

How Much Does Your Soul Weigh?

March 2, 2014

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Dr. David E. H. Jones, a British physicist --- who for years has written for the British scientific journal *Nature* under the pseudonym "Daedalus" found himself a while ago sparking a bit of a debate in scientific and theological circles when he proposed quite tongue in cheek that perhaps there is a way to measure the weight of the human soul. How much, Jones cynically wondered, does the human soul weigh? The professor posited that perhaps there are actual scientific tests that can be applied to our effort to understand the nature of the human soul. He went as far as to suggest that by attaching such instruments as piezoelectric transducers, inertial-navigation accelerometers and other scientific apparatuses to a person's body ... specifically to the body of a person near death ... it should be possible, upon that person dying, to measure the direction, velocity and weight of the soul as it leaves the body. To quantitatively determine the weight of the human soul. Now, as I said, Jones' article on this matter was an attempt to make light of (excuse the phrase) a religious world view that would take seriously the idea that human beings are, in fact, more than a mass of protoplasm. That there is something more to our lives than just the firing of neurons and the pulsating of cells. That the sum is greater than the parts. That there exists inside the human body -- every human body -- a diving spark, a weightless reality, a consciousness called the human soul. That there is more to this world than what meets the eye, that there are things that cannot be weighed or measured or tracked or scoped or scanned. Increasingly, it seems, there is this unnecessary - but

nevertheless - widening gulf between the world of science which is charged to understand without prejudice how the world works and how the world came into being and how the world can use better its resources, how we can improve human health – and the world of philosophy and theology and religion that tries to understand why the world is as it is. Why the world is here even to begin with. Why do we live and move and have our being. Why do we “love” and “hate” and cry and laugh and hope and despair and dream and regret? Two worlds: science and faith – and it seems increasingly never the twain shall meet. And so maybe it is an emblematic question - How much does the soul weigh? – a question proposed by Dr. Jones with more than a hint of sarcasm – and yet a question that lies deep inside the lives of, dare I say, billions of people. How much does my soul weigh? Or, perhaps we ask it another way, and say, How much weight should I give to what is happening inside of me?

I wonder if that isn't the question that Jesus is asking in this conversation he has with a Samaritan woman at the well. It's an intriguing conversation, isn't it? Filled with all sorts of double entendres. Talk of water and living water. Buckets and wells. Spirit and truth. Husbands and no husbands. It is certainly a conversation that we can parse and dissect for a thousand sermons. But beginning with the fact that Jesus is even having this conversation in a world where men did not publicly speak to women and Jews had not the time of day for Samaritans ... might the fact that Jesus even engages this woman suggest to us that Jesus is after far more about this woman than just her biography and theology. Might it be that Jesus was after something far deeper? Might it be that Jesus was after an understanding as to the weight and value of her soul? In other words, what was she worth? Qualitatively and quantitatively what was the weight of her soul? Not that there was any question in Jesus' mind about this -- the weight and value of her soul --- but that there might have been a great question in her own mind. In that day and age, in the eyes of Jews, to be Samaritan, to be female, and to be passed, for whatever reason, from man to man, is to beg the question --- What is the weight of my soul?

So after she and Jesus have this back and forth about water and living water --- Jesus brings up the subject about her husband, or lack thereof, and it is a subject, no doubt, that reaches far into the depths of her soul -- the place where wounds and scars are to be found. And it's to that place that Jesus reaches perhaps to reveal the width and depth and weight of her own soul. So when the woman replies with a basic "No Comment" --- ("I have no husband) Jesus will not let it rest at that. So he reaches again and he pulls out the stuff inside. He pulls out the truth of her life, he pulls out her soul, and he reveals something he's already known. And that is her soul, in fact, weighs a great deal. It is deep, it is wide, and it is of great value. Truth is, says Jesus, you have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband --- such were the facts. Now tradition wants to call her loose, but the truth is this woman had little control in her culture as to which man would take her and which man would discard her. Likely she was a mere victim of patriarchy. And now the Messiah was standing before her and was asking her questions that no one perhaps had ever bothered to ask. Because Jesus was concerned about the weight of her soul.

And so, among many things we can take from this text, it would appear that Jesus has great concern over the weight of a person's soul. That is to say, that in this carnal world where appearances mean everything and judgments are passed all too swiftly, and classes and conditions of people are discarded without consideration of the stories behind and within -- Jesus is eager for people to know that no matter who they are, in the divine laboratory, their souls weigh a great deal.

You remember, don't you, when Jesus is on his way to the bedside of a sick little girl -- a woman who had suffered from a menstrual condition that had rendered her in that first century world perpetually unclean -- you remember how she desperately touched the hem of Jesus' robe and was made clean -- and how Jesus looked at her not as unclean, but as a human being with a soul.

You remember, don't you, the woman who had been caught in adultery (not the man mind you, but the woman) getting dragged before Jesus and how everyone of the men could see clearly that she was a sinner and that she deserved the punishment of the law and that she deserved every

stone that they had ready to throw at her, you remember how Jesus looked at her and saw something more than the sin – he saw the soul. He felt the weightiness of the soul.

You remember the leper that Jesus passes on the side of the road. And everyone back then knows what leprosy is about. Leprosy is a moral condition. Leprosy is connected to character and behavior. Everyone knows that. Except, of course, Jesus. Jesus looks at the leper and instead of standing back, instead of wagging his finger, instead of passing judgment --- Jesus places his hands upon him and says, Be well. He sees a soul. He feels the weight of the soul.

So it makes sense, doesn't it, when the writer of I Peter is explaining the work of Christ on the cross and how the death of Jesus is a once and for all sacrifice for the sins of the world – that it was in the mind of God to make sure that all souls "in heaven and on earth and under the earth," as Paul would say, hear the good news that each and every soul matters to God. That each and every soul is covered by the blood of the Lamb. That each and every soul weighs a great deal. "That though they may have been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged in the flesh," Peter later says, "they might now live in the spirit as God does."

Is this not an amazing thing of which we speak when we say that he was crucified, dead and buried, and that he descended into hell? That there is no length to which God will not go? There is no soul outside of God's reach? Nothing, Paul says, nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Neither death nor life, he says, shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That the God who draws nigh to the Samaritan, to the unclean, to the bleeding, to the adulterous, to the morally suspect – the God who draws nigh to these weighty souls – is a God who will go as far as he needs to make sure the good news is heard. "Why even," the psalmist says, "why even if I make my bed in Sheol, in the place of the dead, why even there thou art with me." Our souls weigh that much!

What hope we have for the world to hear! This is the gospel, isn't it, that we get to deliver to every corner of the universe – to heaven and earth and under the earth – that the strife is over and the battle is done. That no matter what in this world has tried to separate us from the love of God – hardship, distress, peril, sword, rulers and powers and principalities – why even death itself – the good news is that the victory is won – and every soul even in hell has been set free.

Remember that great line in Shakespeare's Henry V at the end of the great battle of Agincourt. King Henry V surveys the battlefield having fought one of the most valiant battles of England against the French. The field is strewn with the victims of war. It's impossible to tell what the outcome has been. And at that a French emissary rides up on his stallion – and Henry does not know how the battle has gone. And he says to the emissary, "How goes the day?" And the emissary replies, "The day is yours."

Don't you wonder if that wasn't and isn't the scene – when the crucified one, the lamb who has taken upon himself the sin of the world, who has finished the act of redemption – descends into hell and stands before the spirits ... the souls in bondage ... and they ask of the Savior, "How goes the day?" And true evangelist says, "The day is yours."

I think of that good news when I think of a young man from my adolescent days. I will name him Mark. Mark was a kid I met in seventh grade. The alphabetical order of our last names put us always in proximity to each other. We started out sitting next to each other in homeroom. And while I did not know him well, I knew him well enough to know that he was a kid that had some issues. And it wasn't long into seventh grade that he began to get into trouble. And he began to experiment with some of the drugs of the day. Pot, alcohol, Quaaludes. And in eighth grade it got worse. And by ninth grade he was into some pretty tough stuff and on into 10th grade and 11th grade. And there we would sit in homeroom next to each – linked, I am embarrassed to say, only by the letters of our names. And over time you could just watch him kind of spiral downward. I watched, but because I was in a different high school world I didn't do anything about it. He was unclean. I never did stop to consider the weight of his soul. And then one day his desk next to mine in homeroom was empty.

And later we saw the teachers out in the hallway cleaning out his locker which again was right next to mine. And then we learned that the night before Mark, while his parents were away, had parked his car in the garage and put one end of a hose up the exhaust pipe and the other end through the window of the car and slipped away. Sixteen years old. I don't know where God was with Mark. I have to think that in his mind God wasn't much anywhere. God was to him, if anything, very far away. But that, of course, is not the point is it? It's never been where is God with us? It's where are we with God? And so when I get to this part of the creed and hear the good news that the strife is over and the battle is done and that the emissary of heaven has galloped into the depths of hell and preached to the spirits in bondage – I'd like to think of that weighty soul – the boy named Mark – when he asks, "How goes the day?" And hears the Savior say, "The day is yours. The day is yours."