

Discerning the Spirit
Matthew 9:35–10:23
Sunday, June 14, 2020

So over the past couple of weeks, we've had some pretty big days in the life of the church. Last week was Trinity Sunday, the holy day on which we celebrate God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The week before that was Pentecost and the coming of God's Holy Spirit. The week before *that* was Ascension Sunday, when we celebrated Christ's ascension from earth into heaven. And before that we were in the season of Easter, celebrating Christ's resurrection from the dead. All pretty big events in the life of the church. But *this week* is bigger than *all* of them. Because *this week* we celebrate *the last day of school*.

I have not been this excited for the last day of school in probably 15 years, since I graduated from seminary. Because for the past three months, since the schools closed, we have had to teach our three kids at home. Monday through Friday, we would wake up each day and do school until lunchtime. And I know I'm not alone in saying that I had *absolutely no idea what I was doing*. I mean, I'm a reasonably intelligent person – I can translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek – but I have absolutely no business teaching a 4th grader math. (Although in my defense, in the 15 years that I have been a pastor, I have never once had to figure out the area of a triangular prism.) At the beginning of all of this, I couldn't even figure out the *website* that we were supposed to be using to get all of their assignments.

And now, all of that is over. We somehow made it through, and our kids actually get to go on to the next grade. But I am convinced that it was only by the grace of God. Because back at the beginning of all this, it was like we knew what we had to do – teach our kids – we just had no idea how we were going to *do* it.

It's like the work we're doing now with the church's Task Force on Reopening. The Task Force has to develop a written plan for exactly what we are going to do to ensure the safety and health of the congregation and the community when we resume in-person activities. And that covers an *unbelievable* amount of detail. When we have meetings, I find myself saying, "Okay, we have to figure out a target date for resuming in-person worship. But *this* thing needs to happen first, and we don't know *when* that's going to happen. And what if *this* happens? How do we even *begin* to figure this out? I've never done this before! *None of us* has ever done this before! And I can't even tell you what *next week* is going to look like, much less when we're going to be ready to be back in person." Fortunately for you all, we have people on this Task Force who are better at this than *I* am. Because it's like I know what we have to *do*, I just have no idea how we're going to *do* it.

Which is what everybody wants to hear from their pastor during this time, right? That I have *no idea* what I'm doing! But I think that's a very real question for *all* of us lately. How do we know the right thing to do? How do we know what is *true* from what is *false*? Just reading the news, how do you know what is *true* and what is *spin*? You hear one person saying that the number of cases of this virus is going down and that things are getting better, but then you hear another voice saying, "Well, actually, that doesn't take *this* thing into account, so it's actually *not* where we thought it was going to be." You hear one voice talking about protests becoming violent, but then you hear another voice talking about how the people committing the violence are coming in from the outside, trying to undermine the protestors' cause. How do we know who to believe? How do we discern what is *right* from what is *wrong*, the Spirit of *God* from a spirit of *evil*? How do we know what God wants us to do?

As I've been struggling with that question, I came across a prayer by a pastor and author named

Howard Thurman, who writes this:

“Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!
The quietness in Thy Temple of Silence again and again rebuffs us:
For some there is no discipline to hold them steady in the waiting
And the minds reject the noiseless invasion of Thy Spirit.
For some there is no will to offer what is central in the thoughts—
The confusion is so manifest, there is no starting place to take hold.
For some the evils of the world tear down all concentrations
And scatter the focus of the high resolves.
War and the threat of war has covered us with heavy shadows,
Making the days big with forebodings—
The nights crowded with frenzied dreams and restless churnings.
We do not know how to do what we know to do.
We do not know how to be what we know to be.
Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!
Brood over our spirits, Our Father,
Blow upon whatever dream Thou hast for us
That there may glow once again upon our hearths
The light from Thy altar.
Pour out upon us whatever our spirits need of shock, of lift,
of release
That we may find strength for these days—
Courage and hope for tomorrow.
In confidence we rest in Thy sustaining grace
Which makes possible triumph in defeat, gain in loss, and
love in hate.
We rejoice this day to say:
Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!”

Those lines resonated with me – “We do not know how to do what we know to do. We do not know how to be what we know to be.” That’s a struggle I think a lot of us are facing in this time.

And Thurman’s answer to that is to place our questions, our doubts, our problems, our *lives* upon the altar of God, awaiting the “noiseless invasion” of God’s Spirit to illuminate and guide us. As we navigate the uncharted landscape on which we *all* find ourselves, how do we know what is *true*, what is *right*, what is God’s *will* for us (as individuals, as a church, and as a country)? The short answer is, by the grace of God. By trusting in God’s Holy Spirit to give us what we need and guide us in the way that God is calling us to go.

Jesus gets into this in our reading from Matthew's gospel. He is sending out his disciples to do the things that he has been doing: preach, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. So they knew what they were *supposed* to do, but you know there *had* to be a part of them that was saying, "But how do we *do* that? *Cast out demons? Raise the dead?*" It's not as hard as teaching 4th grade math, but it's up there. "We do not know how to do what we know to do."

Jesus tells them to trust that the Spirit of God is guiding them. He tells them that they are going to be beaten and arrested and tried, they are going to face adversity for doing what he is calling them to do. But he says to them, "Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you at that time. For it is not *you* who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking *through* you." So trust that the Spirit of God is with you, guiding you, and will give you what you need to do what God is calling you to do.

Jesus says to them, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Jesus is calling his followers to be *discerning*. To discern what is *true* from what is *false*, what is *right* from what is *wrong*. To discern the Spirit of *God* from a spirit of *evil*. But, again, how do we *know* that? We live in a world where the difference between right and wrong, true and false, good and evil is not always as clear as it should be. And there are some people who intentionally try to *blur* those lines and make it *harder* for us to tell. So how do we know that we are following the Spirit of *God* and not a spirit of *evil* or the spirit of *man*? How do we practice this kind of discernment?

Years ago, a friend of mine was going through her father's Bible. (He had passed years before.) She came across a piece of paper that he had apparently tucked away in there. It was titled, "The

Voice of God,” and on it were 11 steps that helped him discern the voice of God in his life. It’s honestly one of the most clear and concise things I have ever read on this, so I want to share it with you. His name was Bob Beaman, and this is what he wrote:

1. God’s Voice is Consistent with God’s Word

God’s calling to you, will be consistent with what we see in scripture (the *written* Word of God) and in the life of Jesus Christ (the Word of God made flesh).

2. May conflict with human reason

It doesn’t always make sense, this thing that God is calling us to do. It may clash with our human nature (that’s third). It may challenge our faith (that’s fourth). It may call for courage (fifth). God calls us to a *different way of life* in which we have to step out from what comes naturally and easily to us.

3. Clashes with our human nature
4. May challenge our faith
5. May call for courage
6. Requires consideration of others

It is never simply God’s call to *me*. God’s call is always for me as I am in relationship with *others*. God’s call to you effects this whole network of people in *your* life. So we have to take that into consideration.

7. May require patience

Yeah. Any questions on *that* one?

8. Requires consideration of consequences

What’s going to happen if you do this? It should not necessarily *stop* you from doing it, but you at least need to be *aware* of that.

9. May advise seeking wise council

You are not in this alone. Find someone who *knows* God, who can walk with you and help guide you in discerning God’s will.

10. Produces spiritual growth

When you are studying God’s word, stepping out in faith, loving and considering others, exercising patience, and seeking wise council, *you are growing spiritually*. It’s not just something that happens at the *end* of all this. It happens *all along the way*.

11. Yields peace

That last point is really important in all this. If we are truly discerning God's will and God's voice in our lives, then we will have a sense of *peace* about what we are to do. This is what the great spiritual thinkers throughout history have said. The 16th century priest and theologian Ignatius of Loyola talked in terms of *consolation* and *desolation* in discerning God's will. *Consolation* is a deep sense of peace in God, while *desolation* has to do with a *loss* of peace. And there is a distinction we have to make in this. It's not just a peace that comes from what we have to *do*. Because Jesus says here that what we have to do will not always bring about peace. He talks about his followers being arrested and beaten and even killed. He talks about brothers betraying brothers, fathers betraying children, and being *hated* by *all*. There's not a lot of peace in that.

But the *consolation* and peace that Ignatius talks about is not a peace of the *senses* that we can see and hear and feel. It is a peace in the Lord; a peace deep within your being. Even in the midst of conflict, it is a peace that says, "This is the way." The *desolation* that Ignatius talks about is the *opposite* of that. It is a *loss* of peace and consistent feeling of being *unsettled* not just because this thing is hard or fearful, but because, "This is *not* the way." You keep hitting roadblocks that are telling you, "This isn't it."

If we are truly discerning God's will, then even in the midst of conflict and fear, we will possess a deep and abiding peace that we are on the right track, even if it's incredibly difficult. That consolation, that peace in the Lord gives us the courage to do what we know to do.

I've shared with you before the prayer by Thomas Merton in which he says:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will

does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

How do we *know* the right thing to do, and how do we *do* it? We place our problems and questions and doubts and fears upon the altar of God. We open ourselves up to the noiseless invasion of the Spirit and listen for the voice of God. We trust that God's Holy Spirit will give us what we need and guide us in the way of truth. We find *peace* in the Lord, and that peace gives us the consolation and courage to do what God is calling us to do.