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Proverbs 3:5-8, Philippians 1:9-11 and Romans 12:1-2

Deeper in Faith: Insight & Discernment

Our third scripture reading this morning is from Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans is a theologically weighty tome which takes the form of three theological arguments, addressing how those from a Jewish heritage and those who are not, Gentiles, can understand God through Jesus Christ. It is through the faith of Christ and through Christ's life, death and resurrection that we gain insight into God and into God's will for our lives. With that frame in mind, hear now these words from Romans chapter 12:

I appeal to you therefore, siblings, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

"Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind." This was the first scripture passage that popped into my mind when I read of recent study by psychologists from Spain, China and the United Kingdom. Here is the gist of the experiment:

"Imagine you are in a single-file line of people calmly evacuating a building. As you walk down a hallway, you come to a fork. Each path leads to a different, but equally suitable, exit. You watch as the people in front of you peel off one-by-one; some go left and others head right, apparently at random. Finally, it's your turn to choose. Which fork do you take?"¹

Using videos with virtual participants, the researchers queried nearly 400 adults asking them to choose an exit path - either right or left - and to do so quickly. The participants could see the choices of those ahead of them in the line. It was an exquisitely designed study, with lots of counterbalancing and controls. The researchers found that participants went with the wisdom of the crowd. People tended to pick whichever option the majority of people that went before them had selected. The summary of the article I read was titled "The road more traveled." The researchers were surprised by the strength of the findings and queried the participants as to why they had made their choices. Not surprisingly, "the responses were variable—one individual went to the left because she was left-handed, for instance—but many reported they had intentionally and consciously chosen to follow the majority."

¹ Research summary can be found at: <https://www.science.org/content/article/scienceadviser-ice-giants-probably-aren-t-so-icy>; Article can be accessed at <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/rsif/article/23/240/20251214/482457/Determining-social-mechanisms-for-sequential>

Following the majority. Conforming to what the crowd does. That is our very human tendency. And Paul said, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind.” “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that you may discern what is the will of God.” Clearly this is easier said than done.

We are continuing our summer worship series *Deeper in Faith* this morning. This is the sixth week of a seven week series. And for those of you who yearn for completion, note we will take a break from the series for a few weeks and finish it up on September 13. Thus far we have considered our values and practices, our sabbath-keeping practices, being still, silent, in solitude, and serving, staying present in the here and now and distinguishing among knowledge, truth and trust. Today we examine the practice of “discernment” which in some ways intersects with all of our prior weeks.

“Discernment” is one of those words that gets thrown around a lot in church circles, especially as related to the ways God calls us to serve. It is about judgement and making wise choices, and has the connotation that these judgments and choices are being guided by subtle cues that are not always evident from the surface, seeing past what is obvious on the surface to a deeper level of meaning. We can be discerning about the company we keep, we can be discerning about the wines we drink, we can be discerning about the careers we choose, and we can be discerning about how we respond to God’s call in our lives.

Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen defines discernment in this way: “Discernment is a spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life that is acquired through disciplined spiritual practice. Discernment is faithful living and listening to God’s love and direction so that we can fulfill our individual calling and shared mission.”²

Nouwen packs a lot of depth into a few words. Discernment is a spiritual understanding. It is experiential knowledge. It is faithful living. It is listening to God’s love and direction. And it is acquired through a disciplined spiritual practice. Let’s walk through these a bit.

Discernment is a **spiritual understanding** as opposed to a concrete, knowledge based understanding. It recognizes that there are unseen realities that we sense and feel and comprehend that encompass the mystery of our faith. As we heard Jennifer share from Proverbs, it is when we trust in the Lord with all our heart and we don’t just don’t rely our own intelligence. Or artificial intelligence.

² Henri Nouwen. *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*; HarperOne, 2013. This quote was referenced in the Sermon Notes for *Deeper in Faith* by Rev. Dr. Becca Ehrlich; Omaha Presbyterian Seminary Foundation.

As I have shared in the Grapevine, I am serving on a committee for our regional synod, the Synod of the Covenant, on a faithful response to artificial intelligence by the church. So I have been reading about AI from a wide variety of sources – those ardently opposed, those who see it as a panacea, those who appreciate it as a tool, those who have ethical concerns. The August issue of the magazine *Christian Century* has a wonderful article on a theological angle of AI related to discernment. Old Testament scholar Uriah Kim writes on AI and the creation of meaning. Comparing the creation texts in Genesis to the creation of new entities by AI, Dr. Kim highlights a limitation of AI – AI is unable to inhabit the language it creates in order to make meaning. Dr. Kim shares:

Whereas divine Logos creates worlds and human logos creates meaning, AI processes symbols without inhabiting the world language discloses. It can surface configurations no individual human could perceive, but it cannot complete the interpretive act that turns relations into meaning. That final movement belongs to embodied beings who live within time and space. The danger, then, is not that AI will replace human thinking. The danger is that humans will mistake fluency for understanding, patterns for meaning, and speed for wisdom.³

In other words, AI lacks the discernment that comes from spiritual understanding, relying on concrete knowledge rather than the unseen realities that we sense and feel and comprehend that encompass the mystery of our faith.

The text Jennifer read from Proverbs also gives us insight into the **experiential knowledge** that is discernment. We hear that we are to know the Lord in all our paths, to not consider ourselves wise and to turn away from evil, for then our body will be healthy and our bones strengthened. Nouwen shares that discernment is experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life. For many of us, how we understand our faith, how we might explain to someone why our faith matters, is through experiential knowledge. It is through the music that opens us to experience God's glory; through a meal delivered when we are going through an illness; through highs and lows of our weekly life shared at youth group; through the tears and the laughter at a memorial service. It is through community and relationships.

Discernment is also about **faithful living**. It is listening to God's love and direction. It is about doing the hard work of caring for the neighbor you have not yet met because scripture tells us that the foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigner in the land of Egypt. It is about showing up to feed the hungry, care for the sick, clothe the naked and visit those imprisoned – those imprisoned by the justice system and those imprisoned by loneliness, addictions and illnesses. Faithful living means that we listen to God's love and direction and respond to injustice in our world. That we welcome all to the table to be fed by the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

³ Uriah Y. Kim. AI and the Creation of Meaning. *Christian Century*, August, 2026; pp52-55. Available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/what-does-ai-reveal-about-creation-and-vocation>

One of the elements that I appreciate about Nouwen's definition of discernment is that he not only defines the elements that encompass it, he also shares how we can acquire it - through a **disciplined spiritual practice**. Throughout the Deeper in Faith worship series I have been sharing various spiritual practices. There are links to them in the Friday e-announcements if you missed any. This week the focus is on prayer practices. You heard one of them during the Time for Children and I'll share more options a bit later in the service.

One of the spiritual practices highlighted this week is *Lectio Divina*. This is a practice that our Conversation and Contemplation group regularly engages in, and if you have an interest in practicing it communally, I encourage you to check out the group, which will resume its weekly Wednesday morning meetings in September.

Lectio Divina has been an important prayer and discernment practice for over 20 years, well before I became a pastor. On Mondays at noon we met for *Lectio Divina* at First Presbyterian, Shreveport Louisiana. It was a place where spiritual understanding and experiential knowledge was embodied and faithful living was practiced. We were a motley crew: a retired doctor with early stage Alzheimer's Disease, a church hopper and shopper, the mother of an Episcopalian priest, the woman straining to hold on to the Old South, the woman struggling between a calling of grandmothering and teaching, and me. Often one of the associate pastors would join in – especially if he was up for preaching that week.

"What word or phrase is speaking to you today?" "What it is in your life that this word or phrase seems to be addressing?" "What does God seem to be telling you to do or change?" We repeated the instructions every week because we feared the Holy Spirit wouldn't move in us unless we were decent and in order.

Week after week after week, the Creator would reveal to me a new path to mercy, a fresh expression of grace, and unquenchable faith through my fellow bruised and broken souls. The eternal truth that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts would be revealed yet again, for I experienced the presence of the Lord when I least expected it. Sometimes when the suffering and humiliation of the cross was all I could see in my life, I would get a resurrection gift of hope from another's view of the same text. Sometimes the Spirit would expose the thin places in our lives, and prophecy would flow like the mighty waters and I would come away drenched by the possibility of the Word. Sometimes I would hear bits and pieces of our combined stories in the sermon on Sunday.

And the Apostle Paul writes to church in Phillipi, as we heard Aaron read: "This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters."

What really matters. This is the heart of discernment. Spending time with God so that we can decide what really matters. So that we no longer have to conform to the world, and instead be

transformed and discern what is the will of God for our lives, so we might fulfill our individual calling and shared mission. May it be so. Join me in prayer.