

Sermon August 28, 2011 Discernment 2 Feelings A God Listening Heart I Kings 3: 1-15 Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO

If you had an opportunity to wish for one thing, and it would be given you, what would it be? Most of us probably would wish for health, wealth, or even world peace. But not Solomon. He wished for wisdom, for a wise heart, a discerning heart, a God listening heart so that he could distinguish between good and evil. He desired wisdom to help people make wise decisions.

The next chapter gives us an example of how this gift was used. Two women came each claiming the child was their son. What would you do? How would you have decided this case? In our present time, this probably would have gone to court which then would have ordered a DNA test on the baby and the two women to determine. But let's say, in good CSI watching, that the two women are identical twins. Still tests probably would have made the determination of the mother of this child. But not so in Solomon's time. He had to rely on wisdom. Some may have thought this might be calculating, or even devious. His action was simple: cut the baby in half and give half to each. Logical in light of there being no DNA. His thinking, his wisdom, his discernment, and his hope was that the real mother would cry out, as she did, to save the child's life. Only the real mother would do this. So she received the child.

Because of Solomon's request for discernment, for a God-listening Heart, he was able to humble himself and become a leader for the Israelites.

A God Listening Heart! What an image. What a great understanding of what discernment is about! A God listening heart! I like that phrase and the imagery.

We learned last week that discernment is a process of listening, of pausing, of being aware. It is slowing down to be at one with God and to be a Co-Creator with God in our individual lives. Discerning is more than just planning, setting goals and objectives. It is specifically a religious, spiritual activity in which our decisions coincide with God's. It all begins with prayer. I shared with you a process taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Order of Jesuits in the Catholic Church. It is based on feelings, of consolations or joys and disconsolations or fears, hurts.

Many of us base our decisions on how they make us feel. Feelings do have a part in discernments. There are feelings that are deep and affectionate such as those feelings we have for partners, spouses and friends. There are also feelings that come and go.

A question to ask about our feelings in the discernment process is whether the feeling leads us away from God by making us anxious, agitated, or of being out of sorts, or a sense of being in the dark. It could also lead to a feeling of this is my way out, and if I don't do this, decide this, then I'm stuck and have to go back to square one. We may even push for that decision. There may be a feeling of going through the motions, of dullness. One may also feel separated from one's true self, and separated from God. The feelings of faith, hope and love are absent. There is no joy, just a feeling of relief that it is over, a decision made.

On the other hand, if the movement is toward God, the decision provides a feeling of being centered with God, in synch with God. It provides grounding, a sense of being alive and awake, awed and grateful, and free. There is passion, enthusiasm and energy. You sense intuitively that this is the way, the truth and the life.

So often we depend on our feelings to guide us. But our feelings can be misunderstood, misconstrued, and lead us down the wrong paths. Emotions can be strong and we get all wrapped up in them.

When the movement is away from God, turn to God and be honest. You might consider the following prayer by Avery Brooke, (From Plain Prayers in a Complicated World, also pg. 37, in Weavings, A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, “Discerning the Spirits” Volume X Number 6, Nov-Dec 1995)

*God, I don't know what to do
Obviously whatever I decide,
It will make a great difference.
I have gathered all the information I need
I have weighed those things for and against.
I have asked the advice of experts and friends, and
I still don't know what to do.*

*Help me, God to choose wisely.
And once I have chosen, help me to go forward in faith.*

Our feelings are important in the process of discernment. We have to pay attention to them. Become Aware! Pause and Pray. Wake up.

Another prayer we might offer when we are unsure of the gift that God might be giving to us is referred to as “the radical prayer” by Flora Wuellner, a UCC clergy, writer, spiritual director. “*God, if this new activity...relationship...interest, personality change...job...is right for me, let it take root and increase in my life. If it is wrong for me, let it become less and less important to me, and let it decrease in my life.*” (pg. 31 in Weavings, A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, “Discerning the Spirits” Volume X Number 6, Nov-Dec 1995)

A final consideration: Discernment is not about the bottom line. It is about being in concert with the movement of the Holy Spirit in your life, in our lives. Discernment is inviting God into the decision process – of listening, waiting, sensing and being aware. It is also about being humble and recognizing that God invites us to be Co-Creators in our lives.

The story of Solomon is one that reveals God's presence in our lives when we invite God in. Our egos often times Edge God Out. Solomon was humble to know that he could not do it all by himself, even with the advisors and other servants. May we be as humble in our leadership and invite God to participate in our life's journey. Amen.