

God's Vision, Our Response:

The Art of Discernment

1 Samuel 3:1-10 Mark 1:14-20 Proverbs 29:18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I think I'll start this sermon with its conclusion: God knows each one of us intimately, and God calls each of us, daily, to follow and serve. And it is up to you and me to discern that call, and then decide how we will respond.

The biblical readings for this Sunday, from both the Old and New Testaments, include the themes of God's knowing and calling. Both also include a response by those being called. These are important and recurring biblical themes. Of question, however, is how do we actually discern God's call in our personal and congregational life? And how specific is that call anyway? Could it simply be as broad as: We are called to love God, and love our neighbor as ourselves?

Let's explore this. In my experience, it is often difficult for anyone to distinguish what we perceive as God's voice (or what I often refer to as the promptings of the Holy Spirit within) from all the other voices clamoring for attention in our heads and hearts. For instance, in today's Old Testament Reading the young boy Samuel needed help discerning God's call. He kept running into Eli's room thinking it was his elderly priest mentor, Eli, who was calling out his name. It took Eli's wisdom of the ways of God to discern that what Samuel was experiencing was actually God's call to ministry and service.

I love this element of the story. For **how often in our own lives do we find that it is through the help and wisdom of someone else that we are aided in perceiving our own direction in life?** I encourage you to reflect upon who have been the 'Eli's' in your life. There have been several in mine.

This passage from the book of 1 Samuel, like all of the 'call stories' in the Bible, also begs the question: **How do you listen for and hear God's voice?** A central belief in traditional Protestant Christianity is that **each and every one of us is called by God**, not just clergy. **This is part of our understanding of the meaning of our own Baptism.** And that's why on the back of the worship bulletin each Sunday we list the ministers as, "All the members of the church." That's not a mistake. I may be the pastor, but **each and every one of us is a minister. Each of us is called by God to follow and serve.**

Discernment may be tricky, however. I used to believe that God had an exact blueprint for my life, constructed before I was even born, and it was my job in life to figure it all out. I don't believe anymore that that's how God operates. For that leads to nothing but constant consternation, anxiety, and judgmental questioning of whether or not we've taken the 'right' narrow path in life. Instead, **what if the 'right' path in life is much broader and simply means following the ways and teachings of Jesus, which brings us back to how we live life in such a way that we enact our love for God, our neighbor, and ourselves.**

I now believe in a God that interacts with humankind primarily in ways that draw us together into true community; into right, mutual relationships; into acts of love and compassion; into paths of peace, hope, justice and joy. Paul Tillich described this in terms such as connecting with the Ground of All Being, and that which is our Ultimate Concern. Celtic spirituality describes this as connection with the Sacred Presence that dwells with and within all things in creation.

That each of us is called, however, is undeniable. Martin Luther, the great Reformer in the 1500's, referred to God's call as "the hound from heaven that keeps chasing you." (Not my favorite image of God, but if it fits...) Yet, trying to describe precisely just how God calls us varies from person to person, and from church to church – based primarily on one's theological understanding of the nature and character of God. I've always contended that **God speaks to us in the way that each person and each congregation can hear and understand**. So, that may be in different ways for different people and different churches, and it may even change throughout one's own journey of faith, as it has in mine.

There are a few things, however, that may help us to discern God's vision and call to discipleship within this congregation. As far as volunteering for church work is concerned, I would say that **God is calling you (and us together as a well as this congregation as a whole) to the particular type of service that excites you the most; the type of ministry you feel most passionate about; the projects or areas of ministry that energize you and fill you with vitality, not drain you**. God is calling you and me to take stock of our gifts and talents and resources and to listen for God's voice – that inner prompting – as well as to the invitations of other people. I can tell you, we, as a congregation, need what you have to contribute to our life, ministry and mission together. **But it's up to you and I, like the prophets and disciples of old, to decide how to respond. How will you answer the call? How will this congregation?**

Christianity, unfortunately, has a spotty record on this. Too many Christians, especially in the Bible Belt, use their understanding of God and the Bible to beat others over the head with the gospel, especially the marginalized, the ones who society prefers to ignore, and those not like themselves – particularly when it comes to religion and politics. Where's the good news in that? Today we are surrounded by hatred, bigotry, racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, prejudice, ignorance, and fear – and a good bit of it still supported and all but encouraged by certain narrow religious beliefs. This should not be the case. And we wonder why so many people are turning away from organized religion today. Instead, **we must be willing to respond to God's call to bring the good news of the gospel to nourish, uplift, encourage and support others, including each other here in this community of faith**. Are we willing to see Christ in the face of those whom others say aren't worth the bother? Yet, are we also willing to see Christ in the face of those who actually believe others aren't worth the bother?

Part of our response to God's call as a congregation is to discern God's vision for our particular ministry together as a community of faith in this time and place. The author of the Old Testament proverb declared: **"Where there is no vision, the people perish"** (Proverbs 29:18). And that may indeed be occurring in congregations without a clear vision. The wizard, Gandalf, in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy puts it this way when he tells the hobbit Frodo, "All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given you." (I've been waiting years to use that quote!)

Conservative pollster George Barna defines "vision" as "the clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to God's chosen servants based upon an accurate understanding of God, self, and circumstances." I agree. For our own John Calvin began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) with the sentence, "True wisdom consists in two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves." Merriam-Webster defines a "calling" as, "a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action, especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence."

When it comes to listening for God's guidance, and seeking God's vision for the church, **Presbyterians have a long-standing tradition of believing that God speaks primarily to a community of faith, and not just to select individuals. Discernment, then, is best done with a group of persons dedicated to trying to listen to where God is leading.** In the Presbyterian form of church government, our polity, that task is **a primary responsibility of our congregation's Session**, comprised of the Ruling Elders elected by you, the congregation, along with the pastor. Our annual **Session Retreat** is this coming Saturday, when we will gather at Camp Loughridge with an outside consultant to help us explore and discern overarching goals for this congregation over the next couple of years. Please, please keep us in your prayers as we discern and fellowship together.

Discernment, however, involves more than just the process of visioning itself. It may be a fun, intellectually stimulating, and an orderly process done with interesting people in a single weekend, but that is not enough. **It is in the incremental steps, the "what we will do next to get there," that makes a vision transformational.** And that requires patience. Patience on behalf of the leadership team and on behalf of the congregation. It's not about speed, it's about progress, however long it takes, to **live into God's vision for our community of faith.** On this topic, Tim Ehrich, a blogger for progressivechristianity.org writes in an article posted on December 15, 2014, entitled "Visioning Isn't Enough":

The tendency in churches is to define the grand vision, adopt an orderly top-down approach for achieving it, and set a timetable. Leaders often think they have done their work with the initiating vision, the brochures and projects developed to support it, and parceling out duties. Meanwhile, they move on to other vision-setting.

Problem is, most organizations can't do more than one major thing at a time, and they don't respond well to pre-defined terms, timetables and outcomes. People need to engage with ideas, participate in planning actions, exercise their own creativity, be heard, and be allowed to resist.

Doing good things at the highest level usually leads only to frustration when incremental steps are ignored and when leaders become impatient.

The Session, of which I include myself, will take this understanding with us into our Retreat in a few days.

Again, I encourage each of you, therefore, to **join one of our Session's ministry teams**, which themselves may be reconfigured this Saturday, so that you can part of both the visioning and implementation of our goals as a congregation. Notice that on the worship bulletin insert each Sunday you can find the **College Hill Mission Statement**.

This is something we look at every year at the Session Retreat, as we will this Saturday. It includes three points:

- **Build an inclusive community of faith.**
- **Receive and openly share the love of God.**
- **Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.**

This vision has served us well in helping us to declare who we are and what we hope to do as a community of faith. Our hope, now, is to **refocus how we organize as a Session, and work together toward fulfilling this mission in 2018 and beyond.**

Jesus called disciples with the simple phrase, "Follow me." We are called to do the same. It's all about God's vision and our response.

Amen.