

“Discernment: Listening for God’s Will”

Date: August 7, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Prayer, God’s Will

Occasion: Prayer series

Texts: Philippians 1:9-11; John 10:1-4

A joke to begin our time together: A man was telling his neighbor, "I just bought a new hearing aid. It cost me \$4,000 dollars, but its state of the art. It's perfect." "Really," answered the neighbor. "What kind is it?" "Twelve-thirty." Another one?

Three old guys are out walking. First one says, "Windy, isn't it?" Second one says, "No, it's Thursday!" Third one says, "So am I. Let's go get a beer."

Listening is such an important skill. Most people don't do it well, at least not all of the time. Jesus used the image of a sheep recognizing the voice of its master to describe the relationship between us and Himself.

Jesus will tell us what God's will is for our lives, if we learn to listen for his voice. We already talked at some length last week about how God's will is revealed through the reading and study of the Bible. God gives us guidelines to live by, principles, laws, commandments, call them what you will. This is how we are supposed to live.

But in each of our lives we have hundreds of decisions that we must make. How do we know if the decisions we make are in accordance with what God wants? How do we know if we've made a good or a bad decision? That's what we want to talk about today.

I'd like to share with you some different ways that Christians have practiced discernment, the process of listening for God's will. I think whatever technique we use, we should always begin with

prayer, actively seeking to know what God wants. It begins to shrink our ego and our over-inflated sense of self-importance. Prayer puts us in a place to actually listen, instead of doing all the talking.

A technique that my Dad taught me has been used by many people when facing a decision. If I have two choices, two things that may be equally good, how do I know what the best choice would be?

Dad taught me to make a chart on a piece of paper. On one side of the paper I create two columns. At the top of one column I mark Pro and on the other column I mark *Con*.

And then I make a list of the pro's to choice number one, and all the cons, the disadvantages to choice number one. Then on the back side I do the same with choice number two, listing all the advantages and disadvantages with my second choice.

Many times, that very simple procedure helps to clarify which decision would be the better one. However, discernment is not simply a decision-making process; it is also a spiritual inquiry. I'm placing myself in front of God and asking to know what is best.

An extremely valuable tool in helping to get my ego out of the way, is to ask an unbiased person for their opinion. I share what I've been thinking, I share what I'm being led to do, and I ask them to listen to my process, how I came to that decision.

I am part of an accountability group and I have a good friend with whom I meet on a regular basis. Dave is often able to tell me when my ego is getting in the way and I need to make more room for God to shine some light on my situation. It is an extremely valuable way for Christians to grow in Christian maturity, to invite others to be a part of the discernment process.

Another technique that is well-known by Methodists has been given the title of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, using four time-honored tools as measures of truth. First of all we go the Bible. What do the Scriptures have to say about my situation? Second, we seek to know the Tradition of the Church – what have other Christians who have gone before us said about similar situations?

Third, we use the test of experience. What has been my own previous experience? A well-known proverb says that *experience is the best teacher*. Mistakes can be a great way to learn what God wants us to do in the future. I'm not going to keep doing that thing that cause me or others so much pain; I'll make a difference choice.

Fourth, we use our reason. Is this a rational decision? Does it make sense? God expects us to use our brains and think about our decisions. We don't have to expect that all of our listening for God's will is happening through mystical experiences. Rational thought is a part of listening for God's voice.

Another way that some people have listened for the confirmation of God's will is by asking themselves, "Do my head, my heart and my gut all line up in agreement with this decision?"

Does it make sense? What does my heart tell me? Trust that inner voice. Does it feel right, down there in my gut? A decision might make perfectly reasonable sense in your head, but something else troubles you in your inner spirit.

Do my head, my heart and my gut all line up in agreement? Thomas Raymond Kelly was a Quaker educator who was known as a mystic. He wrote, "Deep within us all, there is an amazing inner

sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return.” I like that thought.

St. Ignatius once said, “To seek and to find what God calls me to do at this time of my life is what we refer to as discernment. It is to recall that my whole aim in life should be to seek and to serve God in whatever way his call may come to me.”

I would say that discernment is an ongoing process of getting to know yourself, and growing in your willingness to surrender your life to God, more and more each and every day. It is a bending of our will to God, allowing God more and more direction in our lives. It is a life-time process.

It involves learning to know and to trust those inner feelings and promptings of the Holy Spirit. That takes real prayer, and practice, and help. Because too easily we can mistake our will for God’s will.

I knew a couple in college who decided that the prompting of the Holy Spirit had led them to have sex outdoors in a field. They justified their behavior by saying “It felt right to them in their inner spirit. They prayed about it, and it felt right to them.”

Discernment, listening for God’s will, does involve listening to the still small voice inside us, as the mystic Thomas Kelly told us. But it is more than what feels good at the moment. Let me close by re-reading these words from Philippians (1:9-11):

“And this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.” May it be so. Amen.

Would you turn, now, in your hymnals to page 607 to the
Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition? May we pray together?

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,

Exalted for thee or brought low by thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O Glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,

Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.