

Discernment In The Margins

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1 Samuel 3:1-11,15

CHILDREN'S TIME

Your name is very important to you, isn't it? I have heard it said that the sweetest sound to anyone is the sound of their own name. Doesn't it make you feel good when someone remembers your name?

Let's all make name tags while we listen.

Do you think God knows your name? I am sure God does. Names are very important to God.

Now, not very often, but every once in a while God calls to people and they hear it with their ears like another person talking. Here are a few examples from the Bible.

One day, Moses saw a burning bush and went over to take a look. God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses answered, "Here I am."

As Jesus walked down the streets of Jericho one day, he stopped and looked up in a tree. "Zacchaeus, come down. I am going to your

house today." and Zacchaeus came down.

A long time ago, there was a woman named Hannah who wanted a child more than anything, so she prayed to God about it. She promised to have her son serve God his whole life. God gave Hannah the son she asked for, Samuel, and she kept her promise to God and presented him to Eli the priest, and Samuel served in the temple with Eli.

One night Samuel was sleeping when he heard someone call his name. He got up and ran to Eli. "Here I am; you called me," he said to Eli.

"I didn't call you," Eli answered, "go back to bed." So Samuel went back to bed.

"Samuel!" he heard a bit later, so Samuel jumped out of bed and went to Eli again. "Here I am; you called me."

"I didn't call you. Go back to bed," Eli answered.

A third time Samuel heard his name called and he got up and went to Eli again "Here I am; you called me," he said.

Finally, Eli realized that it was God who was calling Samuel. He told

Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if you hear your name called again say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’”

Samuel went back to bed and sure enough, he heard God calling, “Samuel! Samuel!” This time Samuel answered like Eli had told him, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Some people think that God only calls to grown-ups. That’s one reason I like the story of Samuel. Samuel was just a young boy when God called him. God knows your name just as God knew Samuel and today God still calls boys and girls to follow.

SERMON

When I first arrived here nearly 14 months ago, I began with a sermon series that reflected the first item of my initial “10+2 Plan.” That item was to “Pray, Listen and Watch.” It was helpful for me and I think for all of us to take a bit of time to hit the pause button and dedicate time to connect with our God in prayer as we listen for how the Holy Spirit was leading us. And then through the process watch for what God was doing around us.

A word for this process is discernment, and perhaps another

time of discernment would be helpful for us.

Discernment is a word heard much more often inside the church than outside. The generic definition is the ability to judge well, or the ability to grasp or perceive something that is obscure, or to see clearly what is good, as distinct from what is bad.

Discerning is often used in reference to someone who is sorting through a variety of options and looking for the one that is the best fit for the current situation.

It’s easy to see how discernment can be confused with making decisions — simply selecting the best option among the available alternatives. In this way, it has often been used in church planning processes when a church wants to make decisions.

Church leadership teams will discern how to move forward — which direction, and with what kind of plan. It can involve church mission statements, how to use money, figuring out what projects, programs, or ministries are most closely aligned with the church mission, etc.

However, to think about discernment in this way is only seeing part of the picture.

Discernment in Greek is *anakrino* which means “to distinguish, to separate out by diligent search, and to examine.”

So, discernment is referring to a process, not a decision or a result that we are trying to get to. It is about being in a space of inquiry. It is about suspending judgement. It is about sorting and considering before you have settled on a commitment.

Discernment is a process that is much more about listening than deciding.

Being at the point where we can truly listen might be the hardest part. It is about quieting the chatter, removing the clutter, the fear, the judgement, the preconceived conclusions — getting all of that out of the way so that you have a clean and empty canvas in front of you.

Now perhaps we’ll never get to the point of a perfectly empty canvas, but that is the intention.

Listen to what is involved in listening to God in the story of Samuel.

READ 1 SAMUEL 3:1-11,15

What we are really talking about is not simply discernment, but

spiritual discernment, which means we not only are focused on God, but understand sacred significance in what we are going through right now, including the journey that has brought us to this particular place.

It is in this process of discernment that we open our hearts, minds and intentions to God.

You’ve heard the scripture seek first God and his kingdom and all of these things will be given to you as well. Discernment is about seeking God in prayer, in scripture and in community.

Perhaps we recognize that God speaks to us, but we find it very difficult to hear God because of all of the distractions around us. So, you might find that you need to isolate yourself into quiet places in order to really hear God. This is very helpful as an individual.

However, God also speaks to us as a community. Discerning what God is saying to us as a community, requires communication and conversation when we are together.

Samuel, couldn’t discern God’s voice by himself, he needed conversation with Eli before he could redirect his attention and realigned his awareness to understand God’s voice.

It takes both our own private devotion to God as well as our communal worship and conversations with one another to discern what God is saying uniquely to our community.

When we are together, we share about what we hear God saying, what we see God doing among us and what God is doing in the community through our stories.

This is why we share joys and concerns in our worship services. It is by hearing one another that we can more clearly hear God.

Now it is not only learning to hear God's voice, discernment also asks each of us to assess within ourselves how God is directing us.

I think about this as a lingering inner resonating. It is probably different for others, but for me it feels like a deep "Yes" over time.

Now, sometimes we will hear a story that will move us and we feel compelled immediately to do something, but a week later there is no longer any passion for it. We recognize it is a good thing to do, but not for us.

Years ago, I heard a presentation about setting up water filters to give access to clean water to families in rural villages in Africa.

They described how the filters were so much less expensive than digging new wells, how they would last quite a long time, and could serve multiple families. I got excited about these big cylindrical containers that have gravel at the top where you would pour in any sort of dirty water, which would filter down through smaller and smaller gravel to sand at the bottom where you have a faucet to draw water out. It was inspiring how this unit simply mimics the filtering in riverbeds, which eliminate bacteria and viruses and dangerous particles.

I was immediately inspired and sold on the idea that I would participate in a water ministry like that. But a week later, I thought about it again and there was no passion in my heart. It was still a great idea for someone else, but it no longer resonated for me. So, I cut it loose so that my attention could be dedicated toward other things that had a prolonged, deeper resonance inside me.

This same sort of process can happen within a congregation. A few months ago, several of us from the Community Engagement Team went to an education forum at the Congregational Church of Birmingham. We brought back information about how we might get involved in advocating for

better education in Michigan. We made a presentation one Sunday morning and it fell flat. There was no response. It fell flat not because it was a bad plan or bad idea. In fact, I believe that there is great value in what they are doing, but God was not calling us in this season to invest ourselves in that ministry.

We clearly discerned a “No” to that ministry in order to say “Yes” to something else that God is calling us to do.

When we engage in conversations about various ministry options and directions we listen for God to call us to move closer to some and away from others.

This is part of the process of spiritual discernment.

The leadership of this congregation has been having conversations about how we move forward from where we are right now. We have talked about various marginalized populations of people where we might want to focus our attention.

There are no shortage of marginalized groups in our society, as we discussed last Sunday. We have talked about **refugees**, **immigrants**, and **asylum-seekers**. We have talked about **Muslims**. We have talked about the

homeless. We have talked about **children**. We have talked about those identifying as **LGBTQ**. We have talked about those who have never been part of any church and consider themselves “**spiritual but not religious**.” We have talked about the **elderly**, and we have talked about **young families with children**. We have probably talked about others too.

We could share stories from people representing any of these populations and be moved with compassion. But, if we try to reach all of them, we will wear ourselves out with continual exhaustion, and we would not be effective at any of it either.

So, the question becomes which direction is God leading this congregation?

I believe that God has called each congregation with a unique mission and that mission can change in different seasons of time. Right now we are searching for the mission to which God is calling us.

This process of discovery is spiritual discernment for our congregation. Now, this is not something that I, as your pastor, do by going off up a mountain somewhere and dedicating time in prayer to receive a message from

God after which I inform you about it.

No, this is something that we discover together in a time of congregational discernment.

In the coming weeks, the leadership of this congregation will be talking more specifically about what this looks like.

For now, I encourage you to do two things.

1. Find personal prayer and devotion time to reflect on for whom (what marginalized population) God has given you a heart and compassion.
2. Share about that with other people in this congregation.