

## *Humbly, Fervently Draw Near*

Joshua 24:15

Sermon by Mag Richer Smith

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*<sup>15</sup>Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."*

A prayer from Paul to the Church at Ephesus goes something like this:

*"I pray that you may be given the spirit of wisdom & vision, so that the eyes of your hearts may be illumined, & you will KNOW the Hope to which you have been called."*

A prayer from St Francis begins:

*Almighty, Eternal, Just and Merciful God,  
Grant us in our misery the grace  
to do for you alone what we know you want us to do  
and always to do what pleases you.*

But how do we know?

How do we know what pleases God, and how do we discern THAT it's God's Voice we are hearing?

Last week when Bob and I were visiting with Wilma Shank she shared a story with us that went something like this:

A man visited a church for the first time wearing *tattered jeans and a T-shirt full of holes*. After the service the pastor welcomed him and invited him to come back and then said,

*"And I invite you to pray this week and ask God what appropriate attire for worship looks like, and then wear that next time you come."*

The man returned the following Sunday *wearing the same jeans and the T-shirt with all the holes*. The pastor reminded this man that he had invited him to pray about his attire, and the man said, *"I did ask God about what I should wear to this church, and God said, 'I don't know because I've never been there.'"*

What is God wanting us to hear?

A counselor once told me:

*"You know it's a call from God...  
if you don't want to go,  
if the pay is bad,  
and if you have a better offer somewhere else."*

While that was a tongue&cheek retort,  
it did make me ask:

SO WHAT ARE the considerations in making decisions?  
What is the process of discernment that is SPIRIT-Led?

The summer after college graduation with no job in sight,  
I was faced with UNCHARTED GROUND, not knowing  
where to go or what I was to do.

My mother's counsel was,

*"Pray for God's guidance...Want to listen... and God will show you."*

My mother's words were similar to what my spiritual director told me many years later...*"Keep lifting this up to God, and you will know when you need to know."*

Both of these women, whose walk with God was evident,  
*trusted* a SPIRIT who's *waiting* to be heard.

Neither Bob nor I had pastoral ministry in our life plan when  
we entered seminary.

Living in Pittsburgh for over 2 years after retirement was also  
an unplanned surprise.

Interim pastoring at Berkey was not something we sought or  
could have foreseen.

SOMETIMES we see the hand of God *best in retrospect...*  
when we recognize HOW God has been *present & moving*  
in the choices we've made & the places where  
circumstances have taken us.

OUR texts today are about spiritual discernment...  
*seeking, asking, listening & choosing again*  
*whom it is we follow.*

Joshua is a very old man close to death...  
He has led the Israelite people to a *new PLACE- a new land*,  
and he sees them now being wooed *in many directions*:  
*so many options...so many gods...so many distractions,*  
*so many different voices...*  
& so he *passionately urges* the people to be DISCERNING.

"Decide... he says...  
*CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE."*  
Where is your heart? your center?  
WHO do you want to be?  
and *How will you follow the One whose*  
*LOVE has and will keep on LIBERATING you?*

Choose THIS DAY...

I remember a retreat at St. Meinrad's Abby when I asked the abbot *when it was that he experienced a call* to be a monk. He thought for a moment & said: "*JUST THIS MORNING!*" The choice of whom to SERVE, whom to worship, to whom we give our allegiance is before us every day.

"Choose *THIS DAY* whom you will serve."

BUT...How do we listen to the SPIRIT in making our choices?

How do we tell the difference between delusions, mistaken impressions, our own wishes on one hand .... and GOD'S *DESIRES* on the other?

How do we distinguish the light that comes from GOD *apart from* the bright ideas of our psyches?

Well, maybe we don't!

Following a call from God requires faith in what is NOT SEEN and in what is not known (with no money back guarantees).

Actually, THE DESIRE for ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY can be a subtle enemy of active faith.

*Proximate certainty* may be all we get & all we need to set out...

Abraham and Sarah, the prototypes for 3 great religions, go out not knowing where they will land...simply *trusting... needing God to hold their hand and lead the way.*

Who are we to say HOW God is going to act & how we will be *called* to respond? (In all likelihood, we will be pushed in unexpected ways!)

And what about those slaves coming out of Egypt?

Could they even *begin to imagine* where God was leading? But still they journeyed on with both doubt & hope~  
everyday needing to *choose again whom they would serve.*

And some days they followed Yahweh,  
and some days they bowed to a golden calf...  
Some days they *pleaded* to go back  
and other days they *stood in awe* of the cloud of presence and the provision of manna...  
and now as Joshua calls to them, they are in a new land where the menu of gods is as vast as the internet...

And they have CHOICES to make about *whom to serve & worship* and *to whom to give their allegiance.*  
CHOOSING & DISCERNING GOD's VOICE (among all the *other voices*), will require *ATTENTIVENESS & Discrimination.*  
*HOW do WE do this?*  
*Here may be some clues:*

1<sup>st</sup> God speaks as we *read SCRIPTURE* and *apply* it to our lives & to the world.

Someone told me recently that "*Any 10 year old can open the Bible and see what God's will is. It's there, plain as day!*"

Well, sometimes I *wish* it was that easy...and I'd just like to go back to the innocent- literal approach to the Bible of my childhood.

But now I know that there is work to do in *interpreting* that WORD...understanding its context,  
learning about why it was written

and then applying its light to our lives.

We could do well to have lots more Bible studying... studying the LIVING WORD that OPENS us to new ways of seeing God, ourselves and the world around us.

Brian McLaren says that: *"The purpose of scripture is to reveal a life-giving, healing and liberating PRESENCE, who beckons us and beckons the arc of the universe toward ever-greater wholeness, harmony, aliveness."*

The Bible is a vast library and when read and studied with openness to God's *leading*, seeking God's heart, scripture becomes our compass, but not a recipe book with instructive details for every decision.

And while it is God's Word written, the BIBLE is NOT GOD. And while it *points us* to GOD, It does not offer us the sum total of WHO God is WHERE God is *leading*.

2<sup>nd</sup> God speaks to us through a Moving SPIRIT that *whispers in our innermost being*, and is also way out ahead of us.

When we cultivate an active prayer life wanting to HEAR, *desiring to align ourselves with God's desires*, THEN God WILL speak...

One of my favorite verses is from Deuteronomy 4:

(in fact it was our wedding text)

*"Seek the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and you will find God, for Yahweh your God is a merciful God and will not desert you or destroy you or forget the covenant God has made with you."*

The Holy SPIRIT speaks in our *guts* and intuitions,  
in our minds and imaginations,  
through our bodies, feelings, hunches, dreams,  
    & our "Aha's"... opening the eyes of our hearts.  
IF our prayer is "*Show us your light and truth,*" GOD will  
answer, & we "*will KNOW when we need to know.*"  
BUT IT is hard to listen for God with *open-hearted, unjudging*  
*receptivity*. It is hard to sit *OPEN-HANDED* (without placing  
*our own AGENDA & pre-conceptions in the forefront.*)  
It is hard to *LET* the SPIRIT *melt* us and *mold* us anew,  
when we've become *fossilized*.

When Jesus says, "Ask and you will receive."  
he's not talking about all the desires of our hearts being  
granted, he is talking about *seeking* God and *receiving*  
greater clarity in the direction God is *pointing*.

3<sup>rd</sup> God *sheds new light* through our EXPERIENCES...  
By *learning to know* persons who *differ* from us...  
By walking with the marginalized,  
carrying the pain of our neighbors  
& the plight of the poor...

By deep listening to our own pain and  
And by sitting at the table,  
face-to-face with un-likeminded brothers and sisters  
*wanting* to hear their perspective,  
*desiring* to understand how they've arrived at a place  
where we are not...  
God is PRESENT in the midst of these kind of conversations.  
When we *Listen to each other's stories with RESPECT,*  
*LIGHT filters through the debris...*

God sends out *fresh rays* through our experiences.

4<sup>th</sup> God speaks through a community who gathers together to seek *the mind of Christ* (in a world where so many other voices are vying for our attention).

When we *open up* our questions, hopes, doubts and convictions and *listen for* the wisdom & the counsel of brothers & sisters who love Jesus and love us...

And when a community *humbly, fervently draws near* to GOD's HEART praying:

*"Send out your light and your truth, and let them lead us."*...

*Then GOD WILL LEAD US! God is here among us, always wanting to move us to new vistas and deeper love.*

5<sup>th</sup>. God always speaks to us in JESUS whose *self-giving, nonviolent Way of love* is the HOPE for all humanity.

It is not just asking: *what would Jesus DO?*

But *looking closely* at what Jesus DID...

So that in all our discernment the plumbline question will be:

What does loving (like Jesus loves) *look like*  
here and here and here?

And as Howard Charles( my New Testament instructor)always told us:

*"If you are going to e'er... e'rr on the side of GRACE."*

Spiritual discernment requires LETTING GO of anything that gets in the way of *LOVING LIKE JESUS LOVES*.



Where there is oppression and where people are *inflicting* harm on one another, there is clarity WHERE Jesus is...  
always on the side of victims...  
always on the side of healing.

There are times we can say with MLKING that  
*"If we are wrong, then God Almighty is wrong,"*  
because the God we serve and the GOD JESUS EMBODIED  
is ALWAYS on the side of Justice.

The only NEW commandment Jesus gives his followers is this:  
*"Love one another as I have loved you."*

Still... All of our Attentiveness to the VOICE of LOVE  
does not make us Hesitation & Doubt-free...  
The call is to *humbly, fervently draw near to*  
the Heart of GOD and the Way of JESUS,  
acknowledging our capacity for fallibility.

*"It came to me."* is more preferable than *"God told me."*  
OR *"I feel called to"* instead of the *"The Lord calls me."*  
Maybe we need to say:  
*"We may be wrong, but this is where we perceive the*  
*LEADING of God."*

And then NOTICE THE FRUITS...  
IF something is from GOD, we will *know by the FRUITS...*  
*Does our discernment bring love, joy, peace, gentleness,*  
*kindness, self-control, patience, generosity...*  
*and does it lead us to greater justice for the oppressed.*  
THESE are the fruits to look for.

AND ...here's the thing...

Our Creative, Moving, GOD takes our clumsy & feeble attempts to follow and all our missteps, and creates *arcs of grace* . GOD is always growing GRACE!

When our greatest desire is to

*"Have the same mind among us that was also in Christ Jesus WHO let go of: control and power, esteem and approval, security and survival,"*

then we can walk with *hope* & *TRUST* into the future.

And we can pray like Thomas Merton prayed:

*"MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going.*

*I do not see the road ahead of me.*

*I cannot know for certain where it will end.*

*Nor do I really know myself,*

*and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the DESIRE TO PLEASE YOU DOES IN FACT PLEASE YOU.*

*And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.*

*And that I never do anything apart from that desire.*

*And I know if I do this, that you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing of it.*

*SO I will trust you, for you are ever with me."*

May we humbly, fervently draw near.