

“How to Discern God’s Will”

Based on Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

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This book I have in my hand is the Methodist Discipline from 1948. Inside are the rules and regulations of how the Methodist church is to function. It also includes any resolutions adopted at that year’s general conference. Also inside are official orders of worship for Sunday morning, baptisms, weddings and funerals, and ordinations.

Now I have the 2016 Book of Discipline...and the Book of Resolutions...and the most recent Book of Worship. Can you tell the difference? Between 1948 and 2016 a lot has changed. Of course, one is that there wasn’t a United Methodist Church until 1968. But, it’s obvious, our church has a lot more rules and lengthier processes. We adopt a lot more resolutions at General Conference. And our official worship resource has greatly expanded, although it’s a little dated. This recent book of worship came out in 1992. This is just one example of the common experience of institutions, whether it be churches, schools, government, any institution with a bureaucracy: over time their processes tend to get a lot more complicated.

Part of this is due to the gain of experience. Problems come along that previous generations never dealt with, so a policy or process is developed or tweaked to deal with new problems. Lessons are learned and incorporated into the process. But also things get more complicated because it’s easier to add stuff in than to take a bunch of stuff out, or scrap the whole thing and start over. Radical revisions of policies and processes are time consuming, destabilizing and controversial. So things just get added on and we end up with what we have.

Peter and the rest of the first church of Jerusalem didn’t really have a process. The community building around Jesus Christ was a new thing. They didn’t have manuals to refer back to. They had to work with what they had on hand and sort of figure it out and make it up as they went along. Right away they had a vacancy in the apostle position that needed filled. They had to figure out how to fill that position without any guidelines or rules to tell them how to do it. Where to begin?

As we look at this first chapter of Acts, and how the process unfolded, we notice what the key issue is. It is not about putting just anyone in that role of apostle. The key issue is: how do we discern what God's will is? It is assumed that God had in mind who that new apostle should be. The trick was getting a clue as to who that person is. When it comes to discerning God's will, it isn't simple or obvious. Don't you wish it was? Don't you wish sometime God would just call you up on the phone or send you an email with instructions on what God wants you to do? That would be nice. But it has never worked that way. God has never used typical forms of communication. Instead, God speaks through signs, through prophets, through friends, and through dreams. Sometimes it's clear. The Ten Commandments are pretty straight forward. But oftentimes when God expresses God's will for us it's a little foggy and unclear. When it came time to pick Judas' replacement, a big finger didn't come down from heaven pointing to the one God wanted. It had to be revealed some other way. So what process did Peter offer up?

First, Peter gives an account of how they got into the situation they are in. He talks about how Judas was one of them. He had a share in the ministry. Peter points out that what Judas did was necessary to the fulfillment of scripture. He played a role in God's bigger picture. What strikes me is that in no way does Peter throw Judas under the bus. Judas' betrayal was uniquely painful. But it was all part of a bigger plan. I find it very meaningful and grace-filled how Peter frames what Judas did. No condemnation or cursing. None of this "the one who shall not be named" talk. It makes me wonder that Peter didn't go hard on Judas because, after all, Peter had denied knowing Jesus when the heat was on. Grace tends to manifest itself among people who know that their hands aren't clean.

So after Peter gives some context, he names the present need. First, he gave context. Second, he expressed the need and what the qualifications are to care for the need. There are supposed to be twelve apostles, reflecting symbolically the twelve tribes of Israel. So they have to figure out how to get that position filled. How will they go about it?

Peter turns to scripture. In this case, he uses two verses from the Psalms, 69:25 and 109:8. They are interesting picks. You can see them quoted at verse 20. The first says, “Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it.” The second says, “Let another take his position as overseer.” So let me get this straight. The first verse says his place should be left empty. The second says another should take his place. That looks like a contradiction to me. What is Peter getting at?

It’s a riddle; a riddle that Peter thankfully solves. Peter says the replacement should be someone who has been with them from the beginning to the end. It can’t be someone who is late to the party but someone who has always been around. Now, if you look again at Psalm 69:25 where it talks about his homestead being desolate, this suggests that no stranger can live there. But someone who has always been around is no stranger. That person would be able to take the position as overseer, as Psalm 109:8 says. I know; this solution that Peter offers may be a bit of a stretch. Whether you are convinced or not, what Peter is attempting to do is use scripture as a foundation for his proposal for what should be the qualifications of the one to take Judas’ place. The qualifications are based on scripture. That’s the main takeaway.

These qualifications also dramatically narrow the potential pool of candidates. In fact, it appears there were only two who met the criteria. Two people we have never heard of : one named Joseph who also went by Sabbas’s son, a.k.a. Justus, and another guy named Matthias. Just imagine that you were one of these guys. From the time Jesus was baptized by John up to this moment, these two guys were there all along, the whole three years of Jesus’ public ministry. They were just hanging back. They didn’t have the profile as one of the twelve. But they just hung on, waiting in the wings so to speak, ready if needed. And sure enough, the time came. You could say that one of these bench warmers was being called in to the game. There is something to be said about the importance of showing up, just being around in case an opportunity comes along.

First, Peter gives context. Second, Peter identifies the need and the qualifications for filling that need supported by scripture, at least that’s what he attempted to do. Third, he leads the people in prayer. They ask

God to show them which of the two God has chosen. They pray with the conviction that this is not a popularity contest or anything like that, but that God has an intention for one of them to be the replacement. The prayer they offer implies that whoever ends up being the replacement is the one God chose, not them.

I love the line they use in the prayer, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart.” That is so true. It’s a difficult thing, to know someone’s heart. And maybe it’s not possible that we can know the depths of another’s heart. But we confess that God knows us intimately. There’s a lyric in this punk rock song I used to listen to as a kid by a band called Altar Boys that goes, “He knows you better than you know yourself.” That line is half the chorus. The second line is “So you better take some time to think it out.” Hey, not real deep. But over 30 years later I still remember it. Part of our own growth as individuals is to plumb the depths of our hearts, to know with more clarity who we really are deep down. If we have to work at discovering who we really are, how can we claim we know who other people really are, even those we love deeply? Even those we gave birth to? But we aren’t a mystery to God. God knows exactly who we are. That’s what Peter and the rest were claiming in their prayer. They knew that God knew which of these two guys had the right heart to be the next apostle.

First, Peter gives the context. Second, he names the problem and gives the qualifications to care for the problem. Third, they pray for God to show them which to choose. And then last, they throw dice. What? They could have said to Justus and Matthias, “Pick a number between 1 and 12.” I mean from our perspective it’s totally random. But, you see, what they are thinking is that God is going to manipulate the outcome so that the result reveals God’s pick. It is out of their hands. They aren’t doing the picking; God is, through what appears to be randomness. I think that’s pretty genius. This is a completely joint venture between the people and God. Peter does his part to frame the situation and guide the process. It is done openly in front of everyone. Everyone participates through prayer. And God acts through the casting of lots to identify who is God’s pick. It’s not a bad model for just making it up as you go along.

Trust me, that's not the process we use to select candidates for ministry in the United Methodist Church. We do believe that God calls people into representative ministry. Now, every Christian is a minister. Baptism gives you all the authority you need to be a minister. Still, sometimes a person senses in their heart that God wants them to take the place of representative ministry in the church. But that sense of call has to be tested and affirmed by a lot of different groups of people throughout a multi-year process. There are education requirements. A psychological evaluation. Written examinations. Multiple interviews. A period of trial. A lot of prayer. It's a long and somewhat cumbersome process. The collective wisdom of our church over the centuries has led us to the process we have for affirming that certain people have been called by God to representative ministry in the church. It's not nearly as simple as the method Peter and the first church used to select Matthias.

But let me bring us back to the key issue that this whole message is about. We all could use some help in figuring out what God's will is for us. Like I said, God doesn't call us up or send us an email with explicit instructions on what God wants us to do. We have to try to discern it by listening to our hearts, interpreting signs, considering the input others give us. I'll admit it, trying to discern God's will can be a guessing game.

So when you are trying to figure out what God wants you to do, what we have talked about today could serve as a model. First, name the context. Where are you in your life? What is going on in your world? Second, name the problem. What breaks your heart? What is a need in the world that you are passionate about responding to? Consider what it might take to respond to that need. Maybe the scriptures give some insight on what is required. Third, pray for God to reveal to you if you are the one to respond to that need. And then, finally, take a chance. Roll the dice and go for it. Engage with the problem and see if you can make a difference.

I have another set of guidelines for you that might be easier to work with. I got these from Richard Jenson. He has three guidelines when it comes to deciding what God wants you to do. The first is: whatever we are called to do must fit within the framework of loving

God and loving neighbor. God would never direct us to do anything that does not manifest love. Second: God's forgiving love will sustain us if we make poor choices. Let's say you make a choice of what God is calling you to do and it ends up being a disaster. Or you thought you were doing a good thing when in fact it made a situation worse. It was a bad idea. It's not the end of the world. God forgives us when we mess up. And then, third: nothing can separate us from the love of God. Whether or not we make a decision, whether or not we actually follow through with what we decide to do, God still loves us. No matter how things turn out, God still loves us. So when it comes to trying to figure out what God wants you to do, please don't stress. This isn't about trying to get God to be impressed so God will love you more. God loves us just as we are. So see this more as a way to express our love back to God because this is not about earning God's love or justifying God's love for us. Like the old saying goes, God loves you and there's nothing you can do about it.

I have invited you these past few weeks to consider what ministry God may be calling you to do. If you never got the discernment process I distributed, or you lost it, let me know and I will send it to you. Next Sunday, when we celebrate the day of Pentecost, I would like for as many of you as possible to come forward carrying with you the seed of an idea, something you want to try that would be a blessing to others and a blessing to God. I have two people so far who said they will come forward to receive a prayer of consecration. Will you join them? If next Sunday comes and you still are not sure, no worries. God doesn't work on our timeline. Keep praying. Keep discerning. Use the guidelines I have shared with you this morning. What I'm urging all of us to do is to take discernment seriously. I am convinced that we are all here for a reason. And I believe that God does intend for each of us to love God and others in particular ways. Part of living life is to develop the capacity to be sensitive to the leading of God's Spirit, to influence our decisions and to draw us into particular ways of active love. So whether you come up with something next Sunday or not, I urge you to keep developing your capacity to sense the movement of God's Spirit on your life.

