

Discerning God's Will
2 Samuel 7:1 – 14a; Mark 6:30 – 34, 53 – 56; Ephesians 2:11 – 22
Sunday, July 22, 2018

We have heard three very different scripture readings today, seemingly unrelated to each other. But there *is* a common thread that runs through all of them. And to help us *see* that, first I need to tell you about my aunt.

I have an aunt who, every year from the time I was 13 until I was about 30, gave me a shirt for Christmas. But these weren't just *any* shirts. These were the *ugliest* shirts you have ever seen. They would have some really loud design on them like purple and gold paisley or bright green and yellow and red and orange vertical stripes. And they were always two sizes bigger than I wear, so even if I *wanted* to wear them (which never happened), they never *fit* me. And it's not like I could take them back and exchange them for something I *did* want, because every year, she would remove the price tag and I had no idea where she bought it. But she genuinely thought I would like these shirts. She found them in the store and thought, "Yes! Patrick will *love* this!"

So every year – I knew that it was coming – I had to open my present from her and *pretend* that I liked it (before I turned around and gave it to Goodwill). It became a running joke in our family that everyone was in on except her. I felt *bad* about it, because she was wasting money on this every year. And the thing is, it could have been avoided every year if she had just stopped to ask me or my mother, "What would you *like* for Christmas? Is there anything that Patrick especially *wants*?" But instead she just picked what *she* liked and figured that's what *I* would want.

King David wanted to build a temple for the Lord. He says to the prophet Nathan, "I am living in this big, beautiful house, but the ark of God is in a tent." Nathan says, "Go and do it. The Lord is with you!" That's a good thing, right? Build a temple for the Lord. That glorifies God.

What could be wrong with that? But the thing is, that's not what God wanted. God speaks to Nathan that night and says, "I never asked you to do that." You see, David thought about it and thought it was a great idea. He talked to Nathan about it, and Nathan thought it was a great idea. But no one bothered to ask God, "Is this what you want?"

This is a story about *discernment*. And *discernment* is about *knowing* and *doing* God's will. The question here is, "How do we *do* that?" How do we *know* God's will?

Discernment is not just *thinking* about something. A lot of times people will say, "Well, I *discerned* that this was what I was supposed to do," but what they *really* mean is, "I thought about it. I weighed the pros and cons. I used reason and thought about what made the most sense. I figured it out." Or, "This is what I *wanted* to do, so it must be what *God* wants." But *David* thought about it, and he was *wrong*. So discernment is not just *thinking* about something, and it is not just *talking* to someone about it. That's the other thing that people will do. They'll talk with someone else about a situation and from that conversation they will say, "We *discerned* that this was the thing to do. We came to an agreement on it, so it must be what God wants." But *David* talked with Nathan about it, and they *agreed*, but they were both wrong.

Discernment can involve all of that – thinking, reasoning, talking with others. But true discernment is centered on the question, "God, what do you want?" David never stops to ask, "God, what do *you* want?" He says, "This is what *I* think God would want, and we're going to go with *that*." But discernment is about asking, "God, what are you calling me, calling us to do?" Authors Danny Morris and Charles Olsen say that discernment is about asking, "God, what are you up to in the world, and what is my part in it?"¹

¹ Danny E. Morris & Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, pg. 18.

Each of these scripture readings shows us something about how to practice discernment, about how we can become discerning people. And it starts in David's story with simply *asking*. At the heart of discernment is asking God, "What do you want? What are you calling me, calling us to do?" We can't just be in conversation with ourselves and with each other. We have to be in conversation with *God*.

And that leads into this next story from Mark's gospel. The disciples have been out preaching and teaching and healing people, and when they come back together and tell Jesus everything they have been doing, Jesus says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." This is something that Jesus does all the time, and now he's teaching his disciples to do it – go off by yourself to spend time in prayer with God. Because in order to know God's *will*, you first have to know *God*. And how do you get to know someone? By spending time with them and talking with them. It's no different with God. We come to know God and what God wants for the world and for us by regularly spending time with God in prayer and reading scripture. It's not just knowing *about* God. It's *knowing* God, *abiding* with God throughout your day. In order to be *discerning* people, we must first be *prayerful* people.

But the other thing that this story shows us about discernment is that discernment is *communal*. When Jesus took his disciples away by themselves, he didn't say, "Peter you go over there. James, you go there. John, you go there." They all went *together*. Discernment is something that takes place in community. We see that in David's story, too. David spends time on his own, and then he goes to Nathan to talk to him about it. God talks to Nathan, and then Nathan goes back to talk to David. They're in conversation, working this out *together*. We often think of discernment as *individual*, because we live in an individualistic society and that's how we're

used to thinking about life – in terms of the *individual*. But discernment is always meant to be taken back to the community. We have to get away and spend time with Jesus to know him and know what he wants us to do, but our individual discernment always drives us back into community with others. Because we *need* those other voices and perspectives in order to confirm or refute that what we're discerning is actually what God is calling us to do. If we don't *have* those other voices or perspectives, how do we know that what we're discerning is what *God* wants us to do and not just what *we* want to do? You have this whole community of people here, brothers and sisters who you can turn to and trust to help you discern God's will in your life.

So we practice discernment as a community. We bring our individual questions to the larger group and say, "Here's what I'm struggling with or sensing that God is calling me to do. What do you think?" And that moves us into our third reading from Ephesians. What we see in Ephesians, what Paul is talking about, is the *result* of the church's discernment. He's saying to the Ephesians, "Some of you were Jewish. Some of you were Gentiles. But now in Christ you have all been brought together as one body, one new humanity."

This is the result of a process of discernment that we see back in the book of Acts. When the church was first starting out, you had to become *Jewish* in order to be a Christian. Gentiles (non-Jewish people) were *outside* the covenant and kingdom of God. But what happened was, Peter started having some experiences where non-Jewish people were coming to faith in Christ. He goes back and tells the other Apostles what he's experiencing, they talk about it, and discern that God has opened all of this up to Gentiles as well as Jews. But in order for Gentiles to become Christians, they had to become Jewish. They had to be circumcised and follow Jewish law.

A few years later, Paul is going around preaching, and he's having all these experiences with Gentiles. He starts sensing that maybe they *don't* need to do all of that in order to be Christians. Maybe it's fine for Gentiles to become Christians as they are. So he comes back to the Apostles and elders (the leaders of the church) in Jerusalem, and he tells them everything he's experiencing. Peter says, "Yeah, this is what I've been experiencing, too." So they all talk about it and pray about it together, and they come to discern that this was what God was calling them to do; that Gentiles can become Christians *as they are*. They don't need to be circumcised, and they don't need to adhere to all of Jewish law. And now Paul is writing this letter to the Ephesians, *to* some of those people who were brought in to the life of the church as a result of that process of discernment. And *we* who are reading this letter today are the result of that process of discernment.

So discernment is never just for me, never just for us, because it has implications far beyond just me or just us. It's about asking, "God, what are you up to in the world, and what is my part in it?" Recognizing that we are just one small part of what God is doing in the world, so our discernment has to fit with that bigger picture and purpose. And sometimes what we discover is that what God is doing in the world, what God is calling *us* to do, is not at all what we expected. The result of the apostles' discernment in Acts represented a huge shift in the life of the church and what it meant to be a Christian. It changed their whole understanding of what it meant to belong to God. It was not at all what people were expecting. The result of David's discernment was not at all what *he* was expecting. He wanted to build God a house, but God said, "No, and actually, I'm going to build *you* into a house."

What this shows us is that if we are going to ask, "God, what are you calling me to do," then we actually have to be willing to *do* it. Even if it's not what we were expecting. Even if it's not

what we *want*. In our discernment we have to be open to doing God's will and hearing something that we aren't ready to hear. It's not just about getting God to agree with what we want. It's about opening ourselves, our hearts and minds, to the will of God and submitting ourselves to that. So before we can ask, "God, what are you calling me to do," we have to actually be willing to *do* it, no matter what it is. That can be *hard*, and it can be *scary*, and it takes a whole lot of *trust*.

Discernment is about *listening*. It's about asking over and over again, "God, what are you calling me to do," and then *listening, waiting* for God to speak. God speaks to us in a lot of different ways – a quiet voice within, other people, our experiences in life, books and movies and music, nature. We have to listen for God's voice in all of it. And we have to be *patient*, because that can take a long time. I mean, just look at what happened in these readings. It was around 1000 B.C. when David reigned and God said to him, "I will make *you* into a house." When Paul writes to the Ephesians, he says to them, "You are members of the household of God. In Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." So it's been over 1,000 years and this house, this promise to David, is still being built. And 2,000 years after *that* it is still being built in *us*. Knowing and doing God's will takes time. If we are truly seeking God's will, it doesn't happen in *our* time. It happens in *God's* time. And we have to be willing to wait for that.

When we look at everything these readings show us about discernment, we see that discernment involves *knowing God*; spending time with God in prayer and reading scripture. It involves the *community*. It's not just something I do by myself, it's something we do together. It involves an opening of ourselves to *whatever* God is calling us to do, even if it's not what we want or expect. It involves *listening* and *patience*. It involves asking over and over again, "God, what are you

calling me to do? What are you calling *us* to do?" That is the question that guides our lives, as individuals and as a community, in Christ. What is God calling us to do?