

Listening to God

8 Bible Discussions for Discernment

"Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

Mark 10:49

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

Psalms 85:8

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FORWARD

As religious people, we wonder how to respond to the lives God has given us. What did God give me the gift of life for? What does God want from my life? God gives us everything to create our lives, including a choice of creating our own lives or *co-creating* our lives with God.

This creative choice God gives is like . . . a friend in San Francisco loaning me her new sports car filled with gas. I ask, "Where may I take it?" And she says, "Take it wherever you like. On this beautiful day you might especially like a trip up to Muir Woods and Napa Valley or down to Pacific Grove and Cambria. Just bring it back whenever you're through with it." And I ask my friend, "But don't you want to join me?" And she says, "Sure, I'd love to come along if you want me too. But you drive." Within certain constraints, such as the speed limit, you can take this borrowed sports car of your life *where you want to go*; you can go even farther if you take God with you. And God still lets you drive.

This gift of human creativity tells us much about our relationship with God. Above all, it tells us about the incredible love our Lord has for us. Our Creator makes each of us unique and gives us each special personalities, skills, abilities, perspectives, circumstances, experiences, and desires of the heart. God creates each of us with wonderful possibilities. It is like God casts sparkling fairy dust with thousands of opportunities onto the paths in front of us. We don't even see many of our opportunities, but God is pleased when we see some and take advantage of them. Our Lord gives each of us significant freedom to choose what we'll do with our lives.

God also creates each of us incomplete. Despite the many gifts and opportunities each of us is given, each of us is limited. No individual has all of the gifts that we need in community. We are made to need one another. And to need God. And God doesn't leave us alone. God walks with us if we ask. God supports us in co-creating our lives, giving us both the material and the power. And the greatest joy in creating our lives is in doing this as closely *with God* as possible. So religious people also ask, how do we journey through our lives with God?

When we recognize the power of creation that God gives each of us, our journey is not an oppressing responsibility but an adventure. This journey offers the joy of artistry, and love, and companionship. And it's a gift we best respond to by choosing both to create new life and to shape the world according to God's purposes.

That means trying to live our lives with:

- an *awareness* of God's presence in them;
- a *trust* that God will take us where God wants us to go but will also give us choices of how we wish to follow;

- a *reliance* on God that allows us to be less concerned about our material well being and more concerned about what we will create in relationship with God;
- an *effort* to show forth what God is doing in our lives; and
- an *acceptance* of the importance of other people in our lives, especially of a church community in helping us to *walk with God*.

A poem by Ranier Maria Rilke describes our journey with God:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Give me clothing.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.¹

The first response God asks from our lives is the gift that we ourselves ask of our lovers and our children: "Give me your hand."

¹ "Gott spricht zu jedem.../God speaks to each of us..." from *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, by Ranier Maria Rilke, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy copyright © 1996 by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy. Used by permission of Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. For online information about other Penguin Group (USA) books and authors, see Internet website at: <http://www.penguin.com>.

ONE

WHAT ARE WE LISTENING FOR?

Prayer: My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.² Amen.

Opening Questions: How confident are you about what God really wants for your life? How have you tried to figure this out?

Introduction

There is a person who knows who you are and what you are meant to be and to do. That person made you and made you for some purposes. Because your Creator made you, God knows you better than you know yourself. And God has purposes for you. God calls you to answer those purposes in your unique way. Your true identity is what God made you for. It is what God is calling you to, your vocation.

Who is God calling you to be? And how are you going to respond to that call? Answering these questions is important because you may only know your true identity by knowing whom you are called by God to be and what you are called by God to do. God's calling to you to be will be consistent with who God made you to be. Your vocation is the same thing as your most genuine self. A discernment process is directly related to issues of identity and involves becoming whom God calls you to be.

Let's consider how Jesus understood and acted upon his vocation. In the first Chapter of Mark, we encounter Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God through teaching, driving out demons, and healing, and we encounter his struggles between all there is to do, time for prayer, and vocational focus.

Scripture Reflection: Mark 1:30-45

Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (30-31)

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who

² Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. (32-34)

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." (35-37)

He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. (38-39)

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." (40)

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. (41-42)

After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter. (43-45)

Discussion Questions

1. This chapter is full of miraculous healings. These miracles point to who Jesus is. Do you watch for signs, wonders or miracles to suggest to you who you are or what God wants from you?
2. What happens after Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law? Does this happen in other Bible accounts (see, e.g., Mark 10:46-52 and John 9)? Why?
3. Is being "healed" an important step to serving God? What would being healed be like? What types of healing does Jesus do? What do people need to be healed from?
4. Why does Jesus not permit the demons to speak?
5. Why does Jesus leave?
6. How would Jesus (or God) feel when he hears, "Everyone is searching for you"? Why? (See, e.g., Deuteronomy 4:29: "From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul." And Jeremiah 29:13: "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart." And Acts 17: 26-27: "From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of

the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him--though indeed he is not far from each one of us.”)

7. In the King James version, Jesus says “Therefore came I forth.” What does Jesus say he came for? What is the message Jesus is proclaiming? (See, e.g., Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14; Luke 8:1; Luke 10:9; Matthew 10:7.) What does this message have to do with listening to God?
8. What must the disciples have felt when Jesus says, I’m going on to preach rather than meeting the needs for healing of all these people? Were they beginning to wonder whether he cared?
9. What would happen to Jesus’ mission if Jesus let human needs alone determine his call? Can human desires to serve others prevent us from truly responding to God’s call?
10. Does Jesus care? How does he treat the sick man?
11. Jesus has both a clear sense of what he is called to do and a depth and richness of compassion. Where do these senses of calling and compassion come from? How does Jesus balance them?
12. How can we discover what we are being called to do so that we can respond with genuine generosity and compassion and care for the world?
13. Are there times when you’ve had a real sense of what God wants for your life? What was that like?
14. Are there ways you particularly like to listen to God?
15. What types of questions do you ask God? What is it OK to ask God?
16. Think of something that it would be helpful if God let you know. Can you ask God about this?
17. Do you feel that you have a unique relationship with God – a journey in which you participate with God in the creation of your life and identity?
18. Do you regularly reflect on the opportunities and choices you have in your life and listen for God’s calling in them?
19. Are there important aspects of your life that you simply allow to happen as they may? What might be different if you took charge of them and asked for God’s help?

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

“If we believe in God and understand God in a certain way, that understanding shapes our understandings of ourselves, our lives and our responsibilities. If we truly believe in God, we seek to live in relationship with God. Personal truth is determined by God’s purposes for us and our choice to follow those purposes. This is a spiritual journey, and through that journey comes the discovery of meaning. The journey is different for each of us, even though we generally understand its desire and direction. Each person finds spirituality in a different way, and each person creates his or her own life through action or inaction. True self discovery and creation can only be accomplished on a spiritual path through choice and experience which creates and reveals meaning and purpose. The spiritual journey is a struggle, and it is the most meaningful and worthwhile struggle we can have.”³

“The quest to find and do the will of God. . . appears to be motivated by a simple need for direction. We want some indication that we are doing the right thing with our lives, and we are more comfortable having a set of ‘marching orders,’ a to-do list. . . . [But] it becomes clear that it is not just direction we are looking for (as much as we need it). We are attempting – intuitively perhaps – to address a far more subtle constellation of needs that are even more basic to us as spiritual beings: the need to have a sense of belonging; the need for the courage and conviction that come from living with purpose; and the need to have the oneness with God that the ancient Hebrews called *shalom*.”⁴

"My chief care should not be to find pleasure or success, health or life or money or rest or even things like virtue and wisdom – still less their opposites, pain, failure, sickness, death. But in all that happens, my one desire and my one joy should be to know: ‘Here is the thing that God has willed for me. In this His love is found, and in accepting this I can give back His love to Him and give myself with it to Him. For in giving myself I shall find Him and He is life everlasting.’ By consenting to His will with joy and doing it with gladness I have His love in my heart, because my will is now the same as His love and I am on the way to becoming what He is, Who is Love. And by accepting all things from Him I receive His joy into my soul, not because things are what they are but because God is Who He is, and His love has willed my joy in them all.”⁵

“While call requires response and obedience, we will not be given a road map. Our response to call is not mechanical application. Rather, call requires that we take responsibility. We will not necessarily be called to come up with a correct answer, as in a crossword puzzle, but something freer and more creative. We are given building blocks to see what can be done with them, using for the task all of our intelligence,

³ James J. Gettel, God’s Love, Human Freedom and Christian Faith (Chalice Press, 2002), 7-8.

⁴ Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 19-20.

⁵ Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation (New Directions, 1972), pp 17-18, Chapter 3, “Seeds of Contemplation”

creativity, sensitivity, and love. Our critical faculties are required; we must use them the best way we can, constructively and with love.”⁶

⁶ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 14.

TWO WHO ARE WE LISTENING TO?

Prayer

Lord, take me where you want me to go;
Let me meet who you want me to meet;
Tell me what you want me to say;
And keep me out of your way.⁷

Opening Question: What is the God you pray to like? Has your image of God changed through your life?

Introduction

In the last reading, we met Jesus responding to his vocation by serving his Father and serving others (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27) with both clarity and compassion. He was able to follow God's calling because he recognized God's voice. He was able to distinguish that voice from all of the other voices around him.

With many voices around us, the conversation we hear depends on whom we are listening to. And how we hear the conversation depends to some extent on what we expect to hear. A person is not well-prepared to listen to God if he or she is focused on his or her own idea of God. To think of God in a singular way is to make God too small and to risk missing God by placing one's own expectations in place of the greater reality. No idea of God is God, and in listening we need to renounce our preconceptions of God and experience God's presence.⁸

God is extra-ordinary. In the Old Testament stories, God fashioned the world, but in some sense remained outside it. Personal experiences of God required God to manifest God's presence in the world in a form that was not God's usual or full nature. An ark. A burning bush. Angels. God's name is "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE" (Exodus 3:14). This name uses the verb "to be" not once, but twice. God is a person ("I") who is a pure act, a spontaneous willing, a self creator, an acting subject rather than an object. By God's name, God is living, willing, personal and uncircumscribable. Every experience of God is an experience of spontaneity, of action, of someone who is not a noun. God is the fashioner, the renewer, the orderer and the

⁷ "Mychal's Prayer" was composed by Fr. Mychal Judge, a fire department chaplain, and worn in the helmets of New York firefighters. Fr. Judge died responding to the 9/11 World Trade Center attack with New York firefighters. The day before his death, he said at a firehouse re-dedication: "Good days, bad days, but never a boring day on this job. You do what God has called you to do. You show up, you put one foot in front of the other, and you do your job, which is a mystery and a surprise. You have no idea, when you get in that rig, what God is calling you to. But he needs you . . . so keep going. Keep supporting each other. Be kind to each other. Love each other. Work together. You love the job. We all do. What a blessing that is." www.saintmychal.com

⁸ James J. Gettel, God's Love, Human Freedom and Christian Faith (Chalice Press, 2002), 87-88.

performer of all things (Wisdom 7:22-8:1). God is immaterial (nonphysical) and transcendent.⁹

The New Testament adds to a Trinitarian description of God. We experience the love of God in the creation of ourselves and our world by the Father (Transcendent, God above us), in the redeeming love of Jesus who saves us (Personal, God with us), and in the energy available through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit (Immanent, God in us). We may need to draw closer in love to these different persons of One God through different faculties and experiences – with our heads (God above us), our hands (God with us), and our hearts (God in us). Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30 from Deuteronomy 6:5).

When we consider the different ways that we experience God in our lives and community and the fullness and balance in those experiences, we realize that we best respond to God’s love with our whole being: through reflection, action and emotion. Each person has a different balance and emphasis and each of us may deepen our relationships with God in each area.¹⁰ Exclusive focus on a single approach may take us out of close, balanced relationship with God: rationalism (head), activism (hands), or emotionalism (heart) can lead us away from God. Each individual has a different balance of these responses to God and so people may need to move in different directions to grow in relationship with God (more reflection, more action, more emotion). Holistic (or holy) growth experiences involve heads, hands and heart.

Scripture Reflection: Luke 15

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." (1-2)

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (3-7)

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the

⁹ James J. Gettel, *God's Love, Human Freedom and Christian Faith* (Chalice Press, 2002), 18.

¹⁰ Christian Schwarz, *Color Your World With Natural Church Development* (2005). Schwarz introduced these concepts in *The Threefold Art of Experiencing God: The Liberating Power of a Trinitarian Faith* (1999).

coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (8-10)

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. (11-12)

"A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. (13-16)

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' (17-19)

"So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. (20-24)

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' (25-30)

"Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (31-32)

Discussion Questions

1. Why are the Pharisees' grumbling about Jesus? Why do they see him as unholy?
2. Jesus tells three stories (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son) in response to the Pharisees' grumbling. What do the stories have in common?

3. Why does the younger son want to leave? How would people hearing this in Jesus' time interpret his reasons for leaving?
4. How does the father treat the younger son when he wants to leave?
5. How does the younger son live on his own?
6. Why does the younger son return home?
7. What does the younger son expect upon his return home? What is his plan?
8. How does the father receive the younger son?
9. How is the father's welcome like the Christian love described in Romans 5:8 ("God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.") and I John 4:10 ("In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.")?
10. How does the older son feel about this? Why?
11. Have you ever acted like the younger son, the older son or the father?
12. Who is God in the parable of the prodigal son? How is he described?
13. Do we sometimes think of God more like the elder brother? How?
14. What is Jesus saying about God in each parable?
15. Jesus uses an analogy of God as the good shepherd. How is the good shepherd described in Isaiah 40:11, Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 3:15, John 10 and 1 Peter 5:1-2?
16. Do we listen to God differently if we think of God as:
 - Savior?
 - Redeemer?
 - Lord?
 - Father?
 - King?
 - Son?
 - Holy Spirit?
 - Judge?
 - Shepherd?
 - Controller of the Universe?
17. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30 from Deuteronomy 6:5). Do you tend to experience God more with your head (thinking), hands (acting), or heart (emotions)? Have you had different emphases at different times in your life?

18. How we might approach God differently if we pray to Father, Son or Holy Spirit?
19. What is your favorite Bible story and what does it tell you about God?
20. Would you see God differently if you read the Bible as God's love letter to you?
21. Where have you experienced God this week?
22. How might a restricted view of God limit your ability to listen?
23. How might you broaden your abilities to listen more fully to God?

Topical Discussion: Differing Understandings of Authority

Every church has a structure of authority, a way of deciding what is authoritative for Christian belief and practice. For example, some Free Churches regard the Bible as the only source of authority. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope can (in some carefully proscribed circumstances) speak infallible truth, which is binding on all Roman Catholics. Anglican churches believe that scripture, tradition (historic interpretations revealed in what the church has done) and reason are all necessary for a faithful, lively and discerning faith community. To this, Methodists would add the "experience of the people of God," which might actually be closer to pre-Enlightenment Anglican thinking, when reason would have included more of human intuition and experience (rather than just logic and scientific thought). Charismatics make the specific experiences of gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, a primary test of what counts as authoritative.¹¹

The authorities and weighting that people accept affects their discernment. Most Christians agree that the Bible is fundamental for our images of God, the means by which we come to know the Good News of Jesus Christ and from which we learn stories about God's engagement in human history. Others also believe that in order to understand scripture, we need reason (a mind that can read and think) and tradition (an awareness of what previous generations thought it meant). Fewer Christians accept that the experience of Christians living today – especially women, Christians in the Third World and those living under oppressive regimes – have things to teach us about God that no other source can.

The weighting of authorities often depends on whether we believe that our knowledge is incomplete and developing and whether we think that issues and dilemmas that challenge the faithful Christian today are fully dealt with in the scriptures. Gregory of Nyssa (340-395 AD) wrote that "human language can no more contain the fullness of God than the palm of a human hand can contain the fullness of the sea." But, if we don't possess the whole truth, and are moving towards it, we must consider that our own positions could be wrong, that our own particular weighting of these four sources

¹¹ For a more complete summary of responses to different sources of authority in different Christian denominations, see the Appendix in Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olson, Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church, (Upper Room, 1997), 126-131.

could be wrong, or that as the church learns more about God, old positions need to give way to new insights.

1. Which sources of authority do you trust in discerning God's will?
2. Is the way you understand and experience God based on whether you trust different sources of authority, such as scripture, tradition reason and experience?
3. What does Peter mean when he writes, in II Peter 1:20, "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God?"
4. Do you use moral codes (i.e., the Ten Commandments) for guidance in your life? How do you apply them?

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

"Discernment is the task or process of distinguishing the spirit or presence of God at work in the world from other, competing spirits in an effort to determine where the spirit of God may be moving. This is a very different task from the one we typically describe as discernment. Discernment is – by definition – theological, ethical, and critical. It forces us to think about our understanding of God and the ways in which we see God at work in the world. It compels us to make decisions about the moral implications of our lives and the lives of others. And it requires a critical capacity to navigate our lives – individual and collective – guided by the light that our spiritual traditions provide."¹²

"To seek the will of God is to seek a wedding of heart, mind, and soul – the reintegration of lives lived out in a society that promotes disintegration. Heart, mind and soul are those enduring words that ancient people used to describe our innermost passions and motivations, our capacity for relationships and the wellspring of our being."¹³

"Discernment does not imply fully comprehending God's will, but rather it raises the question, What is the next step God wants me to take?"¹⁴

¹² Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 9.

¹³ Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 21.

¹⁴ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 25-26.

THREE LISTENING FOR THE VOICE OF GOD

Prayer: Almighty and everliving God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with those who take counsel from you for renewal and an understanding of your mission. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁵

Opening Question: Have you heard God's voice in unexpected places?

Introduction

In the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, Jesus reminds us that we have a loving Father who wants us to be with Him so that He may share his love with us and save us. God delights in our being with Him. And we are most with God (and worship Him) when we are paying attention to Him and his love for us.

Listening to God transforms us. II Peter 1:16-21 says, "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. . . You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The lesson Peter learned from the transfiguration, and passed on, is to be attentive until you have this light in your heart! The kingdom of God has come so near that it may rise in our own hearts! Jesus is alive and present with us. Am I listening to him?

The story of the transfiguration reminds us that we need to reorient ourselves to listen and respond to God. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:2-9). Listen to him! Even when God's revelation is in dazzling brightness and a voice from a cloud, God has to remind us to pay attention. God is always with us, but we often miss God. Instead we get caught up in our own concerns. God tells Peter simply to listen to Jesus. Don't be worrying and thinking ahead; listen! How do we pay attention then or when God is more gentle – quiet or clouded as in 1 Kings 19 – when God is present in the sound of sheer silence or a still, small voice?

Scripture Reflection: I Kings 19:9-18

At [Horeb the mount of God, Elijah] came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (9-10)

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and

¹⁵ Based on a prayer from The Book of Common Prayer, page 818.

breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. (11-13a)

Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. (13a-16)

Discussion Questions

1. Elijah knew that he was the Lord's servant, but he feared for his life and he was hiding in a cave in despair. Israel had forsaken God's covenant, demolished the Lord's altars and killed the prophets; now they were after Elijah to kill him. When God told Elijah to prepare to listen, what does Elijah expect to hear?
2. As Elijah stood and paid careful attention, where was God present?
3. Why is God's message startling to Elijah?
4. Where is God present to Elijah?
5. What is God like in this reading?
6. When has God spoken to people in the Bible?
7. Have you tried to listen for God's voice in your life? What happened?
8. What are ways God communicates to you (nature, music, dreams, emotions, liturgy, scripture, communion, community, prayer, study)?
9. What does silence have to do with hearing God?
10. What other voices in our lives drown out God's voice?
11. Have events in your life led you to hear or experience God?
12. Are you more likely to listen for God when you're happy or troubled or in between?
13. Do you ever put yourself into situations to confront God, to meet God face to face?

14. What stories/images in Scripture do you recall of God/Jesus confronting human beings face to face? Are these confrontations what you might expect?
15. How do the ways we perceive God keep us from hearing God's voice?
16. How do we recognize and listen to the voice of God?
17. How does God provide guidance to us?
18. What are the right places to listen for God?
19. Does God always answer?
20. What are some challenges you have with listening to God?
21. What are some ways to open ourselves to God's presence?
22. Why do you think discernment is generally so uncertain and incomplete?
23. Why don't some of our choices work out?

Topical Discussion: Empathic Listening

*Steven Covey, the author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*, describes the challenge of listening to understand another person this way:*

The problem is that most of us tend to get into a very efficient state of mind. We have our own schedule. We know the things we want to accomplish. We think it through in our mind. We're under a lot of pressure. There are all kinds of things on our platter. We've got all these balls in the air we're trying to juggle. And it's tough. And that's the way modern life is. It's a rushing world. It's changing. It's chaotic. It's turbulent.

Well what do you do to handle that? You have to kind of figure it out and then be efficient and schedule yourself. And then carry out your schedule. The problem is that when you get into an efficient state of mind, you try to be efficient in your listening as well and you don't really take time to listen to understand, to listen empathically. *See, empathic listening basically means you listen within the other's frame of reference. You listen within their world.* Well look, if I'm into efficiency, how can I want to really open up to your world? Your world's so different from my world and I don't know what your world is going to show me. I don't know how open it is. I don't know how many dimensions, how many variables it has. I can't enter your world. I lose my efficiency altogether and that disturbs and imbalances almost everything else in my life. I don't want to be empathic! That's too much risk! I get too involved. I've got too many things going. I must be efficient.

So I learn to adopt certain techniques. I pretend to listen but I am still basically preparing my response. Why? I'm efficient. I give the impression I'm listening. I

look at you in the eye. I turn my head a little. I smile. I nod. I do other things to show I'm listening but I'm not really. Why? I can't risk it. I'm too vulnerable. Not just emotionally vulnerable because I'm unaware of what might happen and that I might have to change, but I'm also vulnerable in terms of my whole life. I'm not efficient any longer. I can't accomplish as much. . . .

I know for myself, if I were to fault me at the highest point, it would be . . . on trying to be efficient with [others]. I've learned this. . . *You have to get into a whole different frame of mind and then attach yourself to the higher values of really what's important.* . . . What is important? It's relationships!"¹⁶

1. Do you agree with this comment?
2. What are some differences between God's world and ours? How do we listen within God's world rather than our own?

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

"Every true call is a call to obey God; indeed, the word *obedience* derives from the Latin *audire*, which means "to listen" . . . If we love God, we want to live in harmony with God – we want to hear what God has to say, and we want to act on what we hear. St Paul refers to this as 'obedient from the heart' (Rom. 6:17)"¹⁷

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. 'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ." (I Corinthians 2:9-16)

¹⁶ Steven Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families* audiobook (Covey, 2001).

¹⁷ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 14.

FOUR SPENDING TIME WITH GOD

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us love you and spend times in our lives with you. Change our ways of life so that we may become disciples who live with you. Help us live our lives in an ever-greater awareness of you. Make our hearts and minds ready to receive you and to be filled with your love, comfort and strength. Help us listen carefully and give you time and attention. Turn our focus from our own concerns to yours, and strengthen our faith. Help us turn away from distorted worldviews to focus on your reality and your presence in our lives. Restore and refresh us when we turn to you. Help us abide in you. Amen.

Opening Question: What is your favorite way to spend time with God?

Introduction

In the last two discussions, we recognized that God delights in being with each of us and desires that we each pay attention to our personal relationship with God. God is always with us but we do not always act as if we are in relationship with God. We are often distracted from God by the day-to-day activities of our lives. As in any personal relationship, we need to spend time together for the relationship to grow. We are tempted to think we will meet God in the future, but we need to make God a part of our lives right now. If we are to live in relationship with God, we need to spend time with God.

The walk of faith is more than “doing one’s duty,” belonging to a particular group, performing a certain rule or ceremony, or following a particular rule, doctrine or moral code. Each of us needs to spend time with God for our lives to be centered in the right place, for us to live out of a relationship with God. We need to spend time with God because God wants to spend time with us, because we need to have God present in our lives, and because having God present in our lives improves our ability to love others. When we spend time with God, these experiences shape our lives and take us down paths where we find true meanings and purposes.

We embark on a spiritual path by acknowledging the need we have for God in our lives and acting from that awareness toward a stronger relationship with God. With a longing to know God better and to see God’s grace more fully established in our lives, we can ask for a better awareness of God with us (Matthew 7:7-8). God causes our spiritual growth; but we may plant, feed and water (I Corinthians 3:6) to create the conditions for spiritual growth. Each of us may develop spiritual disciplines in an effort to go deeper with God (Psalm 42:7), to know God better and to see God’s grace more fully established in our lives.

Spiritual disciplines are a means we find to direct our attention to God. These disciplines help us spend time with God and let God come into and transform our lives. They are tools for helping us become aware of “eyes opened, hearts burning experiences” (Luke 24:31-32). Spiritual disciplines help us to focus on our personal

relationships with God, with being more aware of the presence of God in our lives and on making our lives more responsive to God. Spiritual disciplines may not provide ultimate answers for ourselves or our own concerns, but they help us become more aware of God.

Scripture Reflection: Luke 24:13-36

Now on that [first Easter] day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (13-16)

And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. (17)

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" (18)

He asked them, "What things?" (19a)

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." (19b-24)

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (25-27)

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. (28-31)

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up

and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. (32-33)

They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." (34-36)

Discussion Questions

Two disciples met Jesus on the road to Emmaus that first Easter afternoon (Luke 24:36b-48). While they were with Jesus, their eyes were opened and their hearts were burning; they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread at dinner; and they immediately got up and returned seven miles to Jerusalem to proclaim the good news to the eleven and their companions.

1. What are the two disciples talking about on the road to Emmaus? Why are they speaking of these things?
2. Two friends, people who had known Jesus, who had walked with him, talked with him, and eaten meals with him every day for three years didn't recognize him even on a long walk down a dusty road. How could that possibly be?
3. How many times on our walks through life do we not see Jesus? How many times do we talk with a co-worker or a parent or a child or a friend or even someone we have never met before and fail to recognize that this person holds a precious piece of Our Lord and Savior within them?
4. How is Jesus revealed to us (word and sacrament)? See also Acts 2:41-42: "So those who welcomed Peter's message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."
5. What is the importance of asking Jesus to stay?
6. What is the experience of "eyes opened, hearts burning" like? How and where do people experience it?
7. Notice that there are two instances in this chapter of Jesus appearing when two are three are gathered (Matthew 18:20). Does this still happen? When?
8. Has Jesus appeared in your life at unexpected times or in an unexpected manner?

Topical Discussion: Some Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual disciplines may be practiced individually, with a spiritual guide, in families or small groups, or corporately. Some are described and followed by religious orders (i.e.,

the orders of St. Benedict, St. Ignatius and St. John the Evangelist). Examples of spiritual disciplines are:

Prayer - Conversing with God involves listening, worshiping, and confessing our sins, as well as interceding for others and can be effectively combined with solitude, silence, and study.

Meditation - Contemplate in silence a scripture, a phrase or a passage from a book (i.e., the Daily Office), with the intent of hearing the voice of God.

Solitude – Listening to God in quietness, closing off the noise of the world.

Study – Inwardly digesting scripture or other wisdom in order to edify, correct, transform and equip ourselves for life and ministry.

Journaling - Writing thoughts, prayers, insights during prayer, meditation and study. Articulating thoughts in written words helps in reflection and in reviewing what we have learned. Many of the Old Testament books are written as a personal journal (Nehemiah, Daniel and Jonah).

Service - Giving of one's time and energy on behalf of others. It is engaging our life to help those in need—the poor, the sick, the elderly, the orphan, the prisoner (Matthew 20:25-28, 25:34-40; James 1:27). Different types of service include pastoral care, outreach/social ministries and relational evangelism.

Tithe/Stewardship - putting our trust in God, turning to God first in appreciation.

Simplicity - An outward lifestyle that places material things in their proper perspective.

Frugality - Abstaining from using money or goods in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamour, or luxury.

Fasting - Abstaining from food or other specific input (such as TV) for a period of time for the purpose of narrowing our focus and heightening our dependence on God.

Submission - Releasing the need to be in control; vulnerability and a willing submission to the Lord usually involves regular input from mentors. It is a willingness to listen to others and is most effective when it is voluntary (Ephesians 5:21).

Obedience - Doing now what we know God has called us to do whether the task is large or small.

Physical Exercise – Being stewards of the body God has given you to respond to God and others in this world.

Fidelity/Chastity/Celibacy – as appropriate to the relationship God calls you to.

Spiritual Guidance - Receiving mentoring for the spiritual journey from a mature follower of Christ. A spiritual guide provides accountability and insights leading to spiritual growth.

Sabbath Time – Taking time to rest, reflect and refocus.

Family spiritual disciplines – spending time as a family together in our faith journey. The depth of a person's faith later in life depends most significantly on the frequency of talks about faith, family devotions and shared service projects experienced with significant adults. Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too. Faith is formed through personal, trusted relationships – and often in our own homes. Faith is caught more than it is taught.

Small Group spiritual disciplines – small group participation forms relationships that encourage the process of discipleship, helping each other share and live out faith in everyday life. Small groups are the ideal place for Christians to follow the exhortations given to us in the "one another" passages in scripture.

Faith Sharing - Communicating the hope that lies within us. Sharing your faith story and hearing the stories of others can build a stronger sense of relationship with God and others. When you share your story and hear the stories of others, you begin to draw a connection between how God has acted in Scripture, liturgy and history and how God is acting to draw you into relationship with God.

Developing giftedness (discernment) - Developing an understanding of one's spiritual gifts and using them to build the Kingdom of God.

Eucharist - The sacrament instituted by Jesus to make the resurrection (his risen presence) real in our lives. In John 6:56, Jesus says "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." The Eucharist is a way of accepting Jesus' presence in my life, a presence which brings me into relationship with God. The Eucharist is not just a ritual; it is a means of my accepting Jesus' coming to me, a means of my being with him as he, eaten, consumed sacramentally, gives himself to me. I need to intend to meet Jesus and to share his ongoing life in the world. Jesus asks me to eat and drink of his life, to actively accept him in my life.

Confession - Admitting our needs and failures with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Worship - Giving glory and honor to God as our response to God's initiative in our lives. The enjoyment of God, who He is and what He does. This is to intentionally savor the presence of the Lord. We can do so through song, praise, appreciation, shouting, clapping, quietly saying thanks, running, crying, dancing and laughing (Psalm 150; Revelation 5:12-13; 6:1-3). At our best, we may worship with our whole lives.

Guidance - Understanding and following the leading of the Lord not just as individuals but as a community of believers.

Celebration - Carefree gaiety and thanksgiving which comes from an understanding or experience of the goodness and faithfulness of God.

Corporate intercession - Joining together as the body of Christ to pray for God's intervention.

Each individual and group will find different disciplines helpful for spiritual renewal at different times. None of the tools that help make us aware of God's presence provide ultimate answers for us. The fundamental importance of any discipline is spending time with God.

1. What spiritual disciplines or practices have you found that help you open your heart and pay better attention to your relationship with God?
2. Think of a time when you felt close to God and what that meant to you, how you felt, what that experience did to you. Where have you experienced God in your life today, or during the past week, or at other times?
3. Consider your personal spiritual disciplines. Is there one on this list that you might feel called to do more of in this part of your spiritual journey?
4. Are there some disciplines that don't work for you? Why?
5. What other activities can bring us closer to God?
6. How do we overcome the distractions in our lives that keep us from being aware of God's presence?
7. In what situations and activities do you experience God's resonance or revelation?
8. Do you have trouble believing that God is a person who loves you and wants to spend time with you? Which Bible verses say otherwise?
9. Do we really need spiritual disciplines or can we just wait for God to get our attention? Why or why not? (See, e.g., Luke 13:24, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.")
10. Do you spend enough time with God? If not, how might you spend more time with God?
11. How does spending time with God affect your life?
12. What (or whom) is the way to a loving relationship with God? How does John 15:1-11 explain this?
13. Is it possible to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17)?

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

“The ability to discern develops in a relationship with God, as one becomes rooted and grounded in the heart of God. Thus, people who abide in the Lord are more likely to be able to hear and distinguish calls.”¹⁸

“God speaks, touches, and reveals in God’s own way and in God’s own time. Still the presence of certain conditions, such as trust, prayer and patience, makes discernment of God’s call more likely.”¹⁹

“Our experiences of God are often experiences of resonance rather than of revelation. We have a sense of God’s presence although God is not fully revealed to us. Resonance is a captivating experience. People feel God’s presence emotionally, ecstatically, mystically, often comfortingly and frequently excitingly. True resonance must come from the real presence of God to which people are open. . . We do not set the resonating reed in motion. God does. . . We must open ourselves to God and we will resonate with God. . . Being open means . . . giving up control of ourselves and allowing another person or power to resonate within us. . . Resonance happens when we are open to it and when we . . . have taken steps to get in God’s cadence rather than our own. . . Varieties of experiences . . . can enhance resonance with God.”²⁰

¹⁸ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 25. See John 15.

¹⁹ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 29.

²⁰ James J. Gettel, God’s Love, Human Freedom and Christian Faith (Chalice Press, 2002), Chapter 3.

FIVE LISTENING TO GOD IN OURSELVES

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us serve you. Let us recognize our dependence on you, and help us hear and understand who you are calling each of us, and our community, to be. As you have called us to your service, make us worthy of our calling and use us to your glory and the welfare of your people. By our life and service help us to enrich your church and world. Help us to see you in others who need our help. As we share your love with others, let us also experience and be transformed by that love.

Opening Questions: Have you identified some of your spiritual gifts, abilities and passions? Do you see gifts in others which are definitely not yours?

Introduction

In earlier discussions, we focused upon listening to God's calling to us, by trying to get into God's perspective to hear God more clearly. We recognized that our activities and desires may distract us from listening carefully to and for God. But we also need to be aware that God has made each of us and made us each uniquely to love and serve God and one another. Because God has made me, God knows me better than I know myself; I am most authentic when I use the gifts God gives me to become the person God calls me to be. By paying attention to how God has made us, or is making us, we can also listen to God more clearly.

John Calvin wrote in the first line of his Institutes of Christian Religion that wisdom is found in the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. To follow God's call, you need to know yourself. Santa Theresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic, said there is nothing so crucial to the spiritual life as humility. The word "humility" comes from humus or soil and has to do with being rooted. *Humility is to know oneself in truth and to accept oneself in truth.* To be rooted. Note that a mystic, a person primarily focused on going to God, says that you first must know yourself.

An important part of knowing ourselves is knowing how we are made to be part of a Christian community. As the human body has a variety of members, so the body of Christ has a variety of Christians, each with his or her own special function. We depend on the gifts of others to complement our own gifts and to build up the body of Christ (Romans 12; I Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). When each of us discovers and exercises our gifts, the church body thrives. St. Paul says we grow up in every way into Christ, joined together so that each of us promotes the growth of the body in love. The body of Christ is incomplete unless each of us is involved. Yet a recent survey found that eighty percent of Christians do not know what their spiritual gifts are and how they are to be used in the body of Christ.

We each have a personal need and a need as members of a church community to understand how God has uniquely made us and who God is calling us to be. To consider my true identity, it is helpful to pray and to regularly ask five questions.

1. *What brings me joy?* What are the desires of my heart? What am I passionate about? What motivates, energizes, animates me? What do I long for? Jesus said, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). We each respond to God by becoming joyful in our own unique ways; the desires of our hearts are not something to be denied or deferred to another. Another way to ask this, is would I grieve if I didn't do this?
2. *What are the talents and abilities that God has given me?* What can I do well and in a way that pleases God? What are talents, competencies and capacities might I make available to God and nurture by education and practice?
3. *What is my unique situation and what are the opportunities that I have?* Where am I in the world? Where can I go from here? What are my background and experiences? What are the limitations, responsibilities and possibilities I have? God will grant me a sense of who I am in response to the particularities of my time and place.
4. *What is my personality?* What is my way of acting and responding to others, to my world and to myself? What is my unique temperament, perspective and contribution in my relationships with others.
5. *What are my spiritual gifts?* God gives us spiritual gifts to support our ministries. Perhaps I feel that what the world needs most is prayer or hope or teaching or prophecy or faith or giving or encouragement or leadership or service. Of course, the world needs all of these gifts but I have been given a particular gift to add.²¹

Scripture Reflection: I Corinthians 12

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. (1)

You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. (2-3)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (4-7)

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another

²¹ James J. Gettel, "What are Your Spiritual Gifts?" *Networking* (Episcopal Network for Stewardship), Volume 9, No. 2 (March 2004).

prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (8-11)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. (12-17)

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (18-26)

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (27)

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (28-31)

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Paul compare spiritual gifts to the body?
2. Why is it important for each of us to identify our spiritual gifts and participate in the body of Christ?
3. How are spiritual gifts unique? What does this say about our necessity to the body?
4. How are we each incomplete? What does that say about our need for unity and love? (What Bible chapter follows this one and how are they related?)

5. How does knowing one's self support humility? Why is humility important to the spiritual life? How does humility bring us closer to God?
6. How does one find self knowledge? Do you feel you know yourself in this sense?
7. Do your unique qualities make you feel like God has a special purpose for you?
8. Because God has made us, God knows us better than we know ourselves and we are at our most authentic when we are responding to whom God calls us to be (our "vocation"). Who God calls me to be will be consistent with who God made me to be. The discernment process is directly related to issues of identity and involves *becoming* what I am *called* to be. Have you ever had a sense of vocation? What is it like?
9. How have events in your life brought you where you are now? Can you think of times when God was active in your life? Do the answers to these questions give you a glimpse of where God might be leading you?
10. How can identifying your gifts help you with discernment?
11. How could over-emphasizing your gifts prevent discernment?
12. Can you identify ways in which your gifts and vocations draw you more closely into relationship with God?
13. According to I Peter 4:10, what is the purpose for your spiritual gifts ("Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received")? Do you see and use your gifts as given for others?
14. Do you believe that you can make a difference in the world? How?
15. Are you following your calling every time you do something good?
16. II Timothy 1:6 says: "Kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you." What are some practical action steps you can take to "kindle afresh" your specific gifts and abilities?
17. If God matches your calling with your abilities, how might God use your abilities for ministry?
18. Do you feel like you any of your gifts are pulling you into new relationships and expressions?

Topical Discussion: SHAPE

Contemporary religious educators have used the acronym SHAPE to describe your uniqueness as a human being. Have you had an opportunity to consider your unique SHAPE? Does your life and ministry flow from your SHAPE?²²

Spiritual Gifts: The first key factor in discovering your SHAPE is to unwrap your spiritual gifts. Review this short list of spiritual gifts from 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and Romans 12. As you read through the list, place a check next to any definitions that describe you. (You may have more than one gift, but everyone has at least one.)

Administration: The ability to organize and manage people, resources, and time.

Apostle: The ability to start new churches/ventures and oversee their development.

Discernment: The ability to distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Encouragement: The ability to strengthen people in their faith and motivate them to action.

Faith: The ability to trust and obey God regardless of circumstances, appearances, or risks.

Giving: The ability to contribute generously to people in need.

Hospitality: The ability to make people feel welcomed and to foster biblical fellowship.

Leadership: The ability to communicate vision and to motivate others to accomplish a goal.

Mercy: The ability to manifest compassionate, practical, cheerful love to suffering people.

Pastoring: The ability to foster spiritual growth in believers and to equip them for ministry.

Preaching: The ability to declare publicly and persuasively the Word of God.

Service: The ability to recognize and meet needs cheerfully, practically, and anonymously.

Teaching: The ability to explain and apply biblical truth and to train others for ministry.

Wisdom: The ability to understand God's perspective on life situations and communicate those insights simply and clearly.

Do you have a sense of what your spiritual gifts might be?²³

Hheart: The second key factor in discovering your SHAPE is to listen to your heart. Your passions are clues as to where you should be serving. What do you have a passion for?

²² Rick Warren uses the acronym "SHAPE" in *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan 2002), 227-256. A helpful resource for exploring personal style, spiritual passion, and gifts is the *Network Kit : The Right People, in the Right Places, for the Right Reasons, at the Right Time* by Bruce L. Bugbee, Don Cousins and Wendy Seidman.

²³ If you haven't taken a spiritual gifts inventory, you might try this one: <http://buildingchurch.net/g2s.htm>.

A role (what you like to do) _____

A people group (whom you like to help) _____

A cause (what you would like to see changed or supported) _____

How can you use your God-given passions and interests to serve others effectively?

In what way can you see yourself passionately serving others and loving it?

What gives you joy? What would you grieve if you didn't do?

Abilities: The third key factor in discovering your SHAPE is applying your abilities. Here are just a few God-given abilities. See if you can find any of yours in this list. Feel free to add more in the blanks.

conversing	writing	artistic ability	architecture	engineering
baking	coaching	mathematics	administration	quilting
gardening	athletics	inventing	brain-storming	carpentry
sculpting	selling	public speaking	tailoring	debating
recruiting	organizing	motivating	making music	typing
acting	hosting	problem-solving	animal care	listening
teaching	fixing things	making money	floral arranging	cooking
mechanics	negotiating	decorating	linguistics	videography

Personality: The fourth key factor in discovering your SHAPE is your personality. Your personality will affect *how* and *where* you use your spiritual gifts and abilities. Here are a few God-given personality traits.

_____ introvert (I gain energy from quiet reflection.)
_____ extrovert (I gain energy from interaction.)
_____ prefers routine (I like to do one project at a time.)
_____ prefers variety (I like to do several projects at once.)
_____ thinker (I analyze before making a decision.)
_____ feeler (I go with my gut instinct.)
_____ works alone (I prefer individual assignments.)
_____ team player (I prefer working with a group of people.)
_____ organized (I read instructions before starting a task.)
_____ creative (I start a task and read instructions only in an emergency)

How can these personality traits help you discover your area of ministry?²⁴

²⁴ If you haven't thought about your unique personality, you might try a test similar to the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator: <http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes1.htm> or <http://web.tickle.com/tests/classiccareer/authorize/register.jsp?url=/tests/classiccareer/index.jsp>

Experience: The fifth key factor in discovering your SHAPE is your experiences. What lessons have you learned through your positive life experiences that can direct you to your area of ministry? How might God use even the painful experiences in your life to minister to others who are hurting?

Prayer, experimentation, survey tools, opinions of others and a gifts discernment course can help in discovering your spiritual gifts. Be careful with the many tools for discovering gifts/discernment. You can't fill out a survey and look at the back of the book and determine what you're supposed to be. Vocational discernment is not a scientific test. It is the product of times of discernment in the presence of God, in solitude and with others in good conversation. God will grant us a sense of who we are in response to the particularities of this time and this place.

How is "using your SHAPE to serve others" different from the way most people understand "ministry"?

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

"Not only is every call unique, but the hearing of every call is unique also. One sign that God may be calling is a certain restlessness, a certain dissatisfaction with things as they are. Other signs of God's call may be a sense of longing, yearning, or wondering; a feeling of being at a crossroads; a sense that something is happening in one's life, that one is wrestling with an issue or decision; a sense of being in a time of transition; or a series of circumstances that draw one into a specific issue."²⁵

²⁵ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 11.

SIX

LISTENING TO GOD THROUGH OTHERS

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the faithful generations before us and those near to us who helped bring us to you. Thank you for the passionate people of our community who know their passion comes from you. Help us to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus so that we may accept what we have heard from you through many witnesses and so that we may become faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. Help us bring others to meet you and to know you. Grant that we may show the power of your love to those near us. Lead us and prepare us to share our experiences of you with each of your children who need you in their lives. Amen.

Opening Question: How have other people helped you to grow in faith or to remain strong in faith or to hear what God wants for you?

Introduction

In earlier discussions, we have seen that discernment requires a close personal relationship with God and an understanding of ourselves. It is also helpful to have inputs from other people to add to our own perspectives and understandings. We especially receive these inputs through sharing our faith stories.

We are interested in stories of spiritual journey. These stories pull us beyond ourselves and help us realize that we are called to more than our ordinary everyday lives. Many people are hesitant, however, to discuss their own spiritual journeys. Although these experiences are the most significant parts of our lives, we feel others will give them little credence. We are shy and uncomfortable sharing our faith stories because this requires trust and intimacy and a level of emotional, intellectual and spiritual confidence we may not feel we have. We need to overcome our shyness because sharing our faith stories is crucial to our growth as Christians.

As we tell our stories, we recognize and affirm our unique identities and how God is acting in our lives. We learn about ourselves by telling about ourselves. And others in our community may help recognize and affirm our unique gifts and experiences. Hearing the stories of others helps us to broaden our perspectives and recognize even greater possibilities for ourselves. Faith sharing helps us to discern the meaning and purpose of our lives.

Recalling our faith stories gives us strength and can bring healing and renewal, especially when we are experiencing uncertain or difficult times. We affirm that God has been with us (in good and trying times) and still is. Others can gain strength and meaning from my stories as I gain strength and meaning from theirs. "Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Listening to one another is supportive and loving and begins to build an intimate and trusting community by fostering understanding and respect among us. In a climate of faith, friendship and love, we can begin to discern where God is calling us individually and as a community and to articulate common understandings that our community can build upon. We begin to connect each of our own stories with the community's story and with God's sacred story and this helps us to grow in relationship as a community of disciples.

As we improve our ability to share our personal and communal stories with others, we also improve the evangelism skills we will use to invite others into our communities. Faith stories are more effective evangelism tools than belief statements or theologies; stories about God's love often connect better with a person's search for meaning. Recognizing that the Holy Spirit grows our faith, we need to do our part in planting and watering – and begin by telling others what God is doing in our lives.

Sharing our faith stories is an essential part of becoming Christians. It helps us appreciate and become more aware of our journey with Christ. Jesus tells us that he is present with us when we live in and proclaim his name. In proclaiming the good news, we become the Body of Christ. We become Christ's arms and legs, hands and feet, eyes and mouth. And because Jesus is with us, our lives, our bodies, like our risen Lord's, can become places where God is revealed in this world. Imagine sharing the Good News of the joy of your faith and, in that sharing, having Jesus powerfully present in and through you!

Scripture Reflection: John 17

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. (1-5)

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (6-8)

"I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (9-11)

"While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. (12-15)

"They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. (16-19)

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (20-23)

"Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." (24-26)

Discussion Questions

1. In this farewell speech and prayer for his followers, Jesus speaks both as still in the world and no longer in it (17:11). Where is Jesus going?
2. What has Jesus' role in the world been?
3. What does Jesus say is eternal life?
4. What does Jesus ask for himself? Why?
5. What does Jesus ask for those the Father has given him?
6. Why does Jesus refuse to pray for the world?
7. Who is Jesus praying for?
8. How will the world come to know who Jesus is?
9. How can our love for one another help the world come to know Jesus?

10. What is our relationship with God through Jesus?
11. When Jesus goes to the cross, where is he sending his disciples?
12. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” How can we do this?
13. Why do we need other people to help us when we’re listening to God?
14. How are you able to share your experiences of God with others? What causes you to be afraid to share your faith story?
15. When has someone else’s witness of their faith to you caused you to feel stronger in your own faith?
16. How do you support others in the Christian life by hearing their stories?
17. What types of settings are most conducive to sharing faith stories? How do you put yourself in those settings?
18. Why do you come to church?
19. When have you found your faith supported or strengthened in the church community?
20. Do others in your faith community help you to be accountable to God or other people or yourself? How? Do you need that?
21. What type of actions, reactions or invitations are we seeking from others in our church community?
22. When have you found yourself drifting away from the church community? What was happening in the church or in you?
23. Who do you turn to for spiritual support and how does this help you?
24. What draws and excites you about your calling into Christ and the church?

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

“Although God calls each of us personally, as individuals we see only partially. Individual perception, reasoning, and understanding are always limited. Even a person who feels absolutely certain that a specific revelation comes from God may be mistaken as to how it is to be applied. Because God often reveals part of the picture to one person and another part to another person, it is prudent to consult one another to discern God’s counsel, guidance, and direction, even if there is no apparent reason to

do so. While circumstances sometimes require us to act without consulting others, the danger of arrogance and error in proceeding on our own can be great.”²⁶

²⁶ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 55.

SEVEN RESISTING GOD'S CALL

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God, by whose spirit the whole body of your faithful people is governed and sanctified: Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before you for all members of your holy Church, that in their vocation and ministry they may truly and devoutly serve you; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.²⁷

Opening Question: Have you ever felt it would be too hard to follow God's call (or to take up your cross and follow Jesus)?

Introduction

In earlier discussions, we found that we may better hear and interpret God's call in our lives through a closer personal relationship with God, a better understanding of ourselves and stories or insights shared by other people. When we begin to sense our callings in these ways, we have unique and special opportunities to respond and actually live into them. And we then have a choice to make, whether to follow a call. It is quite natural to hesitate.

There are so many examples in the Bible of God calling people! Most of these people initially hesitate to answer God's call, but they are faith heroes because they responded and lived into their callings.

These stories show the tension in answering God's call. Consider the different responses to this tension by two people who meet Jesus in Mark 10. A young rich man comes to Jesus and asks what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. This version of the story contains one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible because it's true for every one of us: "And Jesus, looking at him loved him" (v 21). Jesus offers this young man the unique and wonderful opportunity to become his disciple; but the young man cannot give up his riches and goes away grieving. The kingdom of God was at hand and this man could not make the changes needed to enter it. (Mark 10:17-27)

In contrast is the story of the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, who cries out as Jesus passes, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stands still and directs his full attention to this man who has interrupted his journey. Jesus is bound for Jerusalem; the action of the gospel journey is fast and furious; but Jesus stops and listens. Jesus always has time for us. Each of us matters to Jesus. Imagine being Bartimaeus and hearing, "Take heart, get up, he is calling you." What comforting words! Take heart, the Lord has heard your cry. Take heart, you're no longer alone; you're not a despised beggar. You are heard and you are being summoned to Jesus to be saved and follow him "on the way," to become his disciple. (Mark 10:46-52)

²⁷ The Book of Common Prayer, 256-7.

This requires Bartimaeus' response, which is the opposite of the young man's response. Jesus says Bartimaeus' faith makes him well. That faith is revealed by his crying out. Even more, it is expressed by his throwing off his cloak, springing up and going to Jesus. Bartimaeus leaves behind all that he has to go to Jesus. His cloak has served as the blanket that has given Bartimaeus shelter as a homeless person. His faith is that Jesus will take care of him. For if Bartimaeus were not healed, he would need that cloak; and he would not be likely to find it again in the crowd and without sight. Bartimaeus believes. He sees that Jesus is the Messiah and knows that Jesus can heal him, if he chooses. His prayer was answered and he joined Jesus on the way. He found ultimate joy and meaning. To do so, he had to put himself in God's hands.

Are we prepared to "throw off our cloaks"?

Scripture Reflection: Jeremiah 1: 4-19

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." (4-5)

Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." (6)

But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." (7-10)

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree." Then the LORD said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it." The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north." Then the LORD said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. (11-14)

For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the LORD; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. (15-16)

But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land--against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will

fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you.” (17-19)

Discussion Questions

1. How does Jeremiah initially respond to God’s call?
2. Jeremiah is not alone. Consider the responses of Moses (Exodus 3:11, 4:1, 10, 13), Saul (I Samuel 9:21), David (II Samuel 7:18) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5).
3. What is the Lord’s response to Jeremiah? Does he answer Jeremiah’s concerns about his adequacy (age, abilities, difficulty of task, personal needs or comfort)?
4. Does it matter to God’s work whether Jeremiah is adequate to the task?
5. Have you ever heard God in something you didn’t want to hear?
6. What are some things that keep us from listening for God’s call?
7. Do you ever resist listening for God’s call? Why?
8. Has hearing a calling ever made you anxious?
9. Have you ever felt the need to surrender to God’s will?
10. What kinds of excuses do we have in our lives for not responding to God’s calling?²⁸
11. If you clearly heard God’s call, would you follow it?
12. Do you believe God gives you whatever you need to answer God’s call?
13. Have you had experiences that have helped you to trust in God?

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

“Discernment involves listening. We must listen with open hearts and open minds, especially to what we do not want to hear. If discernment is to take place, we must let go of our preconceptions and expectations. We must be willing to hear the appealing and the unappealing, the familiar and the unfamiliar. If we become selective, we may turn a deaf ear to God.”²⁹

²⁸ Some impediments to obedience are cultural values, prosperity, self-interest, self-absorption, self-righteousness, desire for security, desire for certainty, human time frames and self-doubt. Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 36-37.

²⁹ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 31.

“Finding and doing God’s will entails profound change and a willingness to surrender other stories to which we have become deeply attached. And surrender is one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines to practice – in part because surrender is, by definition, difficult, and in part because each time we live too deeply into the stories the world tells us, the need to surrender pulls at our lives in a different way. Pride, security, fear, the uncertainty of letting go – all carry a different kind of real and perceive loss.”³⁰

“It takes a bitter test of all that he has to make a hero. . . Sometimes we bring to a struggle or a cause the gifts we see most clearly, a courage, a strength, or a charm others have told us we have. But often we find more is asked of us than that, more than we intended or thought we possessed. We are asked to offer that which we thought dearest, to forgive what seemed unpardonable, to face what we feared the most and endure it. Sometimes we have to travel to the last step a path that was not of our choosing. But I promise you this. . . it will lead to a greater joy in the end. The difficulty is that the end is beyond our sight, it is a matter of faith, not of knowledge.”³¹

³⁰ Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 149.

³¹ Anne Perry, A Christmas Visitor in An Anne Perry Christmas (Ballantine, 2006), 294.

EIGHT FOLLOWING GOD'S CALL

Prayer: Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.³²

Opening Question: What is the most important thing you feel you've learned about listening to God during these Bible discussions?

Introduction

Through our discussions, we have found that discernment is not just finding out information (on our own or from God or other people) and making a decision. Our discernment is actually a revelation of ourselves in relationship with God and the family of God. Closer relationships and improving awareness are the fruits of an open and ongoing life process.

In an essay entitled, "Is Growth a Decision?"³³ Eugene Peterson describes the spiritual life in terms of living in middle voice. We typically use verbs in active voice or passive voice to describe the activities of our lives. I use active voice to describe an action that I do: "I counsel my friend." I use passive voice to describe an action that happens to me: "I am counseled by my friend." In middle voice, however, I both act and am acted upon: "I take counsel." In middle voice, one person "actively participates in the results of an action that another initiates." Middle voice best describes our activities in intimate relationships, especially our relationship with God:

Prayer and spirituality feature participation, the complex participation of God and the human, his will and our wills. We do not abandon ourselves to drown in the ocean of love, losing identity. We do not pull the strings that activate God's operations in our lives, subjecting God to our assertive identity. We neither manipulate God (active voice) nor are we manipulated by God (passive voice). We are involved in the action and participate in its results but do not control or define it (middle voice). Prayer takes place in the middle voice. . .

We don't have enough (or any!) verbal experience in this third voice, this voice that is fine-tuned to the exquisitely and uniquely human venture of entering into and responding to God. But no friendship, no love affair, no marriage can exist with only active and passive voices. Something else is required, a mode of willingness that radiates into a thousand subtleties of participation and intimacy, trust and forgiveness and grace.

³² The Book of Common Prayer, page 832-3.

³³ Peterson, Eugene. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989.) pp. 102-105.

In our individual and communal lives, we desire to live and participate in actions God has originated. Living in middle voice requires neither our complete control nor submission, but humility and boldness. Middle voice recognizes that we are responding to a vocation, or calling, from God - not just with discernment, but also with the activities of our lives. Middle voice action means that we co-create our lives and communities with and through our relationships with God. Discernment is most true when we are living in middle voice.

Scripture Reflection: Acts 8:5-8, 12, 26-40

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city. (5-8)

. . . When they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. (12)

. . . . Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. (26-27)

Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." (28-29)

So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (30)

He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." (31-33)

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (34)

Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. (35)

As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. (36-38)

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. (39-40)

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus' last words in Acts 1:8 commission the disciples for evangelizing: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." How is that carried out here?
2. Imagine how Philip must feel after the success of the mass conversions in Samaria. How must it have seemed to be immediately called out to a dangerous, wilderness road?
3. How is this Ethiopian prepared to receive Jesus?
4. How does Philip introduce Jesus?
5. What is to prevent this gentile, Nubian, eunuch from being baptized?
6. Do you desire a bigger call (like the many conversions in Samaria) or a smaller call (to a single person on a wilderness road)? Why? Does one have a greater effect than the other?
7. How do you feel about the way God takes Philip where he needs to be? Does this type of thing really happen?
8. Has one call ever led to another call for you?
9. Do we have a calling like Philip?
10. Are you prepared to share your faith stories as Philip does? What are some effective ways to do that in postmodern society?
11. Is it still possible for us to be disciples and help make new and stronger disciples?
12. How do you feel God is calling you to responding love?
13. How do you feel Christ might be calling you to serve him?
14. St. Paul wrote, in Romans 12:1-2, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will

of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect." What kind of transformation does St. Paul say we need for discernment?

15. Frederick Schmidt writes, "A love of God and a romance with God nurtures in us a capacity to see God where God is present."³⁴ How is centering our lives in relationship with God the best means of discernment?
16. How do we center our lives in God?
17. What types of balance do we need?
18. What activities in life do you choose in which the reward is the activity itself?
19. How do we continually and constantly choose to live our lives in God's presence now?
20. What will you do to actively live your faith? What practice/rule will you use or is God calling you to?
21. Could focusing on discernment actually keep us from discerning? How can we avoid this?
22. In discernment, are you listening more for certainty or for love?
23. Is it possible to listen to God with your whole life?

Topical Discussion: Discernment Verses

Pick the New Testament verse below that especially speaks to you right now. Think about it personally, restating it in first person language. (For example, personalized the first verse might read, "When I ask, it will be given to me; when I search, I will find; when I knock, the door will be opened for me.") Tell the group why you chose the verse you did.

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7-8)

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I

³⁴ Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 95.

have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
(Matthew 28:19-20)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:27)

I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the
ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.
(Acts 20:24)

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and
perfect. (Romans 12:2)

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called
according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

So with yourselves, because you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for
building up the church. (I Corinthians 14:12)

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a
mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another;
for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (II Corinthians 3:18)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see,
everything has become new! (II Corinthians 5:17)

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always
having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (II
Corinthians 9:8)

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do
not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all,
and especially for those of the family of faith. (Galatians 6:9-10)

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of
wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart
enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the
riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable
greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.
(Ephesians 1:17-19)

The gifts he gave were to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the
body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the
Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to
completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

“You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” (Revelation 3:20)

Additional Thoughts for Discussion

“Discernment is a gift from God. But it also includes an intentional attempt on our part to hear God’s call in our life. It takes work; it is also a matter of grace. It involves our full humanity as well as communion with God.”³⁵

“Do not make an idol of discernment. ‘The only priority worth having is knowing and loving God. Stay in the space of Love. Do not be lured out of it.’ If discernment follows, fine; if not, so be it. Let it rest lightly. ‘Release your discernment from your ego and your expectations. Flow as a stream that is useful to those who can take’ from it and ‘is in no way diminished by those who can’t.’”³⁶

“Given our finite nature, the choices we make are always flawed. The future is always in the making, and when it arrives, we may well discover that we have acted too hastily, misread the circumstances in which we find ourselves, or made a decision without enough information. There are far too many variables, far too many unknowns. . . To think that we can map our lives or that we should be able to read a hidden agenda into the random character of the choices we make would be a mistake. It may well be that the most important lesson we can learn from life’s dizzying freedom is utter dependence on God. But that dependence is not a passive approach to life that waits for God’s guidance to fall from heaven, as if it could be given independent of our thoughts and experiences. That dependence leads us to make choices that arise out of the love God has for us. As Augustine observes, ‘Love and do what you will. . . .’”³⁷

“Finding and doing the will of God is a matter of spending time in God’s presence, rejoicing in the love and acceptance we find there, and listening to what we may learn by spending time with God.”³⁸

³⁵ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 24.

³⁶ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean and Susan M. Ward, Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 35, quoting from an address by Jan Wood.

³⁷ Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 125-126.

³⁸ Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 171.

“Have patience with everything that is unsolved in your heart and . . . try to cherish the questions themselves, like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange tongue. Do not search now for the answers which cannot be given you because you could not live with them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one distant day live right into the answer. Perhaps indeed you carry within your self the possibility of shaping and forming, as a particularly pure and blessed kind of life; train yourself for it – but take what comes in complete trust.”³⁹

³⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, July 16, 1903, in Rilke Poems (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 225.

MEETING PLAN

Small group discussions and prayer time can be some of the most powerful spiritual experiences. Some groups are more effective than others and experience shows that we need to be aware of the following needs for structure:

- (a) Meetings need to be at a convenient time during the week and meet weekly (or not less often than twice per month, so people don't lose touch). Consider meetings in homes or at church for different reasons.
- (b) Most people will only come if they are personally invited and brought to the meeting. Everyone is welcome. Bring them!
- (c) Co-leaders help cover the group when one leader is absent and so a second leader develops to lead future groups. Invite other group members to lead the discussions and gain experience to lead future groups.
- (d) The best size for discussions is from 5 to 12 members. If the group gets larger than 12, we break into smaller groups for discussion.
- (e) An hour and a half with refreshments afterwards is generally a good length. Members need to know what their commitment is up front (number of weeks and time per session) and that they are encouraged to attend every meeting. Assign someone to check in with anyone who missed a meeting.
- (f) Shared principles will help the group develop pastoral skills and an atmosphere of prayer, openness, faith sharing, trust, safety, honest respect, tolerance and love. These suggestions for maximizing this experience may be shared at the first meeting:
 - *Be open*: Make room for God to do something new in your life.
 - *Be transparent*: As you openly share your hopes, fears, successes and failures, God will use your life experiences to build faith and courage in the lives of others.
 - *Be available*: to God and to each other. Get to know other members of the group. Keep your eyes open for opportunities to encourage and pray for one another.
 - *Create a safe environment*: where people can be heard and feel loved (no quick answers, snap judgments or simple fixes) and keeping what is discussed confidential among group members.
 - *Be Committed*: Take this opportunity and commit yourself to make your group life a priority by attending meetings.
 - *Invite and welcome newcomers*: Who isn't here that we'd like to invite?

- *Keep your focus on God and your faith:* Resist the temptation to make this a critical and intellectual theological enterprise; listen for what God is doing and wants to do in your life.
- *Keep your Bible handy:* Relate our discussions to the narrative and principles of the Bible and to your own life.
- *Consider becoming a small group leader and trying your hand at facilitation.*

An outline for a small group meeting is:

Activity	Suggestion	Time
Opening prayer	Shared song or simple prayer	5 minutes
Opening question	Simple icebreaker to get discussion started for everyone	10 minutes
Scripture lesson	Shared reading or video presentation (i.e., The Gospel of John)	5 minutes
Discussion questions	Facilitator chooses questions from the outline	45 minutes
Identify roles for next meeting	Identify discussion facilitator, prayer facilitator, refreshments host, and a person to call any missing members	2 minutes
Group prayer time	Ask what do we need to pray about and discuss before beginning prayers; those comfortable with adding intercessions can make them; allow for silence	15 minutes
Social time	Start and end meetings on time but be flexible with social times after meetings	Members may leave whenever they need to.

SMALL GROUP MEMBERS

NAME	PHONE NUMBER	EMAIL

SMALL GROUP CALENDAR

DATE	Discussion Co-Facilitators	Prayer Facilitator	Refreshments	Member Follow-up
Week 1 _____				
Week 2 _____				
Week 3 _____				
Week 4 _____				
Week 5 _____				
Week 6 _____				
Week 7 _____				
Week 8 _____				

LEADER'S GUIDE

ONE: WHAT ARE WE LISTENING FOR?

1. This chapter is full of miraculous healings. These miracles point to who Jesus is. Do you watch for signs, wonders or miracles to suggest to you who you are or what God wants from you?

Frederick Schmidt cautions about relying too much on signs or miracles in discernment for several reasons. In relying on signs and wonders, we may (a) avoid serious reflection, (b) “overlook God’s gift of sacred significance in the commonplace events of our lives”; (c) look for certainty although “questions of this kind rarely have one right answer,” (d) expect only “efforts that will succeed” and avoid risky or adventurous undertakings “that might meet with failure, end without closure, or prove to be difficult; or (e) “lead a spiritual life that precludes the possibility of self-giving, sacrifice, or loss.” He writes: “When we take the miraculous and the exceptional to be the measure of God’s presence, rather than think of God as an enlivening presence throughout creation, we do not re-sacralize the world. Instead, we confine God to its margins and gaps. The key to seeing God at work in the world lies not in defining the events that reflect the movement of God but in what Paul describes as the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2).”⁴⁰

2. What happens after Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law? Does this happen in other Bible accounts (see, e.g., Mark 10:46-52 and John 9)? Why?

As soon as Jesus heals someone, they get up to serve him or proclaim him.

4. Why does Jesus not permit the demons to speak?

This is the beginning of Mark’s “Messianic Secret” where Jesus’ identity is hidden. Notice that the secrecy is also extended to the healed leper. There are several reasons why this secrecy might be important. One is a challenge recognized in this Chapter, that fame would make it difficult for Jesus to pursue his ministry because of so many needs. Moreover, Jesus might be concerned that focusing on so many physical needs would not be effective in sharing his spiritual message. Another reason is that demons and others might misrepresent Jesus, especially before the more complete revelation of his identity in his suffering, death and resurrection. And, whether intended or not, the secret is a powerful literary device for Mark that keeps his hearers focused on the identity of Jesus. Contrast this to John where Jesus often directly proclaims his identity.

5. Why does Jesus leave?

We begin to understand that Jesus’ active ministry flows from tranquil prayer. Constant activity is not enough.

⁴⁰ Frederick W. Schmidt, What God Wants for Your Life: Finding Answers to the Deepest Questions (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 70-90.

6. How would Jesus (or God) feel when he hears, "Everyone is searching for you"? Why?

Everyone is searching for you: Jesus' mission is fulfilled.

7. What is the message Jesus is proclaiming?

Jesus message is about the Kingdom of God breaking into this world. The physical healings he does are linked to this Good News. Physical healing is not his full ministry and Jesus does not heal everyone.

Matthew summarizes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, saying: "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). The message is the same in Mark: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (1:14; see also Luke 8:1).

When Jesus sends his disciples out, he instructs them to proclaim "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:9; Matthew 10:7). In his first sermon, Peter asks "What then should we do?" and answers "Repent, and be baptized" (Acts 2:37-38). And Paul says that his ministry was to declare to Jews and Gentiles "that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance" (Acts 26:20). Paul asks, "Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4).

This message of repentance is the most radical gospel message. The response to God's presence in the world, called for by John the Baptist, Jesus and his disciples, is repentance. Jesus' message is: "Repent now to bring your life into the presence, and under the reign, of God." But repentance is not simply, as many believe, the emotional experience of feeling bad about or confessing what I've done wrong. John the Baptist and Jesus did not say, "Feel really bad for the kingdom of heaven is near." They said, "Repent!"

The word "repent" is "metanoia" from the Greek word for mind. The word is about thinking, about changing one's mind, about second thoughts. Even more, it's about a change of heart. Repentance is getting into a wholly different frame of mind and then attaching your self to what's really important. The experience Jesus shares with us is that God loves each of us and is constantly coming to us. We need to prepare our lives to live in an ever greater awareness of God. This requires us to restructure our lives to turn away from a distorted world view to focus on the reality of God and God's presence in our lives. Repentance is preparing the way of the Lord. Repentance is seeking first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Repentance is preparing my self to live in God's presence.

10. Does Jesus care? How does he treat the sick man?

Jesus is filled with compassion! He reaches out to a leper (becoming unclean himself). He does care! Jesus is not just a crusader on a mission who has such certainty of conviction that he just wants people to get out of the way or follow. He does not see people either as an obstacle or as a means to an end for his mission. He stops, pays attention and helps. This is not delaying his mission but part of it.

12. Jesus has both a clear sense of what he is called to do and a depth and richness of compassion. Where do these senses of calling and compassion come from? How does Jesus balance them?

This is grace, a gift from God, which Jesus understands by turning toward his Father.

TWO: WHO ARE WE LISTENING TO?

2. Jesus tells three stories (lost sheep, lost coin, lost son) in response to the Pharisees' grumbling. What do the stories have in common?

Jesus is sharing stories of God's love and mercy to those others might despise as lost. He is correcting the Pharisees' attitudes toward the sinners Jesus is with. Jesus says God will seek those that cannot find him "until he finds it."

3. Why does the younger son want to leave? Why would the people hearing the people of his time hear his reasons for leaving?

The younger son would be considered a parricide, wanting his father dead to obtain his inheritance. The son is the worst kind of rebel.

4. How does the younger son live on his own?

His degradation is complete, to the point of tending pigs.

7. How does the father receive the younger son?

The father runs to the younger son and kisses him before he can give his prepared speech. He gives him a robe, a ring as a symbol of authority and sandals. He restores him.

9. How does the older son feel about this? Why?

The older son represents the Pharisees, who are jealous of the father's generous and caring treatment of the sinful younger brother. They cannot understand this type of love and resent it.

THREE: LISTENING FOR THE VOICE OF GOD

2. As Elijah stood and paid careful attention, where was God present?

God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire; God was present in the sound of sheer silence and a still, small voice.

3. Why is God's message startling to Elijah?

God's startling message was not to flee but to return and overthrow the kingdom of Israel.

6. When has God spoken to people in the Bible?

Some of the stories of the Bible tell of direct encounters with God. Others are through intermediaries or angels. Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus communicated directly with God. Angels appeared to Abraham, Jacob, Solomon, Isaiah and Mary.

14. What stories/images in Scripture do you recall of God/Jesus confronting human beings face to face? Are these confrontations what you might expect?

There are times when, like Jacob, we need to struggle with God to meet God face to face. God responds, though not always in ways that make us comfortable. Jacob's hip gets knocked out of joint and he ends up with a limp. But because Jacob has struggled with God and with other people, God tells Jacob who he is – "Israel" – and blesses him. When we struggle to grow in relationship with God and other people, we find out who we are, whom God made us to be. After wrestling with God, Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

We are hesitant to wrestle with God as Jacob did because that seems awfully irreverent. We usually fear confrontations, which we equate with conflicts. Confrontations make us anxious. We're uncomfortable when we have to address a problem with another person, and often we're more concerned about that confrontation than with the challenge or problem that needs to be confronted.

And yet, we know we need confrontations to move forward. What we don't confront, we avoid. And what we avoid, we can't grow or learn from. Confrontation is the opposite of avoiding; confrontation means simply "meeting face to face" or addressing. That means confrontations can and should be positive. When we get together and address a problem or a challenge with another person, we often can reconcile with that person. We can learn and grow together. We discover we need confrontations in any successful relationship, especially loving relationships. And we need these encounters with God to help us grow in relationship with God.

16. How do we recognize and listen to the voice of God?

This is the question of discernment: how do we know this is God's voice and not our own (ego) or another's (peer or community pressure)? I John 4:1-6 warns: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many

false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

The spirit of truth will “bear good fruits” (Matthew 7:18; John 15). “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:21). Jonathan Edwards identified reliable signs of grace that were good indicators of fruits of the Spirit:⁴¹

- Experiencing a transformation of character and behavior (a grace or goodness that we did not ourselves create)
- Discovering a new affection for God for God’s sake (not because of the gifts we’ve received and even though things may not be going well)
- Developing a deep trust, a personal conviction that is more than an intellectual assent
- Finding a balance in our lives
- Learning how to surrender and become obedient, even in the face of suffering.

Unreliable signs of grace are:

- Intense affection or passion (which may be perverted by our own ego)
- The appearance of love, kindness, politeness (apparent agreement with others)
- Feelings of assurance that we are being saved, guided or filled with God
- Praise for God (especially when things are going well)
- Religious activities (may or may not be signs)

FOUR: SPENDING TIME WITH GOD

1. What are the two disciples talking about on the road to Emmaus? Why are they speaking of these things?

The two believers on the road to Emmaus practiced conversation because they were trying to figure out what had happened. They are disappointed that Jesus was not the deliverer they expected and they are processing what they experienced. "Was Jesus really raised? Do you remember when He said this? Do you remember when He said that? Didn't He promise this? Didn't He promise that?" Together they had a conversation that reconstructed their relationships with Christ. It encouraged them, even though they were sad because they thought Jesus was dead and gone forever. This whole story begins with a marvelous dialog.

⁴¹ John Ackerman, Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations (Alban, 2001), 91-92.

2. Two friends, people who had known Jesus, who had walked with him, talked with him, and eaten meals with him every day for three years didn't recognize him even on a long walk down a dusty road. How could that possibly be?

There is a difference between seeing and recognizing. See also John 20:14 and 21:4. The disciples were looking at a man who happened to be traveling along the same road they were. They did not see Jesus because they did not expect to see Jesus.

3. How many times on our walks through life do we not see Jesus? How many times do we talk with a co-worker or a parent or a child or a friend or even someone we have never met before and fail to recognize that this person holds a precious piece of Our Lord and Savior within them?

Do we see Jesus in every single person we happen to walk down a path with in our day-to-day lives? When we look at another person, do we see someone who is worthy of Christ's message? Someone whom God loves beyond measure? Do we see Jesus Himself, lost, hurting, and alone? Or do we see just another person? I tell you truly, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. (Matthew 25:45)

Topical Discussion: Some Spiritual Disciplines

13. Is it possible to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)?

St. Augustine tells us, in his Homily on Psalm 38, that we continue to pray as long as we permit our longing for God to continue:

It is your heart's desire that is your prayer; and if your desire continues without interruption, your prayer continues as well. . . The Apostle Paul said, “Pray without ceasing.” Are we to “pray without ceasing” in the sense of kneeling, prostrating ourselves or lifting our hands? For if he speaks of prayer in this sense, I believe we cannot do it “without ceasing.” Yet there is another inward kind of prayer without ceasing that is the desire of the heart.

In his Homily on Psalm 13, St. Augustine states, “If you want to pray without ceasing, never cease to long for God. The continuation of your longing is the continuation of your prayer; and if you cease to long for him, this prayer will also cease.” It is this longing that prepares us to meet and be filled with God's love. Our prayers cease when we lose this longing or are distracted from it.

FIVE: LISTENING TO GOD IN OURSELVES

1. Why does Paul compare spiritual gifts to the body?

Paul uses the image of the many parts of the human body to show that diversity is needed; even the less presentable parts are indispensable. And the body is a unity of these gifts. Caring for each of them prevents dissension.

4. How are we each incomplete? What does that say about our need for unity and love? (What Bible chapter follows this one and how are they related?)

In Chapter 13, Paul says that love is more important than any particular spiritual gift (speaking in tongues, prophecy or miracles). This Chapter warns against any improper pride in having received any particular gift. At Corinth, spiritual gifts were apparently very divisive, causing issues of superiority and envy.

SIX: LISTENING TO GOD THROUGH OTHERS

2. What has Jesus' role in the world been?

"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. . . I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. . . the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me."

4. What does Jesus ask for himself? Why?

Jesus asks for glorification, to return to the glory he had before creation, because he has finished his work. This is not a selfish request but so that Jesus may glorify the Father.

5. What does Jesus ask for those the Father has given him?

Jesus asks (a) God to keep his followers safe in the power of his name, (b) for their protection from the evil one, (c) for their unity, that they may be one just as Jesus and the Father are one, (d) that their joy may be complete, (e) that they will be consecrated as he consecrates himself, and (f) that they may fulfill their mission to the world.

6. Why does Jesus refuse to pray for the world?

By rejecting him, the world has become evil. Jesus prays for those who are not of this world.

7. Who is Jesus praying for?

"His own" include all who would believe in him in any time. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word."

8. How will the world come to know who Jesus is?

Through the unity of believers. "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

9. What is our relationship with God through Jesus?

(a) "The glory that you have given me I have given them." (b) You "have loved them even as you have loved me." (c) "I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am." (d) "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

SEVEN: RESISTING GOD'S CALL

3. What is the Lord's response to Jeremiah? Does he answer Jeremiah's concerns about his adequacy (age, abilities, difficulty of task, personal needs or comfort)?

Later in Jeremiah God says, "When you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed" (Jer. 29:13).

EIGHT: FOLLOWING GOD'S CALL

3. How is this Ethiopian prepared to receive Jesus?

He is returning from the synagogue and reading scriptures.

4. How does Philip introduce Jesus?

Philip introduces Jesus in the same way that Jesus responds on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24), by interpreting the scriptures. It is likely that this too became an "eyes opened, hearts burning" experience.

5. What is to prevent this gentile, Nubian, eunuch from being baptized?

Nothing! God accepts outcasts like the prodigal son. Although Deuteronomy 23:2 would prevent this castrated man from becoming Jewish, Philip immediately baptizes him into Christ.

6. Do you desire a bigger call (like the many conversions in Samaria) or a smaller call (to a single person on a wilderness road)? Why? Does one have a greater effect than the other?

In John 15, Jesus says "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." Philip shows that discipleship involves helping to form people in the faith and prepare them to walk with Jesus. It is very possible that this is the story of the beginning of one of the very earliest Christian churches. Consider the history of the Ethiopian church (one of the very first Christian churches) and how Christianity spread through the world.

9. Do we have a calling like Philip?

Philip is doing what Jesus told him to do. In the Great Commission, Jesus directs us to bring others to meet and know Jesus: And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The last words of Jesus in each Gospel are the same commandment.

14. How is centering our lives in relationship with God the best means of discernment?

Discernment is listening to and distinguishing God's voice and action from other voices and activities in the world. A Christian striving to be part of the body of Christ needs to become Christ-centered and, like Jesus, continually strive to discern God's will. An effective discernment process helps us to recognize the presence of God and respond accordingly: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).