memories and experiences.

If we do, we run the risk of not giving someone experiencing similar challenges now that we did then what they need. We forget what we needed. If I am in a place of ease and comfort right now, recognizing that I've made it through, it can be easy to fail to meet someone where they are, and instead try to drag them where I am. "I got through it you can to, so buck up. Look where I am now." This misses the purpose of our own trials as well as the call of God on our lives. Staying in touch with our own brokenness allows the wellness of our soul to continue to grow, and it allows that wellness to shine through the compassion to another. It shines because the other senses not only compassion and love, but also a present stillness and strength born out of experience.

To hold this tension, and have wellness of soul is to have a deeper faith, and a deeper sense of service to God. Remember Horatio Spafford. Rather than grow distant from God, surly, and bitter, he went the other direction. He grew in devotion, and ultimately gave his life over to serving the sick and poor in God's name. His calling through tragedy grew. His tragedy didn't cause him to sit there forever, ultimately it propelled him forward. I speculate that knowing his own pain helped him not only see the pain in the others in Jerusalem, but also pushed him into service there.

Where is God calling you? What unique pain have you experienced that God may want to use to bless the people and community around you?

Ultimately, the question at the root for all of us today isn't about our sadness or happiness, our abundance or need, our pain or comfort, our wholeness or brokenness. All of these things matter, but today there is a deeper question.

In whom have you placed your trust? If the answer is fully in God, then no matter the answer to any of the above, I pray at the very least you can always say that it is well with your soul.