

Discernment

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15 (Violet)

The meaning of discernment: (Visit the Internet on Discernment)

- Dictionary: the act or process of exhibiting keen insight and good judgment; keenness of insight and judgment. Discern – To perceive with the eyes of intellect; detect; to recognize or comprehend mentally; to perceive or recognize as distinct; distinguish. Discernible – perceptible, as by vision or the intellect.
- Spiritual: a study of the word “discern”, “discerner”, in the Bible shows that such words as “point out,” “take note,” “distinguish,” “know,” “interpret,” and “judge” are used. I Corinthians 12:10 speaks of the gifts that are activated by the Holy Spirit. It says, “...to another the discernment of spirits.”
- All our faculties are used in discernment – our minds, eyesight, ears, taste, touch, smell, and so forth. Discernment means we are making decisions based on our best interpretation and judgment. To discern means to determine our destiny, to judge between good and evil, determine a right way and a wrong way; get a sense of direction so we can make a choice, a decision.
- The follower of Jesus, or a disciple of Christ, is expected to use all their faculties as well as prayer in asking God for guidance in order to discern, make a decision or a judgment about what God’s will is for their life. The disciple of Jesus, a Christian, has more than just intellect, emotions or physical ability – he/she also has the Spirit of God through prayer. And even then we find ourselves making unwise choices because of our own wants and selfish desires. Thanks are to God for his grace and forgiveness and we can try again.
- Not too long ago I bought a book called Discerning Your Congregation’s Future by Roy M. Oswald & Robert E. Fredrich, Jr., published by the Alban Institute. There is a segment on “Prayer and Discernment.” It explains that the Greek word interpreted as discernment means “to sift through.” Biblical illustrations are agricultural like sifting the wheat from the chaff, “sifting through our own interior experiences, thoughts and feelings, all of which are brought about the circumstances we are in.” It goes ahead to say that it is “impossible to do spiritual discernment if we do not pray, that is, consciously seek to find God. Prayer is making myself present to God within me and around me. We pray in order to become open to God. And when we bring an openness, a freedom, to our prayer time, then we are able to adopt the unconditional attitude, ‘God, when you show me a direction to follow, I will say ‘yes’ no matter what the cost.’”
- The work of discernment is not starting the board meeting off with a prayer and then working out the solution with the best of our rational skills. It is not going along with the prayer because that is what we are supposed to do and then deciding through rational discourse. It is just the opposite. It is praying prior to the work of the board and then listening to one another, of being open to a solution that is not very rational but instead feels right to the entire group present.
- The sacrificial life and death of our Lord, Jesus, the Christ, is not rational or prudent. “It is a stumbling block to some and a folly to others but it is the heart of the Good News. Either we believe that or we are not Christian at all. As we try to discern the will of God” for our lives, “for our congregation we will focus not on doing the rational prudent thing but rather on doing the faithful thing.” When we do that we will more than likely choose to continue in the path of Christ, the path of suffering and brokenness. We will do the sacrificial, life-giving thing.” (Adapted)
- Discernment needs the Body of Christ, the Community of Faith; it needs tradition (past) and fellowship (present). Rev. John Whittington tells how the members of his church are not taking off in helicopters, that is, going straight up to commence working on what they believe God has called them to do. Instead there is a runway down which their plane taxis and it stops at the pastor’s office before it takes off.

The discernment of Jesus:

- **Through his baptism**

With the thought of discernment in mind this gospel story of Jesus' baptism takes on a deeper meaning. Think of Jesus discerning who he was and what it was that God wanted him to do. Here comes Jesus from Nazareth, where he was brought up, went to school and had now reached physical and spiritual maturity. What was running through his mind? One possibility is the question, "Who am I?" He is trying to discern who he is. Perhaps he has an idea, a thought, but really, just who is he in his own mind and heart.

He comes to John and is baptized by him. He has put a lot of thought towards doing this. It wasn't something he needed to do. Baptism was reserved for those who were Gentiles and were converting to Jew or for those going through a purification process. Jesus was already a Jew and, being sinless, certainly did not need purification. But he does it because he wants to identify with humanity, he does it because he believes it is the right thing to do and John baptizes him.

According to Mark as he comes up out of the water he sees – not everyone sees, only Jesus – “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” And then he hears – again, not everyone, only Jesus – “from heaven (saying), ‘you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” What Jesus sees and hears helps his discernment of who he is. He is God's special son and he has been granted a vision of Holy Spirit like no one else.

- **Through his testing**

Next Mark gives a brief statement of a testing. Not “temptation” mind you, as it says in verse 13. Bible scholars are agreed that the word translated as “temptation” could also be translated “testing” and in the gospel of Mark should be read as “testing”. The NAB translates this as Jesus “stayed in the wasteland forty days, put to the test there by Satan.”

That same Spirit that Jesus encountered as a dove descending upon him now drives him into the wilderness. Other gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, go into more detail about this testing experience. Mark only has two verses whereas Matthew has eleven and Luke has 13 verses. Mark simply says, “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

“Forty days” is the way the Hebrew people indicate “a long time.” It may not necessarily mean a literal 40 days as our western minds envision, but however many days, it is a long time.

The difference between Mark and the recording by Matthew and Luke is interesting. Matthew and Luke indicate that the temptation comes after the forty days of fasting. Matthew indicates that the Angels minister to Jesus after the Satan had left him. Mark, however, implies that the Spirit sustains him throughout the forty day period. The beasts represent “hostile powers” and include Satan. They are also with him the entire period. Mark does not say that Satan leaves Jesus; in fact, the implication is that there is a constant struggle throughout the gospel of Mark. Truly it is a testing of strength between Jesus and Satan.

- So, through his baptism and through his testing Jesus is discerning who he is and how to use the gifts God has given him. After his testing he begins his ministry in Galilee and proclaims that the Kingdom of God is near. He continues his journey towards the cross and every day is going through discernment in order to determine what it is that God is leading him into. He has the disciples as his Faith Community to test his discerning.

Our discernment:

- Jesus is our mentor, our model. He used all his faculties plus his relationship with God in prayer to discern how he would serve and glorify God and fulfill what God wanted him to do. The Holy Spirit of God gave him guidance and ministered to him.
- At this time we will observe the Lord's Supper and then we will continue with the rest of the sermon. May our participation in the Lord's Supper give us spiritual nourishment for the Lenten Period ahead of us.
- With Jesus as our model, our mentor, let us look at a tool called "My Experience for Easter." Remember, it is only a tool but it could prove very helpful in the hands of Holy Spirit and you. God will be glorified and your joy in the Lord will increase.

My Preparation for Easter

I found an article on the internet entitled **Connecting Worship and Daily Living in Lent** by Rev. Daniel Benedict. He says: "Lent is a time of preparation for the initiation of people into the Christian life in baptism. It is also a time for the church to journey together toward Easter and the reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. Lent is not about being miserable, sad, and funereal in anticipation of Good Friday. The Sundays of Lent are not part of the forty days of Lent and so remain "little Easters," as are all Sundays. Fasting and giving up something can be part of Lenten disciplines, but so can taking on some things."

Rev. Benedict shares a tool he used in a church he served in Chuyula Vista, CA. The tool is entitled "My Preparation for Easter". I'm using the same title but adapting for Second Baptist Church (his church is United Methodist).

First let me share a story about two Monks who came to a river and needed to cross. It was not a large or deep river so they prepared to wade through the water. About the time they started to cross a beautiful damsel in distress also wanted to cross but was afraid. One Monk said that if she was willing to ride piggy back he would carry her across. She climbed on his back and he proceeded to carry her across. After all three got to the other side the Monk let her down and she went her way and the Monks went their way.

After about a mile the second Monk said to the first one, "Do you think it was right that we carried that beautiful lady across the river?" The first Monk replied, "What? Are you still carrying her? I left her by the river a long time ago!"

Are there some things we still carry that we should have "left at the river" a long time ago? We could let that river represent our baptism. Perhaps there are some things we still carry that we should have left at our baptism. Or, remembering our baptism, what it means as far as belonging to God through Jesus, the Christ, what are some of the things we should let go? May this tool, "My Preparation for Easter" help us use the Lenten period not only to let go but gain a new found freedom and joy in Christ as we work our way towards Easter.

My Preparation for Easter (Adapted by Bob Molby)

Lent is a time to prepare for Easter. It is a necessary prelude. The death and resurrection of Christ are true whether or not I prepare for Easter. However, without my heart and life being ready, I may not experience the depth and power of Christ's death and resurrection. So with my brothers and sisters, I commit myself to disciplines for conversion from sin and death to love and life in Jesus Christ. With the aid of the list below, I make the following commitments to discipline and growth for the next six weeks:

(Check the ones you desire or feel prompted to do; circle the ones you then decide to do.)

Inward and Personal Disciplines

- ___ Spend time in solitude each day.
- ___ Read a book for inner growth.
- ___ Read twice through the Gospel of the lectionary cycle we are in. (Mark in 2009)
- ___ Begin to keep a journal of prayer concerns, questions, reading.
- ___ Focus on thanksgiving, rather than on asking, in prayer.
- ___ Give myself a gift of three hours to do something I always say I don't have time to do.
- ___ Find a way to go to bed earlier or sleep in so I get enough rest.
- ___ Make a list of people with whom I need to be reconciled. Pray for them and let Jesus guide me in my thinking and feeling toward them.
- ___ Take control of my life by _____.
- ___ Go to all of the Holy Week services as an act of love and waiting with Jesus.
- ___ Take one hour to inventory my priorities and plan how I will reorder them.
- ___ Give up a grudge or a rehearsal of a past event.
- ___ Forgive someone who has hurt me.
- ___ Dance my prayers to a favorite tape or CD.
- ___ Other promptings:

Outward and Social Disciplines

- ___ Take on some loving task: (*Write it out.*)
- ___ Plan to visit a "shut-in" neighbor or church member weekly.
- ___ Write a letter of affirmation once a week to a person who has touched my life.
- ___ Listen and respond to Christ's call to a ministry of service:
- ___ Go to coffee or dinner with someone I want to know better.
- ___ Begin to recycle waste from my home and workplace.
- ___ Give blood and recall the cross.
- ___ Give to the America for Christ offering. (*Our denomination Mission Offering for work in the United States; learn how it spreads the gospel in the U.S.*)
- ___ Say "NO" to something that is a waste of money and time.
- ___ Pray to God to help me resist racial prejudice and to give me courage in opposing it.
- ___ Decide to become a member of the church and speak to a pastor or lay leader.
- ___ Rebuke the spirit of criticism and my own tongue out of control.
- ___ Find a way to live out the baptismal promise to "resist evil, injustice, and oppression" in the power and liberty God gives us by _____
- ___ Other outward and social promptings:

As a way of being accountable, I will either:

- ___ Share my intentions for Lent with my Deacon or
- ___ Share my plan with at least one other person and share with that person my experience of Lent during Holy Week. (*It takes a Community to grow our faith.*)

(signed) _____

(date) _____

Keep this for reference during the coming weeks.