

Discernment and Formation  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
July 19, 2009  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:  
Psalm 25:4-5  
Romans 11:33-36

We have had a brief respite this weekend from the real dog days of summer, but there is no doubt they are upon us. It's easy to let our minds, if not our bodies, drift to some place cool and wet. Perhaps it is a pond or a river of our childhood or a city or club pool, where we could be refreshed and renewed from the heat and humidity of July and August.

Do you remember being taught to swim? It's always a struggle, at first, because before we learn any strokes or dives, we first have to learn how to float, and rare is the person who takes to floating right off.

It's completely counter-intuitive, of course, so most folks do the exact opposite. They thrash about in the water, waving their arms and kicking their feet, using up all their energy but finding themselves worse off, perhaps slipping under, when, really, all they need to do is to put their head back and their arms and legs out, look up at the sky and be still.

All of that is helpful to remember today as we wade back into the deep waters of the question of how we know God's will for our lives. As I said last week, that question is the leading vote-getter thus far in our Summer Sermon Grab Bag series.

The inquiries came in slightly different forms but they all shared the same issue at heart.

"How do I know I am really hearing God's answer?" asked one person...

"How do we persevere when you pray and it takes so long to get an answer from God – like getting a good job when you don't have enough money to pay the bills?" asked another.

And a third: "How do we muster the patience to wait for God's time?"

As I said, these are deep waters. These are questions that hound every person of faith at one time or another.

The psalm we heard in our Old Testament lesson is attributed to King David, whom we might otherwise think had a direct line into God's will. Still, the psalm for guidance and deliverance speaks what we all speak:

"Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation."

In the letter of Romans, the apostle Paul, a man who spoke with the boldest confidence about his understanding of God's will, nonetheless acknowledges that even on our best days there are elements of God's purposes that evade our reach.

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" he writes in chapter 11, referring the mystery of God's ways in one of the most theologically rich sections of all of scripture. "How unsearchable are his judgment and how inscrutable his ways!"

Then quoting his own forbearers in faith, Paul quotes Isaiah and Job, who expressed their pondering:

" 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been God's counselor.' "

" 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?' "

It is easy, I suppose, to hear the desperation in these pleas of these men of God and to tell ourselves that pursuing God's will is an act of folly. But surely the God who went as far as the cross for us seeks more from us than a kind of spiritual stoicism. God must be disappointed when we place limits on what is possible with God. In fact, that is when we usually wander in the opposite direction from God – when we think our egos and presumptions are all we need.

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As I found myself thinking about this, two words kept pursuing me – discernment and formation.

In terms of faith, discernment is a three-dollar word for the quest to know the ways of God, at least as much as we can. It comes from two Latin words, one meaning the

ability to sift or distinguish and a second meaning that refers to something that is off or away from us.

When we speak of formation in the realm of faith, we're referring to how all aspects of the walk of faith shape us to be the people God desires us to be.

Like the chicken and the egg, I can't say what order they come in – whether we can discern God's will because we are formed by a life of faith ... or whether we must be formed by faith to discern God's will. I only know that both draw us closer to God and, in turn, God's will.

Last week, I proposed that knowing God's will is helped when, first, we quiet our own voices and our own wills and, second, when we seek to engage others in our discernment, particularly others in the community of faith.

John Calvin, the most prominent of the protestant reformers, and whose 500<sup>th</sup> birthday I am sure we all celebrated on July 10<sup>th</sup>, prescribed a framework for discernment. He, too, said the church, is part of the framework of being near to God, as a covenant community, as a mutually caring priesthood of all believers, as a worshipping community that rehearses and practices spiritual disciplines together and as a unified body, finding its identity in Christ amid its diversity.

Other parts of Calvin's framework for discernment were:

- Scripture – the word of God read and proclaimed and confessed based on God's revelation.
- Grace – which unites us with Christ, giving us communion with God, and;
- Faith – which locates us with God and constantly asks what God is doing in and with our lives.
- The final but foremost element of Calvin's framework, as I touched on last week, is Jesus Christ, God's clearest self-revelation, who, together with the Holy Spirit, brings scripture to life, causes us to dwell in God's grace and inspires our faith.

Other great church leaders had similar frameworks: John Wesley, who led the Methodist movement in America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, is known for a four-part equation, made up of:

- Scripture;
- Tradition, by which he meant the church's history over two thousand years.
- Reason, the believer's own thinking and interpretation; and,
- Experience, the individual's personal and individual walk with Christ.<sup>1</sup>

You can see where our Methodist brothers and sisters put more emphasis on the role and the place of the believer, while we Presbyterians lean a little more on God. But whatever framework we use, these are some of the means by which we can practice discernment of God's will.

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So, where does formation come in?

This week, as part of the day-to-day business of the church, two elders and I were communicating via email about a note for next week's bulletin. The purpose of the note is to lay out the process you, the congregation, began last week, a review of my relationship with the church and whether my call as your Designated Pastor will be changed into a call as your Installed Pastor, a more long-term relationship.

In drafting the note, one elder used the word "conversion" in describing the technical change that will be considered. That prompted the other elder to quip that she thought I had already been converted. I appreciated her giving me the benefit of the doubt.

But maybe, even if unintentionally, the first elder was right. We are all constantly being converted. The great British Christian writer C. S. Lewis said this about the process of "conversion."

"The world does not consist of 100 percent Christians and 100 percent non-Christians. There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but still call themselves by that name: some are clergymen. There are other people who are slowly becoming Christian though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

<sup>2</sup> Mere Christianity, Book IV, Ch. 10, p. 208

We are being formed when we confess and hear the pardon, when we raise our voices to sing together, even if some of us can't carry a tune or we are the ones whose voices carry others, when we read and interpret scripture, when we affirm our faith and when we pray for each other and the world.

We are being formed when we host the homeless, when we support the teachers and the children at the impoverished Merry Oaks school and when we push for justice for those whose voices are weak.

We are being formed when we gather as a Sunday school class and study scripture. We are being formed when we visit the sick and the shut-in and share with them the good news of the gospel.

In all of this, we are not forming ourselves, mind you, but being formed to God's will and, thus, are more apt to perceive God's will in the nitty gritty of our lives.

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The words of the Larger Catechism of 1647 that we use for our affirmation today say it as well as any. That, unless we submit ourselves to be formed by the things of God, we are "unable and unwilling to know and do the will of God."

Through those things, however – scripture, grace, faith, Christ, the church – the Holy Spirit takes away our "blindness, weakness, indisposedness and perverseness of heart" and by grace makes us able to submit to God's will with "humility, cheerfulness, diligence, zeal, sincerity, constancy, as the angels do in heaven."

There will always be what the writer Kathleen Norris calls "sacred ambiguity"<sup>3</sup> - some gap, whether it is in our understanding of God's infinite wisdom or in our readiness to give ourselves wholly to God's will.

But, as with learning to swim, the first thing we have to do is to learn to float, to stop our flailing and kicking and simply trust the water, like grace, to hold us up. If we can learn to float, to submit ourselves to the currents of God's habits and purposes, we can then be carried downstream, past the choppy rapids of the world around us and into the calm, deep, cool waters of our relationship with God.

To God be the glory. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith, p. 68