

Homily – Discerning the Will of God

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August 27, 2023 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

Over the last few years, I seem to have a recurring dream. In my dream, I am lost and can't get to the place I want to be. Familiar paths become warped, or if I was in the right place, then I seem to misplace it. I begin to get anxious. For some mysterious reason I am not able to find the right path to get me to my destination.

I have never studied dreams, and I don't keep a dream journal. I know some write down their dream immediately upon awakening, but I don't do that. I just remember this recurring one from over the years. And, I think that I have been having it less frequently since joining you here at St. Barnabas. Maybe that means something. Maybe I should be paying more attention to my dreams so that I can better discern what I should be doing in life.

Wouldn't that be nice to have a ready-made way to answer some of life's hardest questions?

Is this the right person to marry?

Should I sell my house and move into a retirement community?

How should I take care of an aging parent?

Should I root for the Giants or the Dodgers?

When can I quit my dreaded job?

Should I have children and when?

Should I get a dog?

Should I do chemotherapy or go straight to radical surgery?

When should I finally tithe ten percent of my income to St. Barnabas?

Sometimes the questions of life are easy and sometimes they are difficult. And, sometimes the difficult life questions happen all at the same time, and we feel buried by the weight of them.

Wouldn't it be nice if dreams could help answer our questions?

But it is not that easy is it?

Now, sometimes we can afford to make mistakes in our decisions.

Here is a story with some truth in it. "A friendly old successful man was asked in an interview, "Sir, what is the secret of your success?" He said, "Two words." "And, what are they?" "Right decisions." "But Sir, how do you make right decisions?" "One word," he responded. "And, what is that?" "Experience." "And Sir, how do you get Experience?" "Two words." "And, what are they?" "Wrong decisions." "

There is some truth in this little story. Hopefully, wrong decisions and mistakes help make us wiser. But, sometimes we don't have the luxury to make a mistake. Sometimes there is no second chance.

And, sometimes it would be nice to have a wise person make the tough decision for us. Whether it is a mentor or someone we hire, it would be nice to have someone whose discernment skills are infallible.

But, there aren't many of these people around, and mental health professionals would point out that this path is fraught with peril. Children, and some adults with limited capabilities, may need to turn over their tough decision to others, but healthy adults need to make their own decisions. Healthy adults need to do their own discernment work.

In one of her Harry Potter books, J.K. Rowling writes, "It is our choices...that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." Did you know there was wisdom in the Harry Porter novels?

We must discern our own choices in life, for this leads to mental and spiritual health.

Spiritual health is a central part of the Apostle Paul's message to us in today's reading from his letter to the Romans. *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Many of us are good at considering our physical health when discerning a tough choice in life. Whether it is a medical decision or a life style decision, we often reflect on our physical health when making these choices.

And, we are also getting better at recognizing that proper discernment is good for our mental health. When we choose actions that are congruent with our values it lifts our self-esteem and our mental health.

And good choices are important for our spiritual health. *"...discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

How often do we include God in our choices?

I am convinced, that when we talk to God or pray about our life choices, then it leads to better discernment and improved spiritual health.

When we determine whether a decision will draw us into closer relationship with God, when we consider the impact of our actions on the physical, mental and spiritual health of others, when we talk to others in the community of God about our choices, then all of these can lead to better discernment and improved spiritual health.

And you will know when you are going in the proper direction when your actions line up against the fruits of the Spirit.

In the 5th chapter of the Letter to the Galatians, Paul write, *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the [ego] with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."*

There are many ways to include God in our decision-making. Can you imagine the boost if we were to do this more frequently?

Now, proper discernment is not only important in the life of an individual, but also in the life of a community. The election of public officials and decisions on public policy are two examples that quickly come to mind.

"...discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Discernment in community can be difficult. Two of my last six parishes were ripping themselves apart through disagreements about worship and music styles. Maybe we can call that toxic discernment. Many of you have heard me say that if you talk to ten people about worship music, ten people will give you twelve

different views about music. Here at St. Barnabas we continue the traditions of the last few rectors as we rotate through many of the beautiful liturgy options of our church. And, we don't do just one style of music, but embrace well done music in many forms. This is beautiful. This is our way to sidestep that toxic discernment that can rip a community apart.

And, disagreements in a parish are small potatoes when compared to the toxic discernment we seem to have on the national level these days.

How is a person, how is a community to discern? How are we to distinguish the voice of God from all the other voices that clamor at us – those of our culture, peer pressure, our careers, our egos?

I should point out that eighty percent of the battle in discernment is choosing, once again, to put the voice of God at the center of the decision. To me at least, it seems like a lot of the decisions being made around us have nothing to do with God. Though this is not an entirely fair statement for me to make, since sometime disagreement is because two people may properly discern different answers.

For example, two people may be wrestling with what seems like the same question; whether to volunteer at the St. Barnabas Thrift Shop. For one person, the call might turn out to be to stay home and spend much needed time with the family. For the other person, the call might be to work at the Thrift Shop and let the family develop a sense of independence. These are two proper answers to the same question.

Again, having God at the center of discernment is eighty percent of the battle, but the other twenty percent is still pretty complicated.

“God speaks, touches, and reveals in God's own way and in God's own time. Still the presence of certain conditions, such as trust, prayer, and humbleness, makes discernment of God's call more likely.”

First and foremost, we have to be willing to trust God and one another. Trust that God is present to us, speaks to us, is loving and merciful, and has work for us to do.

Second, use prayer to listen for God. We must listen with open hearts and open minds, especially to what we do not want to hear. We need to listen with our bodies as well as with our minds, for God speaks to us through our pains and pleasures, through our wills, emotions, and senses. To hear, we must listen with

every fiber of our being. Prayer, especially prayer for discernment, involves listening.

Finally, discernment is more likely if we are humble. Humility grounded in self-knowledge, helps us to avoid the distortions of inordinate self-confidence and exaggerated self-doubt. However, keep in mind that humility is not gained by seeking it directly nor obtained by focusing on one's faults and sins. Rather, it comes quietly to those who draw close to Jesus. As we experience God's greatness, we sense our own smallness. When we encounter the wholeness of Jesus, we realize our own incompleteness. That is what it means to be humble.

"...discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect."

As Christians and as spiritual beings we are called to include God in the discernment of life's questions. Our discernment may be based on trust, prayer, and humbleness. And, as I said last week, all we do should be based on faith expressing itself in love.

Let us lean into our ever-present God to help us discern both our questions and our answers.

Parts of this homily are based on or taken from the book, Listening Hearts – Discerning Call in Community.