DATE: October 18th, 2026
TEXT: Jeremiah 6:16-19
THEME: Establishing core values helps us to understand our purpose.
SUBJECT: Mission, Vision
TITLE: Tending to the Soul by Clarifying Purpose

Main question: How shall we, as a church, clarify our purpose?

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.

Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, mystic, poet and social activist said, "*Humans have a responsibility to find themselves where they are, in their own proper time and place, in the history to which they belong and to which they must inevitably contribute.*" There are no passive observers in life. If you're living, you're making a difference. If you're breathing right now, you're contributing, according to Merton. As the great theologian, activist and crimefighter Spider Man might also add: "*With great power comes great responsibility.*" Having the power to contribute means that we have a responsibility to find ourselves where we are in history; that is, to find our soul purpose in this place, in this time. Well, I've got some good news for you: we're in a liminal time! And liminal times, as I've often said, offer some of the best opportunities to step back, take a look around, see where we are and figure out how we can meaningfully and purposefully contribute.

This is the third sermon in a series I'm calling "Tending to the Soul." I set the stage on September 27th, suggesting that, as people have souls, so institutions may also have souls and that each - to use Merton's words - has the "responsibility to find themselves where they are." I've been suggesting that each is called by God's Spirit to tend to the soul by drawing closer to our true, authentic self. Last Sunday, I offered one

way that we can do that: **by engaging in the process of discernment** when we need to make important decisions. Today, I want to offer another way to tend to the soul: **by clarifying our purpose**. As you know, I'm not coming up with all of this on my own. Susan Beaumont is my guide, and her book is called How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going.

So, how shall we clarify our purpose? It starts with recognizing the historical moment that we're in and to understand it as an opportunity to tend to the soul (where our connection to God lies). I confess that, too often, I don't understand the moment. Too often, I get mad or glad depending on what I hear in the news. Too often, I have too little faith to take responsibility to find my authentic self in my own proper time and place. Still, because I have faith the size of a mustard seed, God can use even that to help me find rest and purpose for my soul.

You won't find today's reading from Jeremiah in the lectionary, but I chose it because, when I thought about liminal moments in scripture, pivotal moments when people had opportunities to find themselves where they were, my mind came to this passage. Jeremiah, as you know, lived at the end of a long line of the kings of Judah and he warned the people of Jerusalem that the day of destruction would come if they didn't change their ways. Though doom was imminent, it wasn't inevitable. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we read about the people's disobedience and self-destructive behavior that seems to have led to a certain moment, to a place and time which called the people of Jerusalem to take responsibility to find themselves because, take responsibility or not, they would contribute … either to their own destruction or maybe - hopefully - to something else.

Things seemed pretty bleak, but still God offered hope: "Stand at the crossroads and look." Who do you want to be, Jerusalem? Because right now, things aren't

looking good for you. You deal unjustly with one another. You oppress the stranger, the fatherless and the widow among you; you shed innocent blood; you trust in deceptive words that are worthless; you steal; you murder; you swear by false gods (Jeremiah 7:5-9). You want to destroy yourself? You're doing a pretty good job as you stand there, deciding which way to go. But you still have a choice; you always have a choice. Instead of going down the road of destruction as you currently are, ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is. And don't just ask: walk. Walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.

Well, as we now know, the story didn't end well for many in the City of Peace (Jerusalem). Maybe they didn't hear Jeremiah. Maybe they didn't listen. Maybe they were too far down a road <u>past</u> the crossroads so that the good way didn't look like a good way anymore. Perhaps good news sounds like bad news to those who have lost their way, who have practiced self-destructive behavior for such a long time that they keep going down a "bad way" because it's familiar to them, even if destructive. So it was for many in Jerusalem. They said, "We will not walk the ancient path." God appointed watchers over them and said, "Listen to the sound of the trumpet!" But they said, "We will not listen." And again you know how that story turned out. Actually, it turned out poorly for the exploiters, the oppressors of strangers - those who had all the power in Jerusalem and who did not listen to Jeremiah. 2 Kings 24:12b-14 describes what happened: "In the eighth year of the reign of the king of Babylon, he took Jehoiachin (almost the last king of Judah) prisoner. As the LORD had declared, Nebuchadnezzar removed all the treasures from the temple of the LORD and from the royal palace, and took away all the gold articles that Solomon king of Israel had made for the temple of the LORD. He carried into <u>exile</u> all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans—a total of ten thousand. *Only the*

poorest people of the land were left." I'm guessing that these were the ones who were oppressed, these were the strangers, the fatherless, the widows. And I'll bet they were breathing a sigh of relief as ten thousand oppressors were being taken away to Babylon. They were about to get a fresh start. God is good!

Still, the road wouldn't be easy for them. Their lives had just been upended too. What does the person who has been blind or lame their whole life do when they're healed? There are a whole new set of complications. Susan Beaumont writes, "*when something has ended and we don't know where we are headed, people need help interpreting their past. People also need to know that they are pursuing something that matters now: worthy work, a shared common cause, or a sense of rootedness to something enduring*." (Beaumont, p. 113). In the absence of these, fearful people will attach themselves to anyone who promises to reduce their anxiety, to return them to the good ol' days. Unhelpful attachments to the past also do not serve an organization well, but the ancient road need not be a fetter. It can provide that enduring rootedness that we need, as long as we recognize the good way.

Actually, the Ten Commandments offered a pretty good ancient path. Do not kill. Do not steal. Honor your mother and father. Don't replace God with anything else. There are other ancient good ways too: *Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.* Always care for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. It's also common to create guidelines as time goes on — as culture changes and calls for new ways of thinking. Jesus stood at a crossroad and took responsibility to find himself in his particular time and place, yet he still walked the ancient path. He never left it, although he did talk about that path in a new language - the language of the point in history to which he belonged. The path on a mountain — the Sermon on the Mount — that was the ancient path. Jesus spoke of it in a new way, however, a way that inspired

others to contribute to their own time. When he gathered with his disciples on his last night on earth, he evoked the ancient path again: *Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* This was an ancient path, but Jesus talked about it in a new way so that his followers would be inspired to contribute in their own way, in their own time and place.

We are at a crossroads now. God is inviting us, as we stand here, to look — to continue to walk the ancient paths, and also to take responsibility to locate ourselves here and now — in our own time and place — and imagine how we are being called to contribute. Southminster has been a vibrant worshipping community since it was chartered in January of 1959. This community has "done church" in many ways that are faithful to the ancient path, but is it time to locate ourselves at the point in history to which we now belong and to which we must contribute. In November of 2000, this congregation adopted its current mission statement: "to manifest Christ's love in the world." That statement is certainly in the spirit of the ancient path, but do we need to change our language and our mindset so we can be inspired to contribute at this proper time. Is it time to understand our mission in a new light? Who is the world? What do we need? What does the world need? How do we find out what the world needs? "How," in Frederick Buechner's words, "is God calling [us] to a place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet?

About a month ago, over 50 people sat down in the Petersen Gallery to wrestle with the first part of that question: Who are we? What brings us gladness? Today, all of you are again cordially invited to gather for another conversation as we address the second part of that question: Who is the world? In other words: Who are our neighbors? Who do we serve? When you find a seat in the fellowship hall, you'll see a bunch of two-sided handouts. On one side is the main question that we'll talk about

today: Who are our neighbors? On the other side, you'll see our mission statement and our vision statement that were carefully crafted 26 years ago. In some ways, we're a different community; in some ways we're very much the same. One thing is certain: the world has changed much. Is that 26-year-old mission and vision statement an ancient path where the good way still is? Or are there paths on that statement that are no longer relevant? No longer healthy? As you talk, feel free to take a pen and underline things you think are still relevant and about which you are still passionate. Then cross out things you think may be out-of-date. Add words of clarification too! For example: does the word "world" need to be changed? Make sure to read the mission statement through the lens of our question today: Who are our neighbors?

Moving into the future as we stand here at the crossroads is the right time to consider questions like these. This is the right time to clarify what matters to us, to continue to walk the ancient path and perhaps to reimagine that path in light of current circumstances. This is the right time, as Beaumont says, "to consider a set of core values that describe our fundamental beliefs and guiding principles" at this point in history.

Each of us has the responsibility to discover what the ancient path looks like in our historical moment. I believe it is our soul purpose to contribute and, by meaningfully contributing, there lies our joy - even our salvation. When many walk the ancient path together with one heart and mind, in their proper time and place, to find their common purpose, salvation comes to their collective soul as the whole body, with its many parts, take a step closer to living into God's vision of the Beloved Community.