

Introduction:

Indifference is not a word we typically use in a positive sense in our current language. Merriam-Webster Dictionary had a number of ways to define the word, which included:

to feel that something does not matter one way or the other

marked by no special liking for or dislike of something *indifferent about which task he*

apathetic: *indifferent to suffering and poverty*

None of these possibilities sounds like a particularly appealing way to feel towards something. When I think about “indifference,” I think about trying to plan a dinner date with Erin. Now, if I give a couple of suggestions and there is a restaurant that she actually wants to go too, she will pick that one for sure. If I give her several options, and she likes them all equally but doesn’t feel the need to choose, she will say “They all sound good, you choose.” But, if I give her a few options, and she doesn’t like any of them, she will say “I’m indifferent.” What she thinks she is telling me is that she doesn’t feel particularly drawn to one restaurant over the other, but over the years I’ve learned that she really means “I don’t like any of the choices, so I’ll probably be disappointed either way.”

This kind of indifference is really marked by a lack of effort; rather than have to make a decision or to care about a certain subject, you can just stay at an uninterested neutral. There is another kind of indifference that we are going to talk about today that is really the complete opposite of this first kind; it is marked by an exerted effort to stay unbiased or impartial, in spite the fact that you might actually have strong feelings or preferences. And this kind of indifference is absolutely essential for discerning the will of God together. I am talking about Holy indifference, that it, to intentionally decide that in our decision making together, we will lay choose to disregard our own preferences, feelings, wills, and desires in order to seek only God’s will. We are going to look at holy indifference. In order to discover what it means for us individually and collectively to pursue holy indifference, we are going to look at how Jesus Himself practiced this when praying to the God in the garden before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

1) What is holy indifference?

First, let us take a few minutes to more fully answer the question; what is Holy indifference?

Danny Morris and Charles Olsen define it like this in their book on community Christian discernment: “God’s will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.” -Danny Morris and Charles Olsen

That seems so simple, and yet I would also say it doesn’t seem easy at all. Why? Because in our lives, at any given time, there are so many different things competing to influence the way we make decisions. Let’s consider what Jesus was experiencing in our passage today. Remember, that even though Jesus was fully God, He was also fully man, which means he was about to experience torture and crucifixion the way any average person would, without any special physical relief because of his position as Son of God. Listen and imagine what Jesus was going through in **Matthew 26:36-46**:

³⁶ Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” ³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Listen to those words, “my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” Jesus was experiencing pure anguish at what was to come: he knew physically it was going to be torture and death, in a way that would be unimaginably painful. He also knew, emotionally, that his death would cause great pain to his friends, disciples, and family. And he knew spiritually that he was going to be separated from God for a time. The temptation to let any one of these influence Jesus to go forward according to the human part of His will would have been overwhelming. Jesus’ Holy indifference, then, was that in spite of these, He was still willing to pray: “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

This is holy indifference, acknowledging before God that we have our own preferences, our own desires, and being willing to lay in exchange for God’s will.

St. Ignatius, who was famous for creating a series of spiritual exercises for monks to practice in order to develop a deeper spirituality, outlined what real Holy Indifference might mean for us, saying that it might actually prompt us to ask for the opposite of what might seem good for us.

“Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed by free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short. The same holds for all other things.” (Spiritual Exercises # 23) –St. Ignatius

Transition: So, if we are called then to Holy Indifference, which means setting aside our physical, emotional, and spiritual preferences in order to allow God’s will to take place, recognizing that this is a tall order for even the most spiritually devoted, how then do we pray for this Holy Indifference?

2) Praying for Holy Indifference

The more I considered Jesus’ feelings, actions, and prayers in this Matthew passage this week, the more I realized that this is the most significant look into the vulnerable, human side of Jesus that we see in the entire New Testament. His whole ministry had been leading to these last few days, everything he had done was to prepare the disciples for the reality of the cross and to ready them for their ministry after Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus had given multiple predictions to them of his death; He knew what was in store. And yet in the final moments before His arrest, with the heavy and painful reality of what was coming, Jesus prays to His Father, if there is any possible way for your will to happen differently, then go ahead and do that!

Consider this: the first time Jesus prayed to the Father in Gethsemane, he said “if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” Of course, Jesus knew it was possible for God take the burden of the cross from

Him, but God's desire to save His people was so strong that He knew that the only way to do it fully, completely, and forever, was through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And yet, Jesus still prays, in spite of His desire to have the burden of the cross taken away, for God's will to be done.

Then, Jesus prays a second time, and this time His wording was a little different. It says in **Matthew 26:42**:

⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, ***if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it***, may your will be done."

This second time, Jesus again asks the same question of God, but in an inverse manner. He still wonders if there is another way, and yet He acknowledges that this may in fact be the only possible fulfillment of God's plan. And again, he closes this prayer by submitting fully to God's will.

In vv. 43-44, Matthew tells us that Jesus went away for a third time to pray to God, but this time he doesn't give us any specific details of the prayer. He instead says that Jesus "went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing." It's interesting that Matthew records it this way. Either, Jesus prayed the same prayer as the second time, or Matthew believes that all three prayers said essentially the same thing. Either way, I don't see Jesus' first two prayers as the same. In fact, I think what we see is that Jesus' attitude changes between prayers one and two, from hopeful of a different outcome to resolute of God's plan. I don't get the sense that Jesus' fear of the physical, emotional, or spiritual pain left him. But because of Jesus' commitment to Holy indifference, that above all other things the Father's will would come first, that his desires that came from His human side were transformed into secondary concerns through prayer. If Jesus had not continually prayed "your will be done," then we maybe would've read Jesus praying three times "if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."

The church today can learn from Jesus' example and commitment to prayer; that by laying out our own physical, emotional, and spiritual biases before God and saying "your will be done," our wants, needs, and desires could become secondary to God's will. Praying for Holy indifference is acknowledging to God that we can't change our own attitudes, and that instead we need to be transformed by Him.

Ruth Haley Barton writes: "Since indifference is something God does in us rather than something we can make happen, we enter into these proceedings openly and honestly before God, trusting God to do what needs to be done in our hearts." Praying for Holy indifference is trusting that although we might not, at this very moment, feel particularly indifferent towards a certain decision needing to be made in the church, whatever that might be, God can and will transform our hearts, which then positions us to really pursue His will without questioning whether or not the conclusion we've come to is from God, or from ourselves.

James tells us **James 1:5-8** that God will give His wisdom to any who pray for it with full faith:

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is

like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Holy indifference has to be rooted in prayer, and if we follow Jesus' example, it has to be continual prayer; only through communication with God can our biased attitudes and hearts be changed to be able to truly say "your will be done."

3) Pursuing Holy Indifference Together

So, how do we work towards Holy indifference in community discernment, when it seems to be something so personal?

Firstly, we have to be honest with one another, and we have to get over our cultural obsession with privacy and guardedness. There is no room in a healthy, functioning church for people unwilling to share and discuss their true feelings and beliefs when it comes to decision-making. This means being honest about our own biases as well as being honest about the level of holy indifference we bring to the table when discussing important matters of the church.

This might mean asking, at the beginning of any serious discernment discussion, how indifferent everyone at the table is. Several years ago, the elders spent a significant amount of time discussing the issue of giving money to Mennonite schools who chose to implement hiring practices that go against some of our beliefs. At the same time as that discussion, we were reading Ruth Haley Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* and talking about what it would mean for us to come to the table, indifferent to everything but the will of God. And one thing that she suggested in the book was that before any discussion, the group should test the level of indifference present, meaning simply that we would go in a circle and share our level of holy indifference or personal bias that day. So we began practicing it as an elder group, and let me tell you, that had an enormous impact on our discussions. We were able to honestly assess ourselves, to know where each other were at, and to recognize the ways in which that affected how we looked at the decisions being made. What it also did was force us to continually pray in between our times together for God to shape our own hearts into hearts of Holy indifference, so as time went on, we found ourselves able to say more and more that we were truly indifferent to everything but the will of God.

For this to work, though, we had to be committed to the process of really seeking God's will, and we also had to respect where each other were at in journey. At any given meeting, one or more of us may have been struggling with our own personal views, feelings, or biases, and the next meeting, another who might have felt indifferent before was suddenly dealing with personal partialities.

In order to work together, we had to be able to listen to each other's' struggles, non-judgmentally. That didn't mean that we would freely let those things dictate our discernment. Holy indifference would be the baseline for any decision that was made. But it did make us more aware and understanding of where a person was coming from. Ruth Haley Barton again writes: "We need to make allowances for varying levels of indifference and of comfort when talking about such things. This is an opportunity for

us to bear with one another as Christ bears with us. It takes a great deal of trust to talk about such inner dynamics, which we are accustomed to dealing with very personally-if we are away for them at all."

Conclusion:

In a track race, when the runners are called to their marks, they will get to their places at the starting line in their own lanes, typically put their feet into the blocks, if it's a sprint, and put their hands to the ground; but their body is still loose. When the announcer says "get set," that's when the runner's bodies get into full position, back up, legs tight, muscles tensed, ready to spring and release all of the energy built behind them.

In community discernment, when we say "get set," what we are saying is we are ready and in position to go, to really discern something important together and make a decision. And in order for us to be in that set position, with our feet in the blocks, bodies ready, muscles ready to spring, we have to have taken the time to become Holy indifferent people together. This might be the most difficult and longest part of the discernment process; it requires immense amounts of prayer and shedding of the things that might just be most important to us. But if we can commit as individuals to work at becoming holy indifferent for the sake of the body, and if we can be willing to be honest with one another about our indifference, and trustworthy enough to receive that honesty with grace, then we will be ready to "Go" and make decisions. Not that the decision making process is then "easy," but we can know that whatever the outcome may be, it is fully directed and guided by God.

To be Holy indifferent, we have to let go of self, which comes through prayer and by reminding ourselves that when we decided to become Christians, we made our first allegiance then to Jesus Christ. In following Jesus, we claim Him as Lord of our lives, saying the previous things that were so important to us, we choose to lay them down in exchange for His will and direction. Paul says it like this in Galatians 2:20:

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

May we then, like Jesus, allow our minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits to be changed through praying to the Father, "your will be done," and may we do this together.