

Discernment

Life in the Spirit, Part 9

from the pulpit of
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1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

¹²But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

1 Kings 3:15-14

⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.” ⁶And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” ¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.”

The sticker was prominently stamped on the cover of the book. But I couldn't read what it said until I got a bit closer. Walking into this Christian bookstore as a high school student, I wasn't looking for anything in particular. But the sticker caught my eye. It said in bold letters, "Read with Discernment." Stuck on the cover of every copy, with the bookstore's name at the top of it.

While I momentarily pondered the sticker's cautionary words, I immediately wanted to read the book, to find out why I had to do so *with discernment*.

If that sticker was meant to dissuade me, it had the opposite effect. In fact, I doubt I would have even picked up the book at all had the sticker not been on it. The temptation was too great now. The warning became an invitation.

I later learned that the cautionary decal was bookstore policy, to be smacked onto anything where the content and/or on the personal theological views of the author were bordering on unorthodox.

It was a warning to good evangelical Christians that this book may contain some heretical teaching. So read carefully. Believe at your own peril. Because if you start holding the wrong ideas, based on what you learned from a book with this kind of label on it, then the bookstore is not going to be held liable for where your soul ends up. So of course, I bought the book.

The book's title, "If Grace is True," was subtitled, "Why God Will Save Every Person." It made a case for universalism. And providentially, the book was an early conversation partner for me as I made my way out of the rigid evangelicalism of my youth, and began to wrestle with deeper questions of faith.

The theological proposition aside, it was the sticker that initially brought me to its pages. "Read with Discernment."

The word discernment comes from a Latin word which means to take apart or to separate. The capacity to see truth in something over against something untrue. The ability to judge wisely. The wisdom to comprehend through listening. All of which points to the hope that with this gift, comes the aptitude to avoid misfortune, or at least to see it coming.

Maybe other things should come with such a warning. How much trouble would my wife have saved if on my jacket lapel on our wedding day it read, “Marry with discernment.”

Or what about going into a roadside café at two o’clock in the morning? “Eat with Discernment.” Or moving here from somewhere else, and you think Old Gulph Road is New Gulph Road or South Gulph Road and all you really want is Fishers Road. “Travel with Discernment.”

We could very well put those stickers on lots of things. But the word *discernment* is quite nearly “insider” language. Even when it’s used in the wider culture, it’s really kind of a religious word, I think. It notes a spiritual element as its function.

While the world often understands discernment as an individual process of wise reflection and judgment, in the Church, we express the idea that discernment is also about God, and others.

It’s what happens when we are able to see God at work in the world and in our lives. And then seek ways to partner with God in this work. It’s the capacity to live wisely together, and with prudence, because of the vision we’ve been given.

Which brings us to Solomon and his dream.

By this time, his father King David is dead, and Solomon has ascended to his father’s throne in no small part due to the scheming of his mother and others. He has his brother killed along with other folks threatening his reign. He makes a marriage alliance with an Egyptian princess, and eventually permits her and his future wives to worship other gods in Jerusalem. He is by no means a character of unblemished virtue in the Bible.

Yet, it this this theophany, this holy encounter with God, that initially helps frame the image of Solomon as a wise, far-sighted, and just ruler of Israel.

The most common thing that anyone knows about Solomon is that he was wise; to which further scripture testifies. But what did that mean for him? More importantly, what does it mean for us?

Look at how the meeting happens. Solomon doesn't seek God first. As exemplified in good Reformed theology, it is God who is the initial agent here. God comes after Solomon. The Lord shows up, and invites Solomon to ask for something. And Solomon responds the way any good politician would respond. He lays on the compliments pretty thick before he gets to a request.

This is how I translate Solomon's prayer...

“Holy and Most High God, you know my father, David, really liked you. And you really knew how to take care of him. Man, was he lucky. And now look at me. Poor, little me. I'm now your humble servant-king, although I'm just a young pup, still wet behind the ears. I don't even know what I'm doing half the time. So all I really want, O Lord my God, is a good mind and a listening heart, so that I can govern your great people, and they really are great by the way...so I can govern them well.”

That's pretty slick, because you know what happens next? God is pleased by that prayer, and even gives Solomon things that he didn't ask for, but that he probably wanted: riches and honor to which none other can compare.

All of which is to say, Solomon wakes up from his dream with a blessing in hand. He prays for an understanding mind. *The Message* Bible translates his request as asking for a “God-listening heart.” And in reply, the *NRSV* says God gives him a wise and discerning mind. The *NIV* translates it as “a wise and discerning heart.”

The difference in translation between “heart” or “mind” is indicative of the fact that unlike today, in Near Eastern antiquity the heart was considered both the seat of intellect and the organ of perception.

Regardless, the blessing of this kind of wisdom and vision didn't make Solomon a perfect ruler or a perfect person. But it did help him see, it did make him a more competent sovereign, and a more faithful partner in God's work.

His prayer was that he would be able to lead God’s people in faithfulness and good judgment. And that together, this community would reflect God’s goodness.

Truth is, the scriptures are full of folks seeking this kind of vision. The Psalmist declares, “I am your servant. Give me understanding...”

St. Paul tells the Church in Philippi, “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” He tells the Church at Thessalonica to “test everything” and hold fast to what is good.

Jesus tells his disciples in John’s gospel, “When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

Again and again, God’s people are called to seek after this kind of wisdom, this way of seeing the world as God sees it. In part, having this kind of vision and discernment requires a good deal of hope.

Princeton Theologian Dan Migliore writes, “Christians hope in the final victory of the creative, self-expending, community forming love of the triune God. Hence [we] hope in the triumph of the love of God over all hate, of the justice of God over all injustice, of God’s freedom over all bondage, of community with God over all separation, of life with God over the power of death. Yet...” Migliore continues, “this hope becomes indistinguishable from cheap optimism if it fails to share the present agony of the world.”¹

Understood this way, discernment is seeing the world and our life as God longs for it be, all the while acknowledging and sharing in the brokenness of the world as it is. Standing with others in their pain, their loss, their anguish, their lament, and then seeking a new way, a better way together.

¹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) p.338.

That's not easy work. Do any of us, in these highly polarizing days, believe that we can honestly discern God's will collectively? Even within our Presbyterian family, we continue to struggle with who God is calling us to be.

Even in this church, we wrestle amongst ourselves. About our call to engage in the world. About how to respond to events of the day. About how to stay in community when things divide us.

I was reminded of this during our summer adult education series, "Navigating the News." We spent four weeks highlighting some of the tensions playing out in the church and the world around us. We talked about racism, immigration, the role of women in church and society, and spoke to a host of other issues.

Now, I'm confident we did not solve a single world problem in there. But it made me terribly proud to serve a congregation of folks who are willing to think deeply about these kinds of cultural and global troubles.

And one of the ways we helped prepare that class was with an infographic one of my colleagues created, inviting us to think about our decision-making process in five simple steps.

Step 1: Pray for guidance, asking God's Spirit to lead you. Step 2: Study the Scriptures. See what they say, in their historical and theological context, and ask how it relates to today. Step 3: Explore our creeds and confessions. Consider what the Church has professed in ages past.

Step 4: Study in community; hear other views that might challenge your own. Step 5: Examine your conscience by listening for what God might be saying.

And then there was an octagonal sign with an exclamation point. It read: Stop! Does your answer or solution lead to greater love of God or a higher love of neighbor? If yes, you're set! If no, go back and start all over again.

That's what discernment looks like, when it points us there. That's trust in the radical idea that our stories begin and end in God, and we are called to hear the stories of neighbors and all creation as being found in God's Story as well.

Let me tell you something: our vision of Christ is always going to be a little blurry this side of eternity. St. Paul tells us that we see through a glass darkly. We will never get it completely right, and often we all get different views of the image, different takes of the full landscape of God's imagination.

As we keep looking, keep listening, keep wrestling, keep trusting together, we can hold fast to the promise that God is with us in the unfinished work.

And if the answer we come to doesn't point us to the redeeming love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and cause us to love our neighbor just a little bit more, then we are called to start again.

Here in this place, we are not a congregation that has it all figured out. Instead, we are a community still searching, still in discernment, still seeking the vision together. Hungry for the Christ who promises to be the way at the end of all our ways, and praying to God that we're headed in the right direction.

Come to think of it, I wonder if we could get all that on a sticker? Amen.