

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Spiritual Discernment: What In The World Is God Up To Now?
Acts 15

Some of you may be aware
that I've been using this congregation as a Guinea Pig for the past month or so.
I have been placing you under the microscope of academic scrutiny
trying to learn what I can about how God is at work among you
how you are responding to what God is doing
and how as your pastor I can best serve you
as you travel together on this journey called the life of faith.

Actually, what I've been doing is no different that what any good pastor should be doing.
If I'm doing my job as a pastor I should constantly be paying attention to these thing
trying to learn all I can about God's special work in this congregation
and in your lives – at this time, in this place.

It just happens to be that at the moment, by doing my job and being a pastor
I'm getting credit toward a doctoral degree
Happily, ministry is a calling that I love and in which I find great fulfillment,
and I believe I've been called to a congregation of remarkable character and giftedness
to serve and to live out my ministry.

So for the past several months I've been studying the practices of the congregation;
and three practices in particular:

our practice of Household Economics, that is how we spend our money
(which has been the topic of study in the Upper Room class)
the practice of Healing Prayer
(the focus of the team which planned our first healing service
and is now planning for the next one, to be held in February)
and – the practice which is the topic of today's sermon –
the practice of Spiritual Discernment
(which is something all of us as believers engage in as individually
and which the elders of the congregation strive to do when they meet together
to decide the course of our life together.)

Spiritual Discernment is the practice of asking the question:
"What in the world is God up to now?"
whether in my life as an individual, or in our life as a community.
What in the world is God up to now, and how can we participate?

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In a book about the practices of our faith,
Frank Rogers tells a story about a middle-aged mother of four children...

Joyce...has been separated from her husband for a year and a half,
ever since he abruptly announced
that he was moving in with an assistant half his age.
It has been like climbing out of a suffocating abyss,
but now, after months of sleepless nights,
her tentative attempts to recreate her life are taking hold.
She has a steady job and a supportive network,
the kids are settling into a routine,
and she is discovering a personal strength that she never knew she had.
And now, with the divorce almost complete, he wants to move back home.
...Tormented by conflicting pulls, Joyce desperately yearns to know what she should do.
What does God want her to do? How can she know for sure?
Please, how can she know?¹

In just beginning to ask these questions, Joyce is engaging in the practice of spiritual discernment.

And spiritual discernment is practiced by communities, especially as I have said, by the leadership.
The Session is now involved in a time of discernment
about the best way to allocate the churches limited financial resources.

This is no easy task.

First I should say that the initial results of our Stewardship Consecration Sunday are encouraging:
many of you have responded very generously to the Session's call to action
by increasing your pledges, or by pledging for the first time,
or by allowing the Session to determine the best way to allocate your gift
you are helping our situation.

If you have not yet turned in a stewardship commitment card,
we will be glad – even relieved - to receive it at the earliest possible moment.

Even so the Session has a good deal of deciding yet to do about how to balance the many important endeavors of our life and ministry together:

our investment in outreach and evangelism
our desire to nurture children and adults to grow in faith
our obligations to church personnel
and the necessity of maintaining our building and grounds.

But we are not simply trying to make decisions about these things;
we are seeking to discern what God would have us do.

What in the world is God up to now in and through Glenshaw Presbyterian Church?

I don't mean to be flippant when I ask the question this way;
rather I believe this question expresses some of the deepest convictions of the church.
As people who view the world through the lens of scripture – through the Word of God –
we believe that God is indeed up to something in the world
– that is to say, God has an agenda, a purpose for the world

¹ "Discernment", Frank Rogers, Jr., in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 105.

and for each and every person who lives on the face of the earth.
Everything that happens in your life, or in my life, or in our life as believers together,
or in the life of the world beyond the church,
every event, every word spoken, every decision made
is somehow caught up in God's grand design, God's perfect purpose.

The church's business – and the calling of each individual Christian –
is to discern where God's Spirit is blowing,
then to get on board, hoist our sails, turn our rudder and head out toward the horizon.

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As we read this story in the book of Acts today
I asked you to pay attention to the processes followed by the early church
as they sought to discern God's leading for them in their new situation.
And what a new situation it was!
The church, until that point, was only a Jewish sect.
But Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had come to the conviction that the Spirit of God
was moving them to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles
and to welcome them into full communion with the Jewish Christian believers.
This was perhaps the moment when the church first began to realize
the universal nature of Christ's message of love and salvation.

The church sought to discern God's will on a very weighty matter.
But, putting aside for the moment the complex content of their issues,
let's look at the way they practiced spiritual discernment:

The writer of Acts begins by telling us that there was *no small dissention* between Paul and Barnabas
and these certain men who had come down from Judea,
members of the sect of the Pharisees,
over the issue at hand.

We begin the chapter with a church in conflict.
But – thankfully for us Presbyterians –
we see in this story that disagreement and dissention among believers
is no sign of God's abandonment.

It is the normal stuff of community life, the currency of discernment.

This disagreement then leads to a *discussion of the question among the apostles and elders*.
Paul and Barnabas arrive to make their case and *welcomed by the church, apostles and elders*
that is, the church shows hospitality to them and their message
even though not all of them would, in the end, agree with it.
Paul and Barnabas offer testimony about what God has been doing
and this is followed by a statement of conviction from some of the *believers*
that Paul and Barnabas are wrong about what God's will is.

It is important to note
that even those who disagree with Paul and Barnabas are referred to as "believers" –
their faith is not in question here, only their understanding of God's will.

Next *the apostles and elders met to consider this matter*,

and *after much debate*, Peter makes statement of conviction which supports Paul and Barnabas.
Then there is more *silent listening by the assembly* to hear testimony of Paul and Barnabas
about what God is up to.

Then James, the leader of the assembly, chimes in
with an interpretation of these current events in light of scripture.
James then announced that *he has reached a decision* about what should be done.
The decision of one person, however, is not enough;
even when that person is the designated leader of the Jerusalem church.
Still, it is *the apostles and the elders* – in other words, a community of spiritual leaders –
who decide the matter.

Then their decision receives *the consent of the whole church*,
that a group should be chosen to deliver a letter to the Gentile believers.
And in that letter we hear the church, with one voice, writes:
We have decided unanimously to choose and send these representatives with this letter...
For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to make this decision.

And listen to how the writer of Acts describes the outcome of this decision in the church:
The decision bears the fruit of
rejoicing, encouragement, strengthening, peace, and the further proclamation of the Word.

Now, admittedly, this account seems a little too perfect.
Anyone whose been involved in church leadership – or even just in church membership –
might wonder if there are actually some details of this occasion which have been left out:
what happened to the Pharisaic believers?
did they just submit to James?
was this decision really unanimous,
and does that mean true consensus or were the voices of some silenced?
We hear about the good fruit that was born in the Gentile church
but did this decision result in discord among the Jerusalem believers?

Most of these questions must remain unanswered – the text does not tell us these things.
But even admitting that this story may show us an ideal that is unattainable in the real world
it nonetheless serves as a model for us as we approach the practice of spiritual discernment.

First, as Christians we hold firmly to the belief that God not only exists
but is actively at work in the world around us all the time.
God is not like the clockmaker who makes the clock, winds it up,
then sits back and lets it run on its own.
God is moving, and loving, and blessing, and judging even now.

Secondly, we believe God's work and purposes can be discerned.
We believe that God's good plan for the world has been decisively revealed in Jesus Christ,
and that as we keep our eye on Christ,
we will be attuned to the things God is up to in the world.

Thirdly, we believe that to truly discern what God is up to in the world, we need each other.
Discernment can only be practiced in conversation with other discerning believers.
To practice spiritual discernment means, like the early believers,

we welcome the testimony of those with whom we may disagree
we understand disagreement as part of the process of discernment
not as a personal attack
we find the courage to speak our deepest convictions
we keep silence together and listen carefully to each other's testimony
we interpret our decisions in the light of scripture
we seek consensus, but when we cannot attain it,
we always respect the voice of the minority as possibly prophetic
and recognize the tension between minority and majority voices
as the creative presence of the Spirit in the assembly.

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Finally, in closing, a word about outcomes – or what we might call “success or failure”.
How do we know when we have discerned God's will correctly?

Throughout scripture, there are certain qualities of life –
whether we're talking about the life of an individual
or the life of a community –
there are certain qualities of life which are signs of the presence
of God's life-giving Spirit.

In the story of the assembly of believers in Acts
we are told that the result of the church's discernment was marked by
rejoicing, encouragement, strengthening, peace, and the further proclamation of the Word.
In the book of Galatians, we are told that we can recognize the presence and work of the Spirit
by the fruits that are born in the community and in the life of the individual believer:
*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
gentleness, and self-control.*

In the 16th century, one of the great practitioners of spiritual discernment,
Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits,
described the outcome of spiritual discernment
by contrasting evil spirits with good spirits:
“It is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety,
to afflict with sadness,
to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul.
It is characteristic of the good spirit, however,
to give courage and strength,
consolation, tears, inspirations, and peace.”²

When these life-giving, soul-nourishing fruits are present,
when the life of a community or an individual believer
is permeated with a deep sense of peace, regardless of the measurable result of a decision

² Quoted from “Discernment”, Frank Rogers, Jr., in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 109.

when the health of the process has been genuinely sought and respected
then we can be assured that in and through our prayerful seeking
the Holy Spirit of God has emerged and guided and blessed.

God's presence can never be nailed down, but always comes as a mysterious gift.

We may never achieve full certainty about God's will;

We are see in a mirror dimly, but one day we will see face to face.

Now we know only in part; then we will know fully,
even as we are fully known.

Until that day

we will continue to stumble

we will continue to be tempted down the wrong path

we will get lost from time to time, and have to turn around.

But God's gracious Spirit is always there, in every new moment

inviting us once again to continue our quest,

to pray, to listen, to pay attention to what God is up to in our lives

and so to live the life of blessed communion with our Savior

and his Holy Guiding Spirit.

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift.

Amen.