

Practicing Our Faith: Discernment

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Philippians 1:9-11 & Romans 12:1-2
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC, on July 30, 2017*

Benedictine nun, author, and activist Sister Joan Chittister delights in telling the story of a priest who once desired transformation and enlightenment. So he traveled to see a renowned spiritual teacher, thinking that time spent with him on a retreat would be just the ticket. "Master," the priest said upon arriving, "I come to you seeking enlightenment." "Well, then," the master said, "for the first exercise of your retreat, go into the courtyard, tilt back your head, stretch out your arms and wait until I come for you." Just as the priest arranged himself in that position, the rains came. And it rained. It rained the rest of the afternoon. Finally, the old master came back. "Well, priest," he asked, "have you been enlightened today?" "Are you serious?" the priest asked, in disgust. "I've been standing here with my head up in the rain for an hour. I'm soaking wet. I feel like a fool!" The master said, "Well, priest, for the first day of a retreat that sounds like great enlightenment to me."¹

We laugh and yet we know how often we are like that misguided priest. How often we have questions about our lives, wanting so much to figure out who God would have us to be and what God would have us to do, only to find that we were asking the wrong questions. How often we come to God seeking transformation but realize we're unwilling to give anything up in the process. How often we try to take a good hard look at our lives or a long listen to our desires, but we can hardly see past the end of our noses or hear anything in the crowded noise of our minds. How often we try searching for deeper wisdom as we make decisions, only to find ourselves soaked in the rain. Discernment, I believe, is what it is we try to do, but so often fail to manage.

So what exactly is the Christian practice of discernment? If you'll permit me here for a moment, I have a prop to help illustrate this concept. Look with me

¹ Joan Chittister, *Songs of the Heart: Reflections on the Psalms*, p23-24.

if you will at this sign. What do you see? (I'm actually asking you!) Right, the FedEx logo! It's pretty straightforward - big bold colorful letters spell out the company's name against a white background. Now look more closely, in the white space right here between the E and the X. Do you see the arrow that emerges?

The pioneering designer of that FedEx logo, Linden Leader, reflected on how his award-winning logo was first introduced. "We presented the whole of our work with no mention of the hidden arrow. Our goal was to not reveal it, to see if it got discovered."² And now once you see the "hidden" arrow and connect it to the speed and precision that FedEx prides itself on, you'll always see it.

Or to use another analogy: if you've ever been to a performance of a symphony orchestra, you know the audible cue that the concert is about to begin. Before the show, members of the orchestra might practice various parts of the music they're preparing to play. Strains of a violin's tremolo or a trumpet's glissando layer on top of one another as they make their final rehearsals before the performance. But as the lights lower and the attendees scurry to their seat, a single note begins to sound. The bright and reedy clarity of the oboe begins to fill the air, as the purest of As resounds for all to hear. First the winds and brass instruments begin to match pitch, then the strings. The oboe's A continues to ring out, as all the players on the stage tune their instruments one last time to that pitch that brings them all in line with each other. It happens again after intermission, and every time these instruments gather together.

So it is with discerning God's dream for you and for us. Discernment is the the broader seeing and the deeper listening. It's like developing an "ear for music" or an "eye for art." Like cultivating the capacity to see that arrow in the FedEx logo, discernment is looking deeply at patterns, situations, feelings, impulses to be able to see what's not immediately recognizable but hidden in plain sight. And like an orchestra who returns relentlessly to the oboe's A,

² <https://www.fastcodesign.com/1671067/the-story-behind-the-famous-fedex-logo-and-why-it-works>

discernment is tuning time and time again God's pitch. The more carefully we are looking for God and being attuned to God — who God is, how God works, what God values and dreams for our world — the more we're able to sense God's nudging as we make everyday decisions in our lives.³

Priest and author Henri Nouwen describes discernment as the "spiritual understanding and experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life... the faithful living and listening to God's love and direction [through disciplined spiritual practice]... for the very purpose of fulfilling our individual calling and shared mission." It's not a step-by-step program, but rather is a "regular discipline of listening to the still, small voice beneath the rush of the whirlwind, a prayerful practice of reading the subtle signs in daily life."⁴ And these words from Ruth Haley Barton are likely familiar to you from First Baptist's period of discernment some years ago, where together you embodied her definition of discernment as "the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God, both personally and in community."⁵ It's that broader seeing and deeper listening *for the purpose of spiritual transformation*.

Spiritual transformation was on the mind of Paul in his letter to the Romans. *The Message* translation of chapter 12 is among my favorite in all of scripture. It says this:

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it."

³ Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality: Personal Spiritual Practices Among Friends*.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Discernment*, p iii, 3.

⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, p192.

That capacity to “readily recognize what God wants from you” is discernment, and by the witness of Paul, we know that discernment and transformation — “being changed from the inside out” — go hand in hand! And Paul’s words to the Philippians remind us of the end goal here, what we are discerning and being transformed to be and do: “and this is my prayer,” Paul says, “that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you discern what is best.” Born from the abundant love of God that flows freely to each of us, we too have the capacity to be transformed *for the sake of love!*

Discernment, then, is the tool that guides us on the way.

On the surface, you and I might equate discernment with decision-making. We can think of any number of questions that often involve a decision: is he or she the one I should to marry? Should I accept that promotion for more money but more responsibilities and time spent at work? Is it time to retire? Does the diagnosis change everything? Who should be our next leader? Should we make this major change now for long-term health and vitality? In decision-making, answering these questions involve weighing any number of factors and logically working one’s way to a conclusion. They usually mean seeking counsel from advisors — family, friends, leadership bodies, therapists, and guides. Sometimes there is research involved — reading certain books, referencing ideas, observing how others have responded to similar questions — and then setting goals and objectives. And if you’re anything like me, you likely will feel a flash of fear that you’ll choose incorrectly and make a mistake!

But discernment, you remember, invites us to take a step further. As we discern, we move past all the information that’s readily available and logical, so that we might see more broadly what may not be recognizable at first glance and listen more deeply to match God’s pitch for our lives.

Luckily, we are not alone as we discern God’s dream for our lives or our church. Many who have come before us have considered a holy process by which we take action on how we sense God at work in our midst. St. Ignatius of Loyola,

the Spanish priest and founder of the Jesuits, determined guiding principles for discernment that generations of Christians and Christian communities have followed as they've sought God's direction.

And so in the spirit of Ignatius, I want you to take a moment to walk through the steps of discernment as we work to see more broadly and listen more deeply. If you need to close your eyes as we do this, that's perfectly fine. Think with me about a concern you're having in your life. Perhaps there is a potential decision weighing heavily on you about yourself, your family, a relationship, your vocation, your neighborhood. Maybe it involves something you feel the need to give up or take on, something you need to correct or improve. Hold that situation firmly in your mind.

Now consider deeply the question you're trying to answer, and try to clearly articulate what it is upon which you're seeking direction. Pray about this matter, giving to God the burden of the decision so that you aren't carrying it alone and asking for help as you trust in God to work for wholeness. Pray for a holy indifference to the outcome, separating yourself from whatever deeply-held wishes you have for what might transpire so that God's dream might emerge. Pray for wisdom, and in the words of Paul, for "love to overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you discern what is best."

Then in that spirit of prayer, begin to look and listen deeply. Look to your experience, the events and happenings and patterns in your life that raised the question in the first place. Listen to those around you whose voices you trust and who clearly want you to be healthy and whole. Look to stories of scripture and Christian tradition. Listen to the facts, the pros and cons, the practical considerations, the time and money and effort and relationship expense you might spend. Look to the people whose lives will be directly impacted by your decision, regardless of the outcome. Listen to your intuition and imagination, putting on the 'clothes of the decision' as you envision what it might look and feel like. Look at the decision you seem least likely to choose and put on those

clothes as well. Listen to the deep emotions that surface vulnerably during your discernment: anger and delight, grief and hope, pain and possibility.

Then from that spirit of prayer about the decision, of looking and listening for God in the midst of your 'everyday, ordinary life', make a choice. Sit with that choice for a bit, and ask God for confirmation that this is the right decision. And filled with all the fullness of God's love, trusting in the faithfulness of your process even if questions or uncertainties still remain, it's time to act!⁶

This plunge into the deeper waters of discernment has the capacity to change your life. Just ask Xavier Le Pichon, the first person to quite literally go deepest into the oceans, some 10,000 feet below the surface of the water off the coast of Japan. His study of the earth told him that it was static, unmoving, 'fixist.' But when he took a deeper look, one at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, Xavier Le Pichon watched as two continental plates came together, the earth at work birthing and creating up from the deep through these tectonic shifts. Strange fish and creatures emerged that no one had ever before seen, and Xavier felt as if he had walked into a party that had been going on for millions of years. He said, in that moment of transcendence, of seeing broader and deeper than any other human had ever done, he just had to pray. And in light of such a sight, nothing else quite was the same. He went to Calcutta to work with Mother Teresa and the Brothers of Charity. Caring for the poorest of the poor led him back home to create an intentional community for folks with disabilities and mental health challenges. You might say he plunged into the deep, or you might say he was drenched in the rain, but either way, Xavier's life was forever transformed.⁷

⁶ This description of Ignatius's process of discernment pieced together from various sources: the CBF *Dawnings* materials, p10; Frank Rogers Jr.'s chapter "Discernment" from *Practicing Our Faith*, p103-116; Ruth Haley Barton's *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, 191-208.

⁷ From interview with Krista Tippett in *On Being*, <https://onbeing.org/programs/xavier-le-pichon-the-fragility-at-the-heart-of-humanity/>

Brothers and sisters, what, then, might be the hidden sign in your life or the pitch to which you are called to tune? May love overflow as we discern God's dream together! Amen!