The Altogether Soul
Psalm 42:1-2
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St. Augustine is known to have written these words about God in the opening chapter of his famous *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Restlessness is a theme found throughout Christian history, particularly in the lives of the saints. Believing human beings are created with a soul - an element of ourselves that is a part of and yet separate from the physical, earthly reality of our lives - means we believe that soul is intimately intertwined with our creator. Our souls will long for union with the Creator. Life in this earthly world will provide barrier after barrier to this union. Yet, we believe life also provides bridges to our God. Somewhere in between the barriers and the bridges we experience longing or restlessness. Today we are going to dive into the longing we feel to be *an altogether soul* and how we can engage the world in ways that will help us quench our longing for closeness to God.

It is believed that the longing expressed in the poetic and powerful first two verses of Psalm 42 may reflect a person who is ill or someone who has been unable to make the important pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. This is a person who is experiencing physical barriers to faithful living, the inability to arrive at a physical destination where a longing to be close to God may be satisfied. Isn’t the image of the deer panting for water a profound one? We know the taste and feel of water on our lips when we are thirsty. We know we need water for sustenance. Isn’t the taste and feel of closeness to God not unlike this thirst for water?

Catherine of Siena was born in 1347 when her mother was 40 years old. She was her mother’s 23rd child; half of them had died before Catherine was born. Catherine had her first vision of Christ at age 5 or 6. She was known for giving away food and clothing to the poor, even at a young age. Catherine of Siena, though she lived long ago, is still greatly admired among Christians and is known for particular images that came to her in her in the form of visions. One such image is that of a vineyard. She describes the vines in the vineyard as vines that were so connected that, she says, “I cannot do good for myself without doing good for you. I cannot do harm to you without doing harm to myself.” This image of connectedness would inform Catherine’s spirituality throughout her young life and it would lead her do things like write strong letters to papal and local leaders for change. She used her voice to make a difference on behalf of others. The visions that came from her own longing to draw closer to God actually led her to draw closer to other people. Catherine died of a stroke at the young age of thirty-three.

If your longing is like mine, it can sometimes lead me to feel paralyzed. When I feel empty or dissatisfied or cannot quickly rectify the void I feel in my life, I often stop trying and give up. I’d

like to think that spiritual longings are different but, the truth is, they often are not. I want to pray more. I want to read the bible more devotionally. I want to go on a silent retreat (well, maybe I only longed for that once a long time ago). I want to practice *lectio divina*. I want to engage a small covenant group for spiritual accountability. The list goes one. These things I want to do because I believe they will help me to grow closer to God, something I deeply desire. But life presents barriers and I often succumb to them. My thirst for God is (temporarily) quenched by other things. Yet the longing remains.

What does it look like for us to tend to our souls the way we tend to other things in our lives – the laundry, the shopping list, brushing our teeth, combing our hair? I'm serious! What would it look like, no, what would it feel like if the tending of our souls were something as daily and as prioritized as the groceries? What if we cared for the longings of our hearts, the thirst for deeper relationships with God and one another as a top-tier priority in our lives? Might that help us in our journey to become an *altogether Christian?*

In scripture, one place where we find Jesus most closely conformed to God is during the Transfiguration. Found in all three synoptic gospels, the recounting of the transfiguration experience is a story of the soul of Jesus in true alignment with God's. If you are familiar with the Harry Potter books or movies, you know that Transfiguration is a class that is offered at Hogwarts, the school Harry and his friends attend. Interestingly, in this class, the students are taught how to turn one thing into another, like a raven into a goblet. They use wands or spells to do this. When Jesus is transfigured, he does not become something different. *He becomes more of who he already is.* In the moment of Jesus' closeness with the Father, he becomes more of who he already is.

Isn't it this way with us? When we are close to our Creator, when the longings of our souls are met and our thirst is quenched, we are more of who we are called to be, more of who we are created to be.

Dorothy Day[i] is another saint of the church that I want to describe for you today. She was born in 1897 in Brooklyn, New York. Her father was a journalist and she, too, studied journalism. Before Dorothy had a career she was an intellectual and a bohemian. And, she was not religious. When Dorothy became pregnant at a young age and found herself alone, her pregnancy became the avenue for a fresh start and with that fresh start came an interest in God and religious practices that would give guidance and direction to her life. She became Catholic when her daughter was baptized and began to be connected to the social justice movements found within the church, particularly with the poor and immigrants. In 1933 the first issue of the *Catholic Worker,* a publication focusing on pacifism, social justice and voluntary poverty, was published with Dorothy and Peter Maurin as editors. (It is still in print today and still sells for a penny! Peter and Dorothy also began opening "Houses of Hospitality" (that would become known as Catholic Worker Houses). These would spread throughout the country. A day in the life of the

house would include those living in the house preparing food for the poor who would enter the house during the day for meals and fellowship. A Mass would often be included as well as book discussions, evening conversations, sharing in chores, etc. Though Catholic, Dorothy did not enter a religious order but adhered to practices of voluntary poverty, living simply, wearing donated clothes, traveling by bus, and striving to have as few possessions as possible. She died in 1980. In her book, *The Long Loneliness*, she wrote, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."

How do we fulfill our longing for God? Will it be in our responses to God's call on our lives (whether through visions like Catherine of Siena or other forms of God's revelation to us)? Will it be through community? Will it be through practicing the Christian disciplines and experiencing God through these ancient rituals?

I am convinced that the saints of the church can help us prioritize the longings of our hearts to grow closer to our God. When the world presents barriers and roadblocks and when we are tempted to succumb to them, there are models for helping us continue toward the stream that is the living water of our Lord. *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God (Psalm 42:1, NIV).* Friends, how will we find and fulfill our longing for God on our journey to become *an altogether soul* in the life of *an altogether Christian*?

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[i] Information on Dorothy Day taken from *My Life with the Saints* by James Martin, SJ. (Loyola Press, 2006)