

Holy Heroes: Making Godly Decisions
I Kings 3:3-12; I John 4:1-6
July 8, 2007

A certain inner city school teacher, wanting her students to have some contact with the animal world, brought a rabbit to her classroom. The children were delighted and asked all kinds of questions about rabbits. In the lively exchange, one student inquired whether it was a “boy or a girl” rabbit. The teacher was taken aback by the question and confessed that she did not know. A little girl’s face suddenly lit up and she exclaimed, “We could vote on it!”

Life is full of decisions. Daily we are faced with choices ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary: what to eat, how to spend money, vocational decisions, relocation choices, how to best care for loved ones. Most decisions are far too complex for a simple “yea” or “nay” vote.

Solomon was barely 20 years old, if even that, when he became king upon the death of his father, David. As he ascended to the throne, he was aware that he would face many weighty decisions during his reign. Thus he asked of the Lord an understanding mind which would enable him to discern good from evil.

Discernment is a gift of God to help us make decisions. Classic spirituality knows it as “discernment of the will of God.” Roman Catholics have much literature about discernment; Protestants have tended to focus on “the will of God.” When we talk of the will of God, we mean that which God wants, desires, intends to happen or to be. God’s will is that which brings God delight and pleasure. Too frequently the will of God has been misunderstood. It has come to be associated with everything that is evil and tragic. In the face of tragedy for which there is no human understanding, disasters are often erroneously considered “acts of God.” But our loving Creator does not wish to harm creation. God desires goodness, wholeness, and health for all creation. When we seek to discern “the will of God,” we are asking God to make known to us those things which bring delight and joy to God.

The Latin word for discernment means “to separate, distinguish, determine, or sort out.” Discerning the will of God is a process of distinguishing the still small voice of God amidst the cacophony of voices that vie for our attention. We will not always be privileged to know the fullness of God’s will; more often we will discover the next step God desires we take. Rarely will we receive a specific, detailed action plan; rather we

will sense a call, a nudge, a prompting to the fullness of what we might become.

Certain conditions make our lives ripe for discernment, such as a consistent life of prayer. In listening for God, we must be attentive to every fiber of our being, for God speaks through the body, mind, heart, and soul. We must trust that God is present, that God speaks to us, and that God has work for us to do. It is helpful to empty our minds of preconceptions and prejudgments in order to listen for God. Discernment requires patience, for God's desires are often not immediately revealed. God's timing is not our timing. Prayer, trust, openness, and patience help us to be open to discerning God's will.

A missionary couple went to Brazil. In one of their letters mailed to friends and prayer partners, they included a calendar of events in their lives. At the top of the calendar they had written, "Our Schedule." Under that heading they had listed goals for their ministry and beside each goal they had written a projected date for attaining it.

But they had crossed out the word "our" and changed it to "God's Schedule." Beside some of the goals they wrote a date when it had been achieved, implying that God had desired them to achieve that goal. Some goals did not have dates by them. The couple commented that they had much to learn about God's timing and the necessity of waiting with faith.

St. Ignatius of Loyola suggests some exercises of the imagination to help test initial decisions. First, imagine yourself on your deathbed sometime in the future, and ask, "What decision would I like to have made, way back then?" Second, imagine yourself standing before God at the end of your life. Before the eyes of God, what would I like to have decided? Third, imagine a loved one or colleague coming to you with the same situation. How would you direct or advise this person? Sometimes thoughtful consideration of one of these exercises can provide the illumination we need and confirm a choice.

Other decisions are more complex and require more time and thought. Ignatius has suggestions and steps for such decisions as well. Begin by gathering pertinent information from your experience, scripture, the community, reading, counseling, or others. Take some time to carefully look at each side of the question. First, consider the negative option, the one that looks least attractive. For example, if considering a vocation change, focus initially on the situation you are already in. For a specific period of time, preferably a few days, live with that choice, attending to the movement of God in your life, and writing down supporting reasons for making that choice. Weigh every reason. Notice how you feel at the end of that period.

Then for the same period of time, consider the other alternative. Live with the choice, listen to God, list your reasons and weight them, notice your feelings.

After considering both options, review the reasons and weigh them. Recall your feelings, your sense of leading, insights that came as you lived with each option. Then make a tentative decision and live with it. Again pay attention to feelings. Does a sense of peace come? If so, make the decision and move ahead. If there is no peace from the tentative decision, chose the alternative, listen to God, notice feelings, test the “rightness.” If peace comes, this is the decision. If there is no peace after testing both choices, postpone the decision if possible or simply flip a coin and trust that God will lead you in either direction.

The Quaker tradition offers a method for assisting members of their faith community in discerning God’s will. It is called a clearness committee. Historically Quakers have used a clearness committee when two members of a local meeting (congregation) ask to be married. Instead of arranged marriages, it is marriages with the consent of a committee! A small group of members gathers with the couple several times to pray, to ask caring but probing questions, to explore issues the couple might not have considered on their own, to listen carefully to how the couple answers.

Clearness committees are often gathered for other types of decisions as well. The process is based on the belief that each person has an inner divine light that gives us the guidance we seek, but that light is often obscured by various forms of interference. The clearness committee functions not to give advice, but to help remove the obstacles so that individuals might discover their own God-given calling.

Parker Palmer tells of a time in which he gathered a clearness committee. He had applied for the position of president at a theological seminary. He was selected as the top candidate and offered the position. Palmer gathered his clearness committee to help him make this vocational decision. His friends asked deep, probing questions but still had no clarity. Finally someone asked, “Why do you want to be president anyway?” After a moment he replied, “I’ve always wanted to see my picture in the paper with the word ‘president’ underneath.” He didn’t take the job!¹

Leaders in families, churches, communities, and businesses will always be faced with decisions. As we seek to be the leaders God calls us to be, we can invite God to be a part of our decision making process. God’s will is what brings us wholeness, completeness, and well-being. Let us invite God to be a partner in our life choices.

¹ Parker Palmer, *Listen to Your Life* (San Francisco: Joseey-Bass Inc., 2000), pp. 44-46.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA