

Discernment Sunday, Pentecost C6
June 26, 2016
“Discernment”
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
David Noble

Romans 11.33-12.7

³³O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” ³⁵“Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?” ³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

12I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do 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. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;

Galatians 5.1, 13-25

5For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

1.

Freedom!

We make a lot out of that here in this country. Next weekend we will celebrate Independence Day, our yearly anniversary of freedom *from* outside control and our freedom *for* whatever pursuit of happiness we desire. One of the freedoms we enjoy as Americans is the freedom of religion. We can take it or leave it, we are free to choose.

We have chosen to take it up, to gather as a congregation, to claim our freedom to believe. And one of our basic theological understandings... is freedom. God’s word says so: *For freedom Christ has set us free.*

But the Galatian church to whom Paul was writing, was not free. Some of them were stuck, believing that God would love them if they just did the right things and believed the right things. They trusted their own knowledge, their own common sense, their own wisdom-- and it got them in trouble. They wanted to lead themselves.

And their insistence that they could do it themselves was leading them into slavery—becoming slaves to their limited knowledge and understanding and tradition. They were not producing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control because they were not asking for God to lead them, for the Holy Spirit to guide them.

2.

Years ago I asked a Bible study I was leading, “How do elders and other church leaders do their work?” One of the elders in the Bible study said, “We get together and share our wisdom so we can do the best job possible.”

I’m afraid that’s true.

At many church meetings, as in this answer to my question, God is not mentioned except at the opening prayer and the closing prayer. And someone quoting a verse from Scripture to help guide the making of a decision would seem way too religious. And stopping to ask the Holy Spirit to help—well, that seems terribly Pentecostal.

Worship and work have become separated. Too often, God is relegated to the sanctuary.

But God came in the flesh. Jesus died and rose in this world because God intends to redeem this whole world, not to let it go. The people out there in the community are God’s concern, and as followers of Jesus, Paul says, they’re our concern too. The Spirit will lead you, he says, if you’ll just ask.

3.

This way of living, of making decisions, of finding our way forward is called discernment. It means “knowing and doing God’s will,” instead of trying to lead ourselves.

I love the Bible stories that describe how people learn what God’s will is, and then do it. Remember the story of the prophet Samuel when God told him to go out and find a king for the people of Israel? And God said this new king would come out of the family of Jesse.

But there already was a king, King Saul, and Samuel said, “How can I do that? I’ll lose my head if King Saul knows I’m hunting for a new king behind his back.” God said, “Invite Jesse and his family to a party and no one will know what you’re up to.”

So Samuel and the Jesse clan get together. It only takes a few minutes and Samuel knows exactly which one of Jesse’s sons God wants to be the new king- the eldest son. He gets his anointing oil ready, but God says, “No, not that one. Keep looking.” OK, Samuel goes on to the next eldest and gets ready to anoint him, but God says again, “No, keep going.” Samuel went through seven of Jesse’s sons this way. But there was an eighth, a young boy out in the fields minding the sheep while one of his older brothers was sure to be anointed king. “That’s the one,” God said. “Bring him in.” And that’s how David became King of Israel.

1. It took time. Discernment does.
2. Samuel asked a question, God answered it, Samuel listened to it, and obeyed. (discernment is “asking” and “waiting”)
3. God’s choice wasn’t the first choice,

nor the easy choice,
nor the obvious choice.

(Samuel had to shed his preconceptions, his assumptions, his prejudices.

4. God saw something in David that no one else saw.
(We almost never see the whole picture ourselves)
5. God was at work right beside the prophet Samuel. Right there.
6. And Samuel listened and obeyed.

All of this is together is discernment.

God was near, working to redeem the world through Samuel who didn't know God's will at first, but persisted, and followed.

4.

When I arrived here two and a half years ago I said I would do two things. That I would love you-- I hope you've experienced my love--and then challenge you to do something new.

For 18 months you have begun to learn the discernment process. That deserves congratulations! Not many congregations have the courage, the patience, the willingness to spend that kind of time learning a new way to live. I want to compliment you on that. Please don't be hurt that I say you've begun to learn the discernment process, because it's hard and it takes time. We'll be learning it for a while.

But you are embracing a powerful way to be a congregation. To spend a long time on one project, asking God, "What do you want with us?" is faithful, and Biblical, and bold. When we started this journey of discernment in October of 2014 we agreed we would make a bold decision that would express God's will, as far as we could know it.

So in a few minutes we will ask once more what God wants with us, and then if our discernment is completed, with God's help we will start to do it.

Christ has set us free. Let us be guided by the Spirit.