

How To Be Human: Discern

A sermon preached on Matthew 9:35, 10:1-16 on Sunday, June 14, 2026,
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I.

I'm aging myself here, but I had a season of my life where my navy blue "W. W. J. D." bracelet never left my wrist right here. Anyone else? They were everywhere back in the 1990s, these colorful reminders to consider "what would Jesus do?" I had today's text on the brain this week and encountered a couple situations when the memory of the bracelet came back to mind.

This week, some Baptists made some statements about women in ministry. Perhaps you heard too. I found myself thinking, "what would Jesus do?" "As you go," he said, "proclaim good news."

I remembered this again yesterday, when many from our church were walking together in the Pride parade, extending the wide, expansive love of God to those who have been denied and demeaned by God's church. As we walked, we came upon clusters of protestors, stone-faced, holding signs with words of repentance and hell and damnation. My children are so unfamiliar with that language of condemnation. It's not the God they've come to know. It's not told to them by their teachers and pastors and friends. So they were confused. "What do we say back to them?" they asked. I had a few choice words pop to mind, to be honest, but then I remembered that old bracelet and told my kids, "we tell them that Jesus loved them." "As you go, proclaim good news," Jesus had said, "that the kingdom of heaven *is at hand*." I hollered in their direction, "Jesus loves you!" and I felt just a bit of dust shake off my feet.

II.

This week, those of us who responded to actions of other Baptists and our church group at Pride weren't the first nor will we be the last of Jesus's disciples, sent out to discern how we respond to God's work of Love in the world. For that's what Jesus does: in today's text and always.

Making sure the hearer knew "The Twelve" of which he'll speak, Matthew gets specific, in name, task, and location. Simon Peter, Andrew, James of Zebedee and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, James of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus, Simon of Canaan and Judas Iscariot, all now called *apostles* instead of *disciples*, "apostle" literally meaning "the one who is sent." They're sent to the lost house of Israel, casting out unclean spirits and curing sicknesses and disease. We should note that of all the gospel writers, Matthew is the one most intent to connect the dots between Israel and Jesus; meaning, one would hear "the twelve," and recall the twelve tribes of Israel and how they're being reimagined under Jesus's leadership. But even Matthew will be astounded at how Jesus's mission in the world will grow.

When the twelve went out, they had nothing in their pockets but a job description from Jesus, a priority toward compassion for the suffering, and some best practices for the road. "Take nothing for the journey," he said. (And the modern day travel industry shudders at the thought!) Their posture was humble yet urgent: reliant on Jesus for guidance, vulnerable to the destructive powers of the world, expectant for others' hospitality to meet their daily needs.

But do you think they felt *equipped* at that point? Bartholomew had to be wondering if the instruction manual would be included anywhere. Andrew

thought to himself, ‘maybe I should slip a few coins in my bag, you know, *just in case.*’ James and John fought over who’d bring the map. And you know Simon Peter wished secretly that Jesus could just hover in the back, like a nervous parent when their kid steps out on their own. “Jesus, you’ll **be** there, though – right?,” I have to imagine someone thinking nervously.

But he wasn’t. The one who called them to follow now sends them forth to go: to do as he did, to go where he’s been, to proclaim good news as he proclaimed, to consider *what would Jesus do*. Remember – Jesus didn’t have to do that! He could have carried on as he was, but instead he empowered *them*. Even in their failures and shortcomings and humanness! He called them to speak and heal and lead and love to the world, gave them precious little to use to do it but more than they could ever ask for, and in so doing, summoned them to discern along the way. But what are they do exactly when they come upon a person whose stubborn illness won’t budge, or if they quickly dehydrate for lack of water or suffer a foot injury for the lack of shoes, or if household after household refuses to welcome them? Some 2000 years later, those specific questions may not be ours as we go, but the underlying one remains: *how exactly are we to know what Jesus would do so that we can do the same?*

III.

“Discernment,” theologian Henri Nouwen writes, “is a spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life, acquired through disciplined spiritual practice. Discernment is faithful living and listening to God’s love and direction so that we can fulfill our individual calling and shared mission.”¹ Nouwen wrote the book on

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Discernment*, p3.

discernment, and reminds us that discernment and decision making aren't the same, primarily in the difference of posture and aims. Who among us hasn't wished for clarity from God when wrestling with an intractable conflict, a strained relationship, a diverging path upon which you must choose direction, a new alignment?

Think with me this morning about the last time in your life when you struggled to know how to move ahead, when you came up against a roadblock and were unsure how to pass. What were some of the things you did to get unstuck or to find guidance from God?

Stay with me in that situation you're considering. At some point, did you step away from it? Did you get scared considering all the ramifications of the next step, and withdraw? Did you feel overwhelmed and picked up something to numb your stimulated mind? Did you drop deep into sadness because you didn't know what to do, and let it take over everything else? Did you go into overdrive and start distracting yourself with noisy activity? I know I've done every one of these in times when I've felt stuck. You may have too. Do you notice, though, that in each of these examples, it involves separating ourselves from the experience that we're having? Fearful withdrawal may have had you on a shopping spree that has you arriving home, not even sure what all you bought. Overwhelmed numbing may lead to hours of scrolling, only to look up, headachy and overstimulated and gross and unsure how all the time had passed. Deep sadness may remove you from the relationships that matter most. Noisy productivity confuses an easily-completed to-do list with this unfinished, imperfect, intractable challenge. Instead of withdrawing, numbing, over-producing, or pulling away, what might be a better way?

Did you notice in Nouwen's definition of discernment that the practice of hearing from and listening to God so as to guide one's path must be experiential? Which means it requires our participation, and embodiment, and all five senses, and engagement in what is unfolding around us! Not distraction or distance from it, but rather a seeing and hearing through it. Not numbing or withdrawing or running away, but leaning in with every tool at our disposal. Think back to that situation you're considering. Let me ask – what would it feel like to engage all your senses, placing yourself in locations – physical, emotional, mental, spiritual – where you more deeply connect to God, and *then* listening to God, to and through the situation at hand?

IV.

You know, as we're thinking together this summer about what it means to be human, I can hardly think about being "sent forth" as Jesus's disciples out in the world, which demands our discernment on what Jesus would do, without talking about how technology inherently inhibits discernment. Don't get me wrong – I don't need to discern whether or not to wash my laundry, I just need to throw it in the washer and dryer and let the machine get it done! I don't need to listen to and through how to get from point A to point B, I just need to put the address in Google Maps and go where it says to go! Admittedly on my first day of work as Minister to Young Adults, when I realized that my passion for young adult ministry in the church didn't automatically translate to knowledge of what to do on day one, I sat down in my new office and the very first thing I did was to Google "how to start a young adult ministry." So believe me, from machines that add ease to technologies that increase knowledge, there is so much for which to be grateful.

But where this gets sticky is in technologies that are built to *replace* the human experience. Back in 1957, writer Max Frisch wrote about technology as “the knack of so arranging the world so that we need not experience it.”² Seventy years later, Max Frisch could not have imagined that technology now would write our essays, and outsource our thinking, and analyze our x-rays, and counsel us on relationships. Yet according to the data, millions of people are taking the deepest desires of their heart and working it out with Claude or Gemini, instead of through their human friendships or counselors. Countless of us are finding better, quicker, more accurate and perfect words to say through ChatGPT, and shortcutting the thinking pathways that build wisdom and interpretative insight. And along the way, I have to assume that, in so doing, the muscles and practices of discernment – so attuned to human experience and embodiment, the discernment we do as followers of Jesus – those muscles will grow stale, flabby, unable to withstand deep questions and situations that demand the fullness of our lives.

For when Jesus sends us out to care for the sick and instead we just tell them to type their symptoms into ChatGPT, we are missing the call of Jesus! When Jesus asks us to use our insight to be as wise as serpents and instead we get too distracted by our feeds and screens to pay attention, we are missing the call of Jesus! When Jesus tells us to proclaim the good news to all people and instead we let the anger and algorithms lead us to kick dust off our feet to anyone with whom we even slightly disagree, we are missing the call of Jesus! When Jesus asks us to bring the fullness of who we are into our relationships *for God’s sake* and instead we let technology dull them, distract them, shortcut them, and replace them, we are missing the call of Jesus!

² As quoted by Christine Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience: Being Human in a Disembodied World*, p1.

Frederick Buechner reminds us that the disciples “... were *human beings*. Jesus,” he said, “made his church out of human beings with more or less the same mixture in them of cowardice and guts, of intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any of us. The reason he made his church out of human beings is that human beings were all there was to make out of it. In fact, as far as I know,” Buechner says, “human beings are all there is to make it out of still.”³

So too is it with us, dear church. When Jesus sends us, he doesn't issue this same set of instructions to each of us about living the particular Christian path we're on. Jesus doesn't demand that we all take literally nothing with us as we follow on the Way, though some do feel that call. But in a spiritual sense, I think he's onto something here. Loosening our grip on the tools to distance, and numb, and protect, and replace insists that we rely on what we already have – our humanness and our relationship with God through the human and divine person of Jesus – as we go. When we choose not to scroll or supplant, our senses are activated all over again. When we live fully in the physical world and not just in the virtual one, we are alive to its learning and possibilities. When we step away from what numbs and distances, our capacity to hear God and discern the path upon which God calls increases.

So that when we come up against a place, a call, a summons where Jesus sends us, we are available to hear it. We've cast off the gold, silver, and copper that would protect us, and left behind the bag and staff that would inoculate us. We are ready. We're curious. We're hopeful. We're clear. Jesus says to go! Proclaim the good news, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*, p147.

That's what Jesus did. That's what Jesus does. That's what Jesus would do.
And that's what we will do too.

V.

As we go, let's heed the reminders of Jesus to his disciples who carried the good news long before: Expect failure and fear and people not to know or understand the source that summons you. Remember that your calling is to be faithful, not successful. Faithful as you love God and love neighbor! Faithful as you study the scripture, and listen to the Spirit, and share meals together, and cure the sick, and be with the suffering, and serve the last and the least! Faithful as you tell the profound and urgent good news that this way of living doesn't have to be the *only* way of living, because God's dream for this world is at hand! Faithful even when that message isn't heard, you carry on. You shake the dust off your feet. You keep going.

If our journey is anything like Jesus's, it will certainly lead to rejection – perhaps even from those who've known us longest. It will give life and hope, even as it disrupts. It may lead to an end, but it always returns us to the beginning where God makes all things new again.

Because that's what Jesus does.

Amen!