

## **Introduction:**

As a church, we've been talking about the essential part of community in our gathering together. We've considered what it means to live life together, to worship together, and to love one another in Christian community. For the next few months we will be taking a closer look at an important function of the Christian community: discerning God's will together. If we live in community the way we see it described in the Bible, our time and our work together should be uplifting, enriching, and encouraging to all involved. Unfortunately, because of the realities of having frail human beings attempting to live out God's ideal for community, our sin nature often times makes the community less than what it is supposed to be. Ruth Haley Barton writes that "Community is the most 'overpromised and underdelivered' aspect of the church today." And this is never so true than when we attempt to make decisions together through discernment.

To discern is to make a keen judgment of a situation, possible choices, and possible outcomes. Discernment is the process by which we make a decision. For instance, it's Friday night, and you've decided that you want to go out to eat for dinner. So now comes the harder decision, where to go? This is where discernment comes in. So several things need to be considered. What is your budget? How many people are going? Are you feeling fast food, a nice sit-down experience, or something in-between? What kind of food are you feeling right now? Is eating going to be the event for the evening, or is it a part of a greater event, like going to a movie, or a concert, or having a game-night? What time are you wanting to eat, and how long do you want to be at the restaurant? If you are going with someone else, you might run these questions by them and have them help you discern.

Discernment, outside of the context of the church, is wholly dependent on your own perceptions and abilities. It is seeking the best possible decision and outcome, but that comes only through your ability to discern.

How do we do discernment in our regular lives? We use our senses: what we can see, touch, hear, smell; we use our guts, how do we feel about this particular issue, from the inside. If we are discerning as a group, we might use research, debate, arguing, voting, power-struggles and power-plays. We might make lists of pros and cons, use our reasoning and logic, go with the popular vote, and we most certainly will use Robert's Rules of Order in any type of discussion.

Discernment, in Christian practice, is different than discernment we might do in the "real world." Realize that the church is not a "business," so we can't treat decision-making and discernment the same way that we might in our jobs. And although many of the things already listed can be tools in Christian discernment, they ultimately cannot be the entirety of what we do together.

Christian discernment is primarily about seeking the will of God in any particular situation. It's not about making the best decision, even though that certainly is part of our desire. In fact, it's more difficult than just making the best decision, because in discernment there isn't necessarily a "bad" option. It's about seeking God's will. Charles Spurgeon once said:

*"Discernment is not a matter of simply telling the difference between right and wrong; rather it is telling the difference between right and almost right."*

So, in seeking God's will, we are willing to lay down our own preferences, opinions, desires, and allow the Spirit to move amongst us and speak to us, even if this means that we might hear something that we aren't prepared for or don't want to hear. And in order to seek God's will, we have to use God's wisdom.

In our passage for this morning, the apostle Paul writes about the wisdom of God, over and against the wisdom of the world. What do we learn about this wisdom?

**1) The wisdom of God is fundamentally different from the wisdom of the world:**

*<sup>6</sup>We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. <sup>7</sup>No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. <sup>8</sup>None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

Paul tells the church that God's wisdom is different, first of all, because it comes from the eternal God who can never be proven unwise. Paul makes the point that even the most wise, most mature "rulers of the age" would eventually "come to nothing." He goes even further to say that even while they were still alive those that might be considered the wisest among them did not understand true wisdom, God's wisdom, as evidenced in that they crucified Jesus.

In fact, Paul says that God's wisdom was hidden from the wisest in the world and only made available to those who knew God. So then, even the most mature of "ruler of the age," we could say guru or leader, even in their infinite wisdom, will never be able to make the same discernment as discernment made in faith. So again, when we practice discernment in the church, we have to think differently about the ways in which we decide things, knowing that the wisdom of God is so different from the wisdom of the world. We cannot treat the church like a business.

**2) Believers are given access to the wisdom of God.**

Paul tells us in verse 9 that the wisdom hidden from the wise because of their unbelief has been given to followers of Jesus because of their belief.

<sup>9</sup>However, as it is written:

"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—

For those of us who subscribe to Christianity, who have confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives, we have been given the wisdom of God, a deep, unending, and indestructible wisdom.

And this isn't dependent on our education level or our reasoning skills and abilities. It is the gift of God, given to us when we commit to Him in faith. And how is this given to us?

### **3) The Spirit teaches believers the wisdom of God.**

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:10-12

*<sup>10</sup> these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup> For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup> What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.*

When we commit ourselves to Jesus Christ, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the living presence of God who dwells within us. And Paul tells us that the Spirit, who has received God's teaching, will then pass along that wisdom to us. Paul is really echoing Jesus' teaching on the Spirit as guide in John 16:13. Jesus is telling the disciples that He would soon be leaving, but he urges them not to be afraid, saying:

*<sup>13</sup> But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.*

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be with us in His place, and all the wisdom that the Holy Spirit has received from God is then taught to us. This is so important to Christian discernment together because if we are not looking for the movement of the Holy Spirit in our discussions, then we are missing the wisdom of God and are relying on ourselves. This is what separates the way the church operates from any secular business or organization. Ruth Haley Barton writes in "Pursuing God's Will Together," *"Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish or discriminate between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God). There are many qualities that contribute to good leadership, but it is our commitment to discerning and doing the will of God through the help of the Holy Spirit that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership."*

**Transition:** So, communal Christian discernment means to seek the will of God for the people of God together. And as Christians, we are given a different wisdom, the wisdom of God, in order to discern the will of God. This wisdom is different from the wisdom of the world in that it is in no way connected to our own gifts, skills, and abilities, but instead is given to believers as a gift by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. So the question then is, if we have been given the wisdom of God through the Holy Spirit, how then do we access that wisdom of God in discernment?

In her book "Pursuing God's Will Together" Ruth Haley Barton strongly emphasizes preparation for discernment over the process of discernment. If we really want to know God's will, we need to make the right preparations, which includes then tapping into the wisdom of God, or as Paul says, "Having the mind of Christ." So, how do we prepare? Let's now consider one case study in the book of Acts where the church practices communal discernment:

### **1) Acts 1:12-26, Matthias replaces Judas.**

In the first chapter of Acts, the apostles are tasked with choosing a new apostle to replace Judas' place. Judas had betrayed Jesus by giving Him over to the Roman and Jewish authorities, and it says in 1:18-19 that he bought a field with the silver he was given for his betrayal, fell in the field and died. So Peter, according to Scripture, leads the group in discerning who the right person would be to fill Judas' position. Luke records the scene in Acts 1:21-26:

*<sup>21</sup> Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."*

*<sup>23</sup> So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias.*

*<sup>24</sup> Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." <sup>26</sup> Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles*

So, how do the apostles prepare for discernment in this passage? First, they use their own criterion to select suitable candidates for apostleship. Now, this might seem contradictory to what I've been saying so far, but hold on. God has gifted some leaders with the special ability to strategically consider situations in a way that can be extremely useful for the church. The apostles probably thought about what were important character traits for an apostle and then chose two worthy men from among their group from which they could then allow the wisdom of God to help them discern the right person for the job. We too can use our God-given gifts to discern, which might then include lining up several possible and feasible solutions to a given decision, but we cannot rely solely on our own abilities.

The apostles then appealed to the wisdom of God through prayer. And not just through petitionary prayer, but through real listening for God's voice. I wonder how often we as a church together take intentional time to listen for that still small voice of God. It's easy, in prayer, to start rattling off our requests to God and to never really take the time to listen to His answer. Oswald Chambers said: "God does not exist to answer our prayers, but by our prayers we come to discern the mind of God."

So they asked God for his wisdom, and then allowed God's wisdom to shape their response.

Finally, the apostles released the decision to God's control. In this specific instance, they performed the ritual, one that we do not do today, the casting of lots to determine who the man would be. Casting lots, to us, might seem like rolling the dice, or gambling, but in their practice it was an extremely holy ritual used when making important decisions. The apostles believed so strongly in God's presence that they released the outcome of their discernment to God's hand through the outcome of the ritual.

Notice, they didn't pray and then cast votes, or pray and then continue to debate and argue. They prayed and then completely left the decision up to God. Now, I'm not suggesting that we start taking up that practice. But I want us to seriously consider this: do we have the same kind

of faith as the apostles, willing to completely let go of our own will and desire in exchange for the will and desire of God?

So, in this case, we see the apostles prepare to discern through a combination of human ability to identify, reliance upon God, and willingness to allow God to make the ultimate decision.

Willie James Jennings, in his commentary on Acts, writes of the Apostle's discernment process like this:

"A common thing, a selection process, has been placed in an extraordinary setting, in the upper room before Pentecost. From this moment forward every common thing of the disciples of Jesus, every administrative act, every bureaucratic gesture exists in the posture of waiting and stand in the shadow cast by the Holy Spirit and within the necessary work of prayer."

**Conclusion:**

So, how can we as a church begin to deliver on the promises of what community is supposed to look like, especially when we make decisions? Over the next two months, we will look at different parts and elements of Christian discernment and prayerfully consider how we have in the past discerned important decisions as a body and how we will discern important decisions in the future. For this morning, let us commit to understanding discernment as seeking the will of God by using the wisdom of God through prayer and release of our own opinions, desires, and will for God's will.