

Sermon August 21, 2011 Help! I don't know what to do! Discernment-1. Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO 80222 Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, Senior Pastor

Scripture Psalm 25: 1-2, 4-5, 9-10

1-2 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust;

4-5 Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your trust, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;

For you I wait all day long.

9-10 God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble God's way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,

For those who keep God's covenant and God's decrees.

From Taoism , from Lao Tsu: *Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?* Lao Tsu, Taoism

Help! I don't know what to do! Do I go to this school? Take this job offer? Stay? Get married? Go out on a date? Remain behind? Mow the lawn? Go to the movies? Purchase which computer?

Think back on the decisions you made this past week. You even made a decision to come to church this morning. My wife often asks me: "Thomas, what do you want for dinner?" And of course as a loving man, respond: "Whatever you like, dear."

Decisions, decisions, decisions. It is part of living and dying. We make decisions everyday, some are small, like getting up in the morning, watching a television show, and others are monumental, like a new job, marriage, moving, divorcing and even dying. These monumental ones are stress inducing.

One question we often ask when it comes to decisions, is "What would Jesus do?" or "Is this God's will?"

A new word is entering our lives now. It is "DISCERNMENT" which is a process and often is used as a substitute for decision making, planning, and formulating. Companies go on retreat to develop a new advertising campaign.

But discernment is much more than just making a plan, developing goals and objectives, strategies for meeting those goals and objectives. Discernment is a theological concept. It is a religious term. It applies to a spiritual dimension to all of life. Moses had to determine if the burning bush was truly God. Abraham had to discern whether the call to leave home was truly Creator God. And of course, Jesus, had to determine, discern, decide whether the call to death on the cross was truly the will of God, the call of God. We have that story as he wrestled with it in the Gospel accounts of the garden of Gethsemane.

Discernment is more than just making a decision. It is making a decision in light of the call of God. It is the end product resulting in hopefully a decision, a plan, a covenant, that coincides with our own desires and the desire of our Creator and Creative God. It is my belief that God

does desire the best for all of us, the balance, the wholeness, the abundance of life. It is in the process of our living and our relationships, and our decisions that we become all that God desires of us.

When I decided to attend seminary, it was not with the intent of becoming a pastor, but to gain a different perspective on working with people wrestling with ultimate questions like “what am I suppose to do?” Questions require decisions. At seminary I met Eco Watanabe, a Buddhist monk. We became good friends. One day he asked: “Tom, you have a great deal of knowledge about Buddhism, would you like to become a Buddhist?” I responded that I couldn’t answer that right away but would reflect and pray on it. (In actuality, what I was doing was the beginning of discernment.) After a period of time, I came to Eco and expressed deep appreciation for his invitation, but that at this time I could not accept the invitation, because I had not given my own faith, an opportunity to work in me. It is like wine, I said. One must sip it, taste it, enjoy the senses and see how it affects me. I had knowledge about Jesus, about Christianity, but I did not have experience with, and of Jesus. There is a vast separation between knowing of, and knowing about. One is based on relationships and the heart, while the other is based on head experience. Both are necessary.

So how is that we do begin?

Be aware, be attentive, God is all around, within and without. The psalmists writes “The whole creation sings praises to God.” Anthony de Mello, in “One Minute Wisdom” on “Discovery.” “Help us to find God.”

“No one can help you there.”

“Why not?”

“For the same reason that no one can help the fish to find the ocean.”

The first step is to pause. Become aware of the goodness of God, of where God is right now in your life. For some there may be little consolation, little joy and lots of disconsolation or troubles. Become aware. Exam your life and what happened this past day, or this past hour. Where did you see God, where might you have been more charitable? Give thanks. This is a must. It helps to pay attention to the movement of God and the Holy Spirit.

So now you have a decision. For me at one time it was which seminary do I attend? Yale or Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley where I really wanted to attend. California has always beckoned to me. Another was choosing which churches to pastor. We all make decisions, but by using some discernment processes, listening to the Holy Spirit, we are trying to live our lives as Co Creators with God.

St. Ignatius of Loyola was the founder of the Jesuits in the Catholic Church. He formulated a process of discernment which I have used.

First: write down what it is you wish to decide. Formulate this. Let’s say you are wrestling with which school to attend, or which church to attend, or whether to move to a new residence or remain in your own home.

Write down on the left side the positives of making the decision. This is what we would do normally. We list on the left side all those reasons we should do this action.

Now, write down on the right of those, a line down the middle, separating them, and forming a T, those reasons for not doing the action. On both sides of the T, the positive and the negatives for making or not making this decision let your mind and heart flow openly. This is what we normally do in decision making.

Now take another sheet of paper, and again divide it into a T, and at the top, write, “NOT MAKING or DOING THIS, action, decision, choice.

Now write down the positives of not making the choice. There will be feelings, reasons that will surface that were not on the original. Remember we are listing the positives of not acting. On the right side, now list the negatives of NOT ACTING, CHOOSING.

In this process we become aware of our deeper feelings about the Call of God on us. We have to participate as Co Creators in the lives God gave us. In Discernment, we are purposely seeking the deeper wisdom and guidance of God’s Holy Spirit.

St. Ignatius’ process can be used for most any decision. However, we need to participate in the examen, the place where we see God moving in our lives, right now.

God wants to be active in our lives. We can focus on ignoring the places, people, circumstances where God pops in on us. We can focus on the practical, the bottom line, and miss the opportunity that God might just be calling us to a deeper relationship with Jesus.

So this week, pause, listen, and do the examen, where do I see God moving in my life? A phone call from a friend, a letter or an email, or simply the smelling of a rose.

Thanks be to God for continually inviting us on the journey of life that leads through death to a deeper life eternal with the ever Creating God. What a journey! Amen.

Resources

The Way of Discernment, Spiritual Practices for Decision Making, by Elizabeth Liebert. Westminster John Know, publisher, 2008. She is Professor of Spiritual Life at San Francisco Theological Seminary

One Minute Wisdom, Anthony de Mello, Image Books, 1988

listening to god, Spiritual Formation in Congregations, by John Ackerman, The Alban Institute 2001.

“Discerning the Spirits” Weavings, A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, published by the Upper Room, Volume X, Number 6, Nov-Dec. 1995