

DATE: October 11th, 2026
TEXT: 1 Kings 3:5-10
THEME: Good decision-making tends to the soul as we listen to God's voice and wisdom through discernment.
SUBJECT: Spiritual Discernment
TITLE: Tending to the Soul Through Discernment

Main question: How can we make decisions that tend to the soul?

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.

There is a proper way to make certain kinds of tea. I know it's possible to pour some hot water into a cup and then toss in a tea bag. That does produce tea. But, to make some types of tea properly, you'll need something in which to steep your tea. Begin by boiling water (an electric water kettle works well). Then pour a little hot water into the teapot. Maybe swish it around a bit. The purpose is to "warm the pot" which 1) keeps the brewing temperature consistent, 2) prevents cracking of your teapot, and 3) awakens the tea leaves to release their full aroma and taste, ensuring maximum infusion. After a few minutes, I'll pour out the water and begin the steeping process with loose tea in the infuser. I let it steep for about 5 minutes before removing said infuser. The result, in my opinion, is much better than tea made with the "tea throwing" method. It's slower and more methodical and I like to steep tea when I can, though I will use the fast-brew method fairly often when time is short and I NEED a cup of tea.

Two weeks ago, I drew attention to the soul. I suggested that, even as our faith tradition affirms the soul of the individual, it might be possible to conceive of an institutional soul. And, along with that, just as it's important to tend to the individual soul,

so it's important to tend to the soul of a group. I want to acknowledge, however, that some of you may not be fully on board with the concept of a church, a committee, an organization or a nation having a soul. That's OK. I'm not sure I'm fully on board with that either. But we can all confidently move on to Part 2 of this series on "Tending to the Soul" without a full embrace of a belief that institutions have souls because what we really mean by "soul" is the authentic, true self - whether we're talking about an individual or an institution. A few weeks ago, I mentioned a book by Susan Beaumont, [How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going](#), and in that book, Beaumont begins with the premise that organizations do, in fact, have souls - a true spiritual center. Perhaps when she talks about an institutional soul, just think "authentic identity of the organization" or "it's true purpose." Beaumont talks about several ways to tend to the soul of organizations during liminal times and, over the next three weeks, we'll look at three of them. Today, I'll focus on **deepening group discernment**.

Now, you may be wondering: what does tea preparation have to do with discernment? Two weeks ago, I illustrated two different ways to make decisions: first through rational decision-making and second through a soul-tending process of discernment. As one can make tea in different ways, so can people make decisions in different ways. I think each has its place and both are useful in context. It's just that so many decisions that are made today in business, in government and in churches are the equivalent of tossing a tea bag into a cup because that's the fastest and most efficient method and organizations have lots of decisions to make. But what if there's an important decision to make: Does a proposed new ministry fulfill our mission? Who shall we call as our next pastor? In a church meeting, someone may offer a five-minute

reflection followed by prayer before starting the decision-making process. A great start! But then it's all-business on a timeline: frame the problem, identify the underlying issues, propose a solution, argue the pros and cons, and call for a vote. That works for many decisions that need to be made, but some decisions just need time to brew in a teapot for a while, allowing the soul to infuse and flavor the best thinking of the group. Imagine facing a big decision and coming to consensus about how to move forward, sensing that there was no other possible choice, and knowing that you weren't the only one feeling this way but that everyone in the group came to the same place together. That would be soul enriching.

Pure discernment, writes Rev. Beaumont, begins with a desire to do so. Solomon described himself as "a little child" when he expressed a desire for discernment. He asked God, "*Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.*" This is the right mindset for all who wish to hear the voice of the Spirit. And, indeed, our ancestors of faith have been asking God for discerning hearts ever since. During the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart, Thomas à Kempis, the Beguine Communities of women, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich and all who we now place in the category of "mystics" attended to the soul in varieties of ways, including discernment. When they discerned, they were guided by scripture, their own personal experience, reasoned argument, and their feelings. In the 16th century, John Calvin focused on scripture as the central guide by which to make decisions. As we know, he emphasized "decency and order" in the decision-making process, using rules and procedures to guide deliberations. Roberts Rules of Order (1876) was first published in a manual about 200 years after Calvin's death and it came

out of the Calvinistic mindset. Its use has now expanded well beyond the church to the point where Robert's Rules (and variations of it) are used in most decision-making settings today - at least in Western culture. When people use it, it most often provides a way for people to engage in orderly reasoned debate, but it doesn't necessarily give space for reading scripture, attending to feelings, to praying, or being in silence.

Before discernment begins, it's important to gather people who have the right skills, mindset and abilities that support a discerning process and to teach them to cultivate stillness and prayer. The discernment process also needs to be designed according to the task at hand *and the people involved*. Like a good cup of tea, setting things up properly takes time - maybe weeks or months - before the actual discernment begins. And taking the time to set things up properly is rewarded with noticeably fuller flavor. Even the set-up nurtures the soul as it helps people get in touch with their true, authentic selves and with a sense of purpose.

Actual discernment **starts with a skilled leader** who should be very familiar with decision-making guides like Robert's Rules. Rather than calling this person a parliamentarian, however, this spiritual guide is known as a *discernmentarian* because, while she needs to know how to guide a group through a discussion, she also needs to guide that discussion in a way that includes scripture, prayer, silence and attention to feelings. I'll offer several components involved in the discernment process, but don't get bogged down trying to memorize them. There are books on this subject and people who are trained to do this work. Just listen to the flow, knowing that the process can go forward, backward and sideways depending on the leading of the discernmentarian and the Spirit.

Framing. What are the boundaries of the discussion? Often, boundaries are defined by a well-crafted question. When I was a teacher, I used to try to teach students how to ask good questions. Many say it's easy to ask questions, and it is. (examples) But it's actually quite challenging to think of relevant questions that guide us to deeper truths, questions that will begin the process of hearing the voice of the Spirit speaking to us.

Grounding. What principles will guide our conversation? Our mission "Manifesting Christ's Love in the World" is definitely one of those principles. You may know that Southminster also has "core values" that describe this mission.

Shedding. What might prevent the group from focusing on God's will as the ultimate outcome? How do our individual egos, biases, fears and interests get in the way of listening to the Holy Spirit? We must try to shed these things - as best we can - so that we can attend to the still small voice of God speaking to our true selves.

Listening. What are other people in the room saying out loud or in their body language or in their tone? What are people outside of the room saying through surveys, interviews, congregational meetings and focus groups? A good facilitator will help the group gather all of this information and data and then set it aside in order to continue the discernment process.

Exploring. In what directions could we go? This is probably the most familiar part of the discernment process to many because it resembles brainstorming. Participants identify all possible directions and alternatives.

Weighing. Which options seem best? Now the group yields to intuition. They might choose a story in the Bible and explore ways in which the discernment issue is

like or unlike the story (Biblical Theological Reflection). They might sit in prayer and notice where they feel directed from beyond themselves: where they feel energized, where they lack energy.

Choosing. What is the best option? Consensus is the goal here, but consensus is not the same as unanimity. Consensus is also not the majority. In consensus-based decision-making, the group works with an option until every person involved in the choice can say: “I believe this is the best decision we can arrive at for our organization at this time, and I will support its implementation.” This kind of consensus is also not simply “going along with” a decision. There is a universal commitment to carrying it out and if anyone lacks that commitment, the group may ask that person if they are willing to “stand aside” and allow the decision to proceed. If group commitment simply can’t be achieved, then the leader may need to return to some of the previous discernment steps and eventually get back to choosing.

Lastly, **Testing.** Is the decision God’s will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else? Before a decision is announced beyond the discerning group, that group should take time to rest and pray. When they come back together, each group member is asked if they are still able to support the decision. If so, then the decision is made public.

Group discernment done well - like making a great cup of tea - isn’t possible all the time. We live in a world with deadlines and where many decisions have to be made quickly. But in a few months, a group called the Pastoral Nominating Committee will be formed and its job is to find the next installed pastor of this church. And, as you know, we’ve formed a group already called the Building for Hope Team. Its job is to consider

our congregational passions, the needs of our neighbors and all of our various assets (this building, our property, the gifts and skills of the people in this church, the financial resources of Southminster) in order to identify a social enterprise: a well-supported and sustainable ministry of this congregation that has meaning and purpose and that can help move our church forward in a unified way.

Using discernment in the way I've described for every decision would probably grind the business of the church to a halt. Yet there are ways to incorporate discernment - or parts of it - even within scheduled meetings. It might take a half hour, take up an entire weekend retreat or happen over the course of months.

Beaumont asks, "Who can ever fully know the mind of God?" Sometimes answers come like a lighting bolt and the way seems clear, but it's often not that way. Yet through an intentional life of prayer, stillness and listening, we can place our lives in alignment with God's purpose, stepping out of the way, so that God's will can be done on earth as in heaven.