

Discernment
Acts 15:1-21

Fifth Sunday in Lent/9th March 2008

The early church was confronted with an enormous problem. Can Gentiles become followers of Jesus without first becoming Jews? Was Jesus' resurrection only good news for Jews, but not everyone else?

This was a monumental crisis for the early followers of Jesus and for First Century Judaism. Jesus was a Jew, of course, resurrected from the dead by Yahweh, the God of Israel. Jesus' resurrection signified the beginning of a new age, the victory of Yahweh over sin and death and every principality and power that seeks to destroy God's creation and dehumanize God's people. Jesus is the promised Messiah – the promised deliverer, the Redeemer. Jesus' followers were then empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue his work of love and justice, to extend God's forgiveness and redemptive grace beyond Jerusalem. That's what Jesus' first followers thought they were to do. That is, until the same Holy Spirit started to move beyond the confines of Jesus' Jewish followers.

The Holy Spirit started showing up in unexpected places, like in the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion stationed at the Empire's administrative center in Caesarea Maritima, as we find in Acts 10. About the same time Cornelius has his vision telling him to go searching for Peter in Joppa, Peter has a vision. Peter sees heaven open up and a large sheet comes down, held by its four corners. In that sheet were "all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds," all the things a good Jew would be squeamish around. Then he hears a loud voice, "Get up Peter; kill and eat." Peter says, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Just as Peter was coming out of the trance, God said there'll be a knock on the door – go with them. Sure enough. There's a knock on the door. The friends of the Centurion summon Peter and he goes. Now, remember, this strange, disturbing vision was still in his head as he made his way to Cornelius' home. Peter arrives, knows he needs to testify about Jesus. The next thing he knows – while Peter was still speaking, the text tells us, he's interrupted by the Spirit, the Spirit "fell upon all who heard the word." The uncircumcised, the Gentiles, begin to praise Yahweh for Jesus. How can this be, thought Peter? But then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So the Gentiles were baptized – for who can say who is in and who is out of the Kingdom when the Spirit moves? And – perhaps more significantly – Peter remained with them for several days – in their homes, in their non-Kosher homes, sharing meals at their very non-Kosher table. Peter must have been shell-shocked by the whole experience. No doubt saying to himself, how on earth am I going to explain this to the elders back in Jerusalem? They'll never believe it – and yet it's true. Peter wasn't the only one – remember what happened when the Lord showed up in Paul's life. The next thing he knew he was off preaching to the Gentiles.

Now, not everyone believed this was right. They were not happy with this at all, so they went to the Council in Jerusalem. "Unless you are circumcised according to the customs of Moses, you cannot be saved," the men from Judea declared, furious with the way the laws of

Moses were being ignored. It was not uncommon for Gentiles to convert to Judaism, but that's not what the fight was over. Their concern was this: what happens if a pagan or Gentile becomes a follower of Jesus, but does not complete all the purifications prescribed by the Hebrew tradition, will they then contaminate the purity of the rest of the congregation? They were concerned about the well-being of the entire community, but also the state of one's relationship with God. How can there be any other way? How can there be *table-fellowship* with these new believers if they don't follow the purity requirements for sharing a meal? Because, remember, Jesus' followers were still very much part of the Jewish community, not set apart from it.

It was up to the Council in Jerusalem to settle this heated dispute – what was God doing among them? What was God's will on this matter? Acts 15 is a watershed moment, a pivotal moment in the history of the church. The majority of us as Gentiles would probably not be Christian today but for the Council's wisdom to discern the movement of God. Their decision acknowledged that God could be up to something radically new and different; it paved the way for Gentiles to become followers of Jesus without following all of the Jewish dietary laws. *What we discover in this text is the way the early church discerned the movement of the Spirit in the midst of heated debate and disagreement, over issues that were extremely personal, over practices that were deeply cherished. This text remains a helpful guide when we, both individually and together as a people of faith, seek after God's will.*

How did they discern the will of God? How did they reach a decision? First, through debate – respectfully listening to everyone and approaching the issue with an open mind. Second, through testimony – people spoke from their experience of what God was doing in their lives and their experiences were honored, not discounted. They listened, not “out of a humanist notion that people of an opposing view are worthy of respect, [or because every opinion counts,] but because one can never know whom the Spirit will choose to speak through on any given occasion.”¹ Finally, through framing the issue correctly, they came to a consensus – Peter moved beyond either-or thinking and offered a third way, basically asking the question, “what is precious and what is expendable? What is at the core of our faith and identity, and what is not?” Some of the Jewish laws were followed, considered essential; the others were left for grabs so as not to exclude the Gentiles from the community. Writing almost 1500 years later, the Lutheran Reformer Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), could have spoken for them when he said: “In essentials, unity; in differences, liberty; in all things, charity (or love).”

The contemporary church and denominational squabbles could still learn from this method: what is precious and what is expendable for our congregation, for the church in general today?

But did you notice what the apostles and elders in Jerusalem did not do in their discernment process? *They didn't take a vote.* They didn't poll the council and go with the majority. Neither was this a council of bishops asserting their authority over the people. What mattered most was the will of God. Of course, in our polity as Presbyterians, the majority matters. We take a vote and the majority wins. There's an old Latin phrase that goes with this

¹ Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 92-99.

approach: *vox populi, vox dei*, the voice of the people is the voice of God. The will of the majority is the will of God. You can see why democracies have often appreciated this way of doing things – and how we’ve confused the will of the majority with the will of God. Sometimes it is; but sometimes it’s not. Just because the majority agrees does not mean that God agrees or that we’ve discerned the will of God. As we will see next week, it was the voice of the people, the crowds that could affirm Jesus in one breath and then denounce him the next. The majority was anti-Christ, was anti-God. The prophet is often a minority voice, yet precisely the voice of God in the Old Testament. This is why our Presbyterian polity has always insisted that we need to make room for the minority and allow the minority to speak (as we do at the General Assembly), because they might see things the majority does not see, have an experience of God that the majority has failed to notice. In the Thursday morning study of Acts and in our discussion of Anthony Robinson’s book, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, we have talked about this larger issue of discernment as critical to the health of the church. Robinson says it best, “Democracy, which honors important values, seeks the will of the majority; discernment seeks the will of God and the mind of Christ.”²

That’s what we’re about in the church – seeking the will of God, seeking the mind of Christ. It’s our constant goal, especially as we move toward April 6 and make important decisions with regard to the scope of the needed renovations and how we’re going to pay for them. We can take a vote – and we will, we must – but it’s my hope that before we vote we will be more concerned with discernment than democracy, of seeking after what God desires from us (less of what our egos want), of knowing the will of Christ for us, and then move toward it.

But how do we do this? How do we discern? There’s no foolproof way. I’ll offer one suggestion in a minute. First, I can share how Christians *don’t* do it. Sometimes we think the best decision is the most rational one, or the one that’s going to save us the most (the “best buy”), or perhaps the best decision is the safe one, the cautious one. Sometimes we draw up a list of *pros* and *cons*, add up the columns and one with the most items “wins.” You can do this. But that doesn’t mean it’s God’s will. Sometimes it just means you’re good at math. When God is in the picture, sometimes it doesn’t all add up. It’s why Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) once said, “For two and two make four is not part of life, but the beginning of death.”³ And why, as Jesus taught, the mathematics of the Kingdom, 5+2 can add up to 5000.⁴ We must be ever aware of the way our human assumptions try to define and delimit what God can or cannot do. I’m not suggesting that Christians are anti-rationalists, foolish, or always take senseless risks, but something else needs to be included in our discernment process.

This appeal to reason, of needing to reduce risk, always playing it safe, endlessly trying to save money, even avoiding struggle, tension, and suffering are all worthy and noble, at times, *but they are not necessarily categories of concern for God*. But they are, if you think about it, categories of the *heart*. The hopes and dreams and passions of the human heart follow after a

² Anthony Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 185.

³ Cited by Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 58.

⁴ As in five loaves and two fish; see Matthew 14:13-21.

different star, march to the beat of a different drum. The heart will not always allow the rational or the safe or the expected to define its life. It wants to live beyond the ego, beyond the rational. The contemporary novelist, Paul Coelho, wrote, "Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dream." The brilliant mathematician and Christian, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), once said, "The heart has reasons that reason cannot know." Just consider the heart of Jesus – the gift of his life, his ministry, his passion for God's will and the heart, the *courage* – literally, from the French meaning "with heart" – to suffer even for those who could not embrace his love for God; the purpose of his life had nothing to do with being rational or getting the best buy, he didn't draw up a *pro* and *con* list to figure out what he should do with his life, he wasn't concerned with playing it safe, avoiding risk, and running away from suffering; in fact, following his heart *for God* led him to suffering. It all didn't add up for him and on the cross his cry of dereliction was another way of saying it doesn't all add up, this doesn't make any sense. And yet that was what was precisely needed, the will of God for his life, and it all became clear later, remembering with joy that it was all worth it.

How do individuals and groups discern the will of God and the mind of Christ? There are no simple answers. But a good place to start is with prayer – to pray for the *desire* to want to know God's will, the heart of God, and then pray for the *courage* to follow, with heart. Part of that desire is a wish to know the very heart of God – what would please God's heart, what does God care about, where are God's passions, hopes, dreams? Where is God at work in the world and how can I/we become a part of it? How can I help? Where am I a hindrance? *What will make God happy?* We ask this question, not in order to make God happy because God is mad at us or waiting to punish us, or in the sense that we're trying to curry favor or make God love us – God *already* loves us. Already. Accept it! Because you know, because we know that we are loved and being loved by God through Christ, and because we love God, we want to seek to do God's will. It's no different from the way you desire to enhance the happiness of the one you love. You ask, what will make her happy? What will make him happy? And then you do it.

With hearts full of love for God, we *want* – not *have* – to do God's will. What will make God most happy? That's a good place to begin the work of discernment.

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