

Dear Friends

*Soul Searching* is not too strong a phrase to describe the decisions we are having to make these days. Soul Searching often involves looking deep within to find a direction that is far from superficial and embedded near the heart. Soul Searching can be done in times of crisis or of transition. It certainly happens as a consequence of contemplation, the art of stilling of one's being in order to ponder the depths.

If pushed, I probably have two complaints about the way many people use the word *soul*. The first is the tendency in popular art and culture to think of the soul as something separate or apart from ourselves. The idea that we are body and soul, made up of two separate entities living together in one being, was fashionable in ancient Greece but it really doesn't reflect an understanding of Christian spirituality. The recent Disney movie "Soul" operated with this definition. It was fun but it was wrong. If our souls are separate and inherently eternal then there is no need or place for God in spirituality.

Our ancient spiritual ancestors in Israel didn't think that *we had a soul*. They thought that *we were soul*. The idea that while our soul may be the part of ourselves that knows what to pray for, it is also integrated with the whole of our being. Jesus taught that we have the capacity to love God with all our heart, and mind, and body, and soul. It is all of God. It is all good. It is all redeemed.

The second problem I have with the common understanding of soul, especially in pop spirituality (including male spirituality) is that it is so often presented as overly individualistic. It is all about getting in touch with your deepest self for the sake of your happiness, your peace of mind, your best life. You, you, you. But when Moses finds holy ground he is sent back to Egypt to free slaves. When Esther finds safety in her privilege she risks it all to save an entire people. Jesus says that the love of God and the love of neighbour are equal and not to be considered apart from one another.

Richard Rohr, who writes extensively about soul, says that our soul is the part of our being that asks, How am I the same? What do I have in common? What do I have to share? In other words, the soul wants to do what is right, not just for our self, but for everyone. Which brings us back to Soul Searching.

The Council of your church had a soulful discussion on Tuesday evening. They are a group of people who want the pandemic to be over as much as you do. They want us to gather together and sing and pray and greet and embrace life and one another. But they are also leaders, charged by the congregation to make decisions in the best interest of the whole. We had to search our souls to answer the question, What do we do next?

We wrestled with questions about safety for the still-vulnerable, the essential place of children in our midst, confidence and security in our sanctuary, and certainly a profound desire to not have to turn anyone away from the freedom of worship. The end result of this soul searching was that ***Charleswood United Church will comply with Public Health Orders and continue with online services only and will review this decision every six weeks.***

In these late stages of the pandemic there are many who are hesitant to join the common effort, angry that their choices have consequences, vilifying politicians and medical professionals who don't have the luxury of thinking the world only exists for them. I suggest that the souls of angry contrarians have been, for the most part, largely unattended. Perhaps with cause. Trauma can cause the ego to take hold and choke out the soul. But it doesn't have to be that way for them.

And it doesn't mean that soul searchers need do anything less than love our neighbours while standing firm on the holy ground we have discovered in the depths.

Grace and peace,  
Michael