

Helping Others Discern: Christian Friendship

1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 15:4-5, 14-15

For about a month now, we have been considering how we as Christians discern the will of God.

When we are faced with choices in our lives that really matter, how do we perceive, how do we know, what God wants us to do?

We have seen in the Bible that Christian discernment always leads us toward involvement in the community of God's people. Christians discern God's will together, in community, because we need the guidance and correction and wisdom of others who are also seeking God's will.

Jesus does not call us to be spiritual Lone Rangers, like TV's Joan of Arcadia, figuring out what God is up to on our own, without any help of others. Jesus calls us, rather, into community, to walk *with others* on our journey of faith, and to seek the counsel of other Christians as we discern God's will for our lives.

So today, in this final sermon, we turn to the practical question “How can we help each other, as brothers and sisters in the Lord, to discern God's will for our lives?”

The way I'd like to approach the subject today is by considering what it means for us to be Christian Friends to one another.

What is Christian Friendship?

Too often, what we think of as Christian Friendship is less than what it could be, less than what it should be.

Christian Friends who are truly helpful to each other in discerning God's will must be more than simply friends who both happen to profess the Christian faith.

Christian Friends who are truly helpful to each other in discerning God's will must be friends for whom the Christian faith, and following Jesus, has become a topic of conversation.

Genuine Christian Friendship does not simply assume the faith of the other, but draws that faith out, brings it forth, nurtures it and helps it to grow.

Think for a moment about the friendship of the twelve disciples in the Gospels.
Can you imagine the Twelve following Jesus during the years of his ministry,
struggling to understand his teachings, and to heed his call to them,
but *without ever talking to each other about Jesus?*

Can you imagine if the Twelve disciples *never mentioned Jesus' name* to each other,
or if they never talked to one another about the *joy* of being with him
or the *challenge* of following in his footsteps?

Seems ludicrous, doesn't it?

Christian Friends - if they are truly Christian in their friendship to each other -
are friends who openly acknowledge, in their conversation, their common faith.
Christian Friends talk about the Lord they follow together.
Christian Friends talk about Jesus!

An example from marriage counseling might help make the point.
Most married couple who enjoy strong and healthy marriages,
have learned how to pay attention to their relationship
and talk about their relationship almost as if it is a separate entity,
apart from themselves.
They have learned to attend to the growth and nurture of the relationship,
as a third thing from either of the two individuals.

In a similar way, the Christian who is growing in faith
has learned to attend to his or her relationship with God.
And Christian Friends
are those who help each other pay attention to their relationship with God.

So, in addition to enjoying all the usual, human benefits of friendship,
Christian Friends have a common goal:
To help each other grow more mature in their relationship with God.
Or, to say it another way,
To help each other know and follow Jesus Christ.
Or, yet again,
To help each other remain open to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

In Christian Friendship, these goals are not assumed,
they are explicit, they are talked about, they are front and center.

(Now you may object: Get real!

By this definition, there are very few real Christian friendships,
and any of us who claim to be Christian friends, are really just hypocrites.

Well, maybe so.

But we need to hold up the ideal of Christian friendship,
lest we forget how far we have slipped away from genuine biblical discipleship
and genuine Christian community.

Unfortunately, it is true, too many of us find this kind of focused Christian relationship
only by going to a pastor, or a spiritual director.

But there are not enough pastors or spiritual directors to provide the spiritual guidance
that is needed by the whole body of Christ.

And God help us, if only those with a seminary education are considered competent
to be Christian Friends and fellow discerners of God's will.)

So then,

if Christian Friends are friends who actually talk to each other about following Jesus,
how do Christian Friends help each other discern?

Certainly, we encounter opportunities for this all the time in our friendships:

Your friend is out of work and wonders whether it's time to re-train for a new job.

Your friend tells you about the pain in her marriage, and wonders what she should do.

Your friend agonizes over his family's excruciating choice for their loved one:
to begin life support, or to let nature take its course?

Your friend at school wonders what to do after graduation.

Or whether to break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

How, as Christian friends, do we help each other discern?

Perhaps the first thing to say is that

our role is NOT simply to advise our friend on a course of action;
it is not simply to say what *we* think they should do.

There are times for that, I guess, in extreme moments:

I ask you whether I should jump off this bridge and end my life,
you should probably urge me not to do it.

But in most cases,

the role of the Christian Friend is *to help the other attend to God's voice*
and to *discern Christ's leading* in the matter.

The role of the Christian Friend is to recognize that

the content of the choice (though it may be very important)

is not the central matter.

Of greater significance is the friend's relationship with God in Jesus Christ,
and whether the making of this choice will be an occasion
for the friend to grow in his or her relationship with God,
to draw closer to God,
to become a more mature follower of Jesus Christ.

Consider Eli and Samuel in our Old Testament reading.

Granted, Eli was a bit more than just a friend to Samuel,
he was more like a mentor to an apprentice.

It may be that many of our Christian Friendships are this way
when one friend has been traveling longer than the other on the journey of faith.

So consider how Eli responded to Samuel

once he recognized that it was the Lord who was calling Samuel's name.

He did not jump to a conclusion about what the Lord was telling Samuel.

He did not call him a lunatic, and refer him for evaluation
at the Shiloh Psychiatric Institute.

The scripture says that

Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy.

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down;

and if he calls you, you shall say,

'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' ”

Eli offered guidance to Samuel that helped him become open to hearing the Lord.

Eli helped Samuel attend to the voice of God.

To offer this guidance, Eli had to listen carefully to what Samuel was telling him.

He had to read between the lines; he had to perceive what was underneath the content
of Samuel's situation, Samuel's experience.

And even before he could do that,

Eli had to believe that the Lord might actually have something to say to Samuel.

This is what Christian Friends do for one another,

and it doesn't take any special degree or certificate or ordination to do this.

Christian Friends, first of all,

believe that the Lord might actually have something to say to them.

Then they help one another listen to the Lord,

and pay attention to their relationship with God.

In the words of Jesus, in the Gospel of John,
Christian Friends help each other “abide in Christ”
and to see and experience “Christ abiding in them.”
Christian Friends turn each other toward Christ,
who no longer calls us servants, but friends,
and makes known to us everything he has heard from his Father.

This kind of friendship may sound very vague and mysterious,
but to begin is really very basic and simple.
To begin this kind of friendship,
really just has to do with asking the right questions.

At some point in the conversation between Christian Friends,
one ought to ask the other questions like this
(and for those of you who take notes, even for those who don't usually,
these questions are worth writing down and keeping):

Where do you see signs of Christ's presence in this experience?
Or, In this situation, what does God's grace look like for you?
Or, What faith issues seem most pressing to you right now?
Or, What feelings are you having about this,
and do you think your feelings are from God?
Are they feelings of peace? Or feelings of turmoil?
Feelings of consolation and comfort? Or of desolation and pain?
How are you praying (or *are* you praying) about this situation?
What are you praying for?

Do you see how this is Eli-type guidance?
These are questions that help your friend attend to the voice of God in his life, or her life.
You are not telling your friend what you think is right or wrong,
though certainly that may be appropriate, even crucial, sometimes!
But more than advice, what your Christian Friend needs from you,
is a reflection of Christ, a reflection of Christ who calls us friends,
who makes known to us everything he has heard from the Father.
What your Christian Friend needs from you is to be led closer to this Christ.

Well, there is much more that we could say.

We could continue this series on discernment until next Lent I suppose,
but perhaps it is time to give it a rest.

But, my Christian Friends, you will be in my prayers.

First, that you will - in your hearts - truly want to discern and to do God's will.

Then, that you will grow, more and more, in a mature knowledge of your Lord,
and in your ability to recognize God's voice.

And finally, that you will find here in this congregation,

a genuine *Christian* community, and truly *Christian* Friendships,

that will lead you closer to Christ, to be attentive to his voice,

and open to his amazing grace

which is at work in *every* circumstance of our lives.