

Discerning the Way
Jubilee Mennonite Church

May 19, 2019

Purpose: To explore the work of discernment as a discipline of the Spirit.

Message: The work of discernment, especially as a body, allows us to practice the moving of the Spirit in our midst.

Scripture: John 10:1-10 (I will read); 1 Corinthians 1:18-31,

Synopsis: The image of the good shepherd is one that we love dearly. We use the metaphor of Jesus looking after us, the sheep, a comforting and connecting sense of identity, sometimes using the “door” of Christ as a means of telling who is in and who is out. But in broader terms it speaks of the way God is at work in the world and the follower’s ability to discern the voice of God and the actions of the Spirit (Chapter 9). Discernment as a discipline asks us to listen for the shepherd’s voice and follow the best we may.

[On God’s Will and Mindy Lahiri | The Femonite: Musings from a Mennonite Feminist](#)

[I’m 35 And I’m Glad I Don’t Have Kids Or A Husband | Thought Catalog](#)

[Fear Or Discernment? | Allison Vesterfelt](#)

[Matthew 4:1-11 Commentary by Judith Jones - Working Preacher - Preaching This Week \(RCL\)](#)

[The good shepherd john 10 1-10 5-11-2014.docx](#)

[Being Mennonite: Decision](#)

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John 10:1-10 NIV NIV

10:1"Very truly I tell you Pharisees,
anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate,
but climbs in by some other way,
is a thief and a robber.

2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for them,
and the sheep listen to his voice.
He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

4 When he has brought out all his own,
he goes on ahead of them,
and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

5 But they will never follow a stranger;
in fact, they will run away from him
because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

6 Jesus used this figure of speech,
but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

7 Therefore Jesus said again,
"Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers,
but the sheep have not listened to them.

9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.
They will come in and go out, and find pasture.

10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I have come that they may have life,
and have it to the full.

We spend our lives surrounded by voices. From the time we get up in the morning to the time we go to bed, there are voices and ideas of all sorts bombarding us with ideas, concepts, and marketing. Even within sleep, dreams will come with there all too real images and visions of the world that we are left to make sense of. Some voices invite us, offering us life and happiness, usually by way of consumption. Some voices stir fear, mistrust and conflict, advocating their course as the way to safety. Others push us toward graciousness, forgiveness, and hope, inspiring us to seek and know the divine. Which brings us to ask; how in the midst of all of these voices do we find the voice of God? It is not an easy answer. God is the author of all things good, whether or not it happens to have a religious label slapped on the outside. God's voice is in much that has nothing to do with religion, and often that which masquerades as piety is anything but. But how do we know the difference? How do we discern where God lies, and how God calls?

Discernment is one of those impossibly churchy words that does not have much credit in the real world. We can talk about making up our minds, coming to a wise decision, or seeing our way to the end of our logic. But discernment of a decision smacks of something weird and out of ordinary, or at least so sufficiently over the top as to be meaningless anyway—like consulting chicken bones about the weather tomorrow. So what are we saying when we say discernment is a discipline of the spirit and of the church. Simply this: we sit and interpret together the way that God is leading us. It is the radical idea (and yes I do mean that in its original sense) that God has something to say, and followers of Christ and the father, we wait to be a part of what God is saying to us, and respond accordingly. Discernment asks the question “Where is God in this scenario and what might God have us do here?” As such, the various process is a discipline, a holy habit where we take time to consider the spiritual implications of our decisions along side the logical, personal, and logistical. We wait upon the Lord to hear what God is saying to us, with the hope that we hear well enough to be informed. As such, I would propose that the discipline of waiting on God—seeking to discern the will of God in the way of God—is as much the point as necessarily assessing what it is that God wills in any absolute sense. Not that this is not important- it is—but we know it can be tricky too. I tend to think that decisions and paths made in the right spirit of discernment can be used by the and within the Holy Spirit to do the work of God, regardless of the agenda of the day. Might one path be better than the other? Perhaps. But sometimes just looking for God is the best way to find God.

Our text this morning from John is not what we think of when we consider discernment. We know these words and the declaration that they carry well, and not as a passage about finding God's way. God's salvation, of course. Discernment, not so much. We look at this metaphor of the sheep in a gate from the stand point of security alone—the pen being the protected domain of holiness into which we are all trying to gain access and Jesus is the divine bouncer, keep those who do not belong out in the cold of our religious club. This works because this is what we are used to—a society that excludes and divides, separating one world from the next by whatever means necessary. We see it in our world through its immigration laws. We see it in ourselves as we gravitate toward those with the familiar last name and the proper ethnic heritage. We see it in our church as it struggles to learn how to embrace those who so often are kept out no matter what generation we find ourselves in, no matter what the issue of the day happens to be. I overheard a conversation a while ago where someone had had a bad experience with airport security, and complaining bitterly ended “well, God know his sheep; they will get what is coming to them.” So there. We assume that because this is how the world works that this must be how God works too.

Except I am not sure it is. I don't even think that this is the point that Jesus is trying to make here. This text in isolation is a standalone statement from which draw information about the nature of Jesus and the way of God. But this text is part of a bigger story. It is actually Jesus' response to the questioning of the Pharisees who stood amazed and incredulous in the healing of the man born blind in Chapter 9. He heals them and no one quite know what to do with this or about this. It leads to this whole discourse about the nature of seeing God. He is responding to those who were speculating about who he was, that anything that cured, especially on the Sabbath, could never be of God. This metaphor is directed at those who cannot believe that God could be in something that violated their expectations of righteousness—the one thing they could not possibly see because their expectations blinded them. This is Jesus' explanation as to why they don't get it.

But there more to this metaphor. As I said, we assume that the sheep pen is about keeping the wrong sheep out, and the right sheep in. We hear this and think holding cell of a individual farmer. But that is not how it worked back then. The sheep pen was the communal corral in each town where all the sheep were placed at night for guarding and safe keeping. It's a car park for sheep. All of the sheep from all of the shepherds were crammed into the same

area. There were no brands, no ear tags, no external mechanism to tell who's sheep was who's. But in the morning, each shepherd would come out, and call to their sheep, the one's who knew their voice, and the sheep would follow. Keyed to the voice of the shepherd, they know what to do and when to do it. Even the imitators trying to lure sheep away would fail. So the metaphor of the gate and the pen is not about who will get in and who will get out, but how we know the voice of the holy in the midst of our madly braying world, and follow that voice as it leads. Jesus is saying here those who hear the holy, know the holy, and are formed by the holy, will follow that voice of the holy which he carried and he spoke so well. The voice of God speaks as it will to whom it will, granting abundant life and healing to those who would only hear. It is a free, open gift. The challenge is for us to hear well enough to know God's working in our midst.

Which brings us back to the work of discernment. How do we pick out the voice of God in the midst of the bedlam of our over noised world? How do we hear the cadence and tone of the Good Shepherd? There is no easy answer. Its hard. Sometimes the best we can do is trust the gut feeling of right and wrong to bring us forward. Others of us require long periods of prayer and discernment to get a sense of leading. Ronald Rolheiser suggests some characteristics of the voice we can listen for:

- It speaks in whispers even while being recognized in thunder
- The voice of God is recognized wherever one sees life, joy, health, color, and humor, even as it is too recognized wherever one sees dying, suffering, poverty, and a beaten-down spirit.
- The voice of God is recognized in what calls us to what's higher, sets us apart, and invites us to holiness, even as it is recognized in what calls us to humility, submergence into humanity, and in that which refuses to denigrate our humanity.
- The voice of God is recognized in what appears in our lives as "foreign", as other, as "stranger," even as it is recognized in the voice that beckons us home.
- The voice of God is the one that most challenges and stretches us, even as it the only voice that ultimately soothes and comforts us.

- The voice of God is always heard in privileged way in the poor, even as it beckons us through the voice of the artist and the intellectual.
- The voice of God always invites us to live beyond all fear, even as it inspires holy fear.
- The voice of God is always heard wherever there is genuine enjoyment and gratitude, even as it asks us to deny ourselves, die to ourselves, and freely relativize all the things of this world.

The voice of God, it would seem, is forever found in paradox, in both that which we expect, and that which pushes most deeply. We are all too quick to declare one state of being as God (usually the one that keeps us safe and happy) and the other as not God. But that is not where the voice is found. More often we hear in that which bids us to come out of that which is familiar, safe, and well protected, to come to that which gives life to us in abundance, even beyond what we might well imagine. It is the task of listening not just for what we long to hear, but what we most deeply need to hear that leads us forward.

The Good shepherd calls to us, wishing to lead us, if we would but listen to the one open door who bids us always to come. May we be given ears to hear all the God is calling us to do.