

DATE: September 27th, 2026
TEXT: 1 Kings 19:9b-13
THEME: Knowing who we are and what we're called to do requires attending to the soul.
SUBJECT: The soul
TITLE: Tending to the Soul

Main question: Who are we?

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

I studied French in college. Three days a week I attended French class. The other two days, I'd go to the language lab where I'd ask the attendant for a blank cassette tape that would record me speaking as I listened to a pre-recorded lesson. I could later listen to myself speak and thereby (hopefully) improve my pronunciation. I'm reminded of the story of a student who walked up to the language lab attendant and said, "May I have a blank tape, please?" "What language are you studying?" asked the attendant. "French," said the student. "Sorry, we don't have any blank tapes in French." "Well then, do you have any blank tapes in English?" asked the student. "Yes, we do." "Good," said the student. "I'll take one of those." (The student's ability to speak French plateaued after that, but her English did improve slightly.)

Anthony DeMello was a Jesuit priest and the Director of the Sadhana Institute of Pastoral Counseling in Poona, India in the 1970s and 80s. He told this story to illustrate the point that it makes as much sense to imagine a blank tape in any particular language as it does to imagine that anyone is French or English or Ghanaian or anything else. Being French or English is a matter of conditioning, but it's not who we

are. DeMello says, “A baby born of American (sic) parents and adopted by Russian parents has no notion she has been adopted and grows up to be a great patriot and poet who gives expression to the collective unconscious of the Russian soul and the aspirations of Mother Russia. Is she Russian? American? Neither. Find out who you are” (Taking Flight by Anthony DeMello; Doubleday (1990); p. 142).

Who are you? A carpenter? A mother? A student? Are these really who you are? Or are they just labels? Products of conditioning? Is there an identity - unique to each of us - that goes deeper than all of these? Our faith tradition says ‘yes.’ Scripture calls it a “soul.”

The heart of the Hebrew scriptures is called *the shema* because the Hebrew word “shema” (שְׁמָע - “hear”) is the first word in the passage. So, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 reads: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your **soul** and with all your strength.” Psalm 23 includes this verse: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing. The LORD makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters, the LORD restores my **soul**” (Psalm 23:1-3a).

What is a soul? The word that is used in the Tanakh (Hebrew scriptures) for “soul” is the word “nephesh” and it is translated in various ways: *soul, living being, life, creature, himself, herself, mind, desires, appetite, persons*. The use of such a wide variety of words in scripture in place of “nephesh” makes it difficult to understand just what the soul is. The New Testament does the same thing with the Greek word for soul (ψυχή): heart, mind, life, person and soul. G.K. Chesterton (English author, Christian writer and poet who mentored C.S. Lewis) talked about the soul, rather than the body,

as the essence of our personhood: the soul has a body and not the other way around. With this understanding, you might think of the soul as your true self. It's what distinguishes you from everyone else. It is your uniqueness. You do not have a soul. You **ARE** a soul that cannot be destroyed. Think of the soul as the very fiber of your being. Reading *the shema* with this in mind might sound something like: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with **every fiber of your being** and with all your strength."

Your soul is who you are. So how are the soul and the Spirit related? I believe that the spirit of God communes with our soul. The spirit of God is not who we are, however; rather, it intercedes for us in groans that words cannot express (Romans 8:26). If we, in our soul, attend to the spirit of God, chaos can rage all around us, but we will be at peace. The opposite is also true. If we do not attend to our soul and don't remain open to God's spirit interceding for us, we can become bitter and corrupt. And so, regularly tending to the soul - our essential self - IS essential. Deuteronomy 4 tells us, "Only give heed to yourself and **keep your soul diligently** so that you do not forget the *things which your eyes have seen* or let them slip from your heart as long as you live" (Deut. 4:9).

How shall we attend to our soul? That's what spiritual direction is all about. Perhaps some of you have (or have had) a spiritual director, someone who is trained to walk beside you in your spiritual journey - someone who helps you notice and respond to God's presence in your everyday life. I'm not a spiritual director, but if you'd like to know more, let's talk.

Now I want to expand this idea as we think about Southminster Presbyterian Church moving through this time of transition, this “liminal season.” Last week, many of you participated in a conversation after church, reflecting on the question: *Who are we as a congregation right now?* The wording of that question suggested that communities, like individuals, have identities and that asking the question is as relevant for churches as it is for each of us. Could organizations have souls like people do? In her book, Susan Beaumont thinks so. As the soul is the true self of a person, can we speak of a “true self” of a church or of any organization - a business, a club or maybe even a nation? Does God’s spirit intercede for organizations, guiding leaders - if they will be guided - to help their community find its authentic and true self AS a organizations?

Well-known psychiatrist and theologian, Gerald May, offers this: “Any grouping of people is more than the sum of its parts; it is a system with its own life, an entity in many ways like a person. Each family, community, church, business, even nation or culture has characteristics and experiences that constitute a life of its own” (Gerald C. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 176). Think about the addresses to the seven churches in Asia Minor as recorded in the book of Revelation. John the Apostle doesn’t speak to “the people” or even “the leaders”, but to “the angels”: “To the angel of the church in Ephesus”, “To the angel of the church in Pergamum” for example. Could that language be John’s way of recognizing and acknowledging the true self in the organizational soul of each church? Does Southminster Presbyterian Church have an angel - a soul - that IS its true, divine, essential, authentic, unique self that cannot be destroyed? If so, how shall we tend to that soul so that (to paraphrase): this body

[does] not forget the things which [it has seen] or let them slip from the life of this community as long as it shall live?

That will be the subject of upcoming sermons starting on October 11th. Next week is World Communion Sunday and we'll hear from three people in our congregation as they reflect on faith experiences outside the U.S. Then, for the rest of October, I'll focus on how we can attend to our collective soul as a church and I'll be relying on the work of Susan Beaumont. Rev. Beaumont comes from the American Baptist tradition. She also teaches at Wesley Theological Seminary and has authored several books, including my favorite: *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. She talks about several ways to attend to the soul of the institution, specifically during liminal seasons like the one we're in now: 1) by deepening group discernment, 2) by clarifying purpose, 3) by shaping institutional memory and 4) by engaging emergence. Again, I'll go deeper into these in future weeks. For now, I'd like to draw out an illustration that Beaumont offers, one that shows an example of soul-work within a church setting. She distinguishes between 1) a decision-making process that is common to many churches and 2) the practice of discerning with the soul of an institution.

Here's an often-used decision-making process:

A congregation is considering a proposal by the city to use a portion of the church's parking lot for use by city workers. The leadership council debates the issue and decides to bring it before the congregation for a vote. After an opening prayer, a quorum of members debates the advantages and disadvantages of the proposal. Most in attendance sit quietly and listen. A handful of vocal members debate about safety

and security issues as well as anticipated effects on church activities. They talk about financial impacts and, after 30 minutes, someone calls for a vote which decides the issue.

This method of decision-making reflected the best thinking of the membership body. People relied on their personal knowledge and brought common sense to bear on their choice, but was this process a full engagement with the soul of the institution?

Now consider what soulful engagement might look like:

Church leaders consider a proposal by the city to use a portion of the church's parking lot for use by city workers. Similar to the first church, they explore the pros and cons of the proposal and think about the financial implications. Then they move into prayer and silence. After a time, group members acknowledge their personal preferences, doing their best to name the biases that shape those preferences. One group member acknowledges a recent conflict with a member of the city council. Another remembers a former church he belonged to and how people often took advantage of the church parking lot; even caused some vandalism. The group prays together to be released from these personal biases so that their discernment can focus on the good of the whole. The group then evaluates the connections and disconnections between the parking lot decision and the mission of the congregation and its core values. They also imagine how this decision connects to the larger story of the congregation's relationship to the city. They work by consensus, ensuring that each member is heard and that all reservations are addressed. Again, they rest in silence—attending to any lingering unsettledness.

This kind of process creates space for the soul of the institution to speak. Beaumont compares this kind of tending of the soul to the process of tuning an instrument, like a guitar. The guitar tuner strikes the fork to produce an authentic pitch. He listens for how the tuner pitch resonates with the note produced by one of the strings. If these two are out of tune, he hears a distinct warble. The further apart the warbles, the more out of tune the guitar. By tightening or loosening the string, he can reduce the warble until it is in line with the tuning fork and matches its authentic pitch.

I submit that one can attend to the soul individually or as a group, listening beyond the great and powerful wind, the earthquake and the fire to attend to the still small voice so that we can answer the question, “Who are we?”

[End with with guitar tuning and begin singing “Listen to the Word That God has Spoken” #455]

**Listen to the word
that God has spoken;
listen to the One
who is close at hand;
listen to the voice
that began creation;
listen even if
you don't understand.**