

## Life's Best: Discernment

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1 Samuel 16:4-12; John 6:35-51

“[F]or the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” -- 1 Samuel 16:11

Do you have a discerning palate? I don't. I'm not one of those people who can take a sip of wine and then take a sniff over the glass and pronounce the vintage good or bad because of its depth or smokiness or hint of citrus. It takes more than a hint of citrus to get my taste buds' attention; it takes something like a glass of orange juice.

I don't have a particularly discerning palate, but I hope and pray that I have a discerning mind and a discerning heart. I hope and pray that I have at least rudimentary powers of discernment in the important things, because I think discernment is one of those best practices for living I've been offering to you on recent Sunday mornings.

Discernment is one of those words that's been around for a long time in the religious vocabulary of our Catholic siblings, but only since about the 1980s have Protestants begun to recognize its importance – and that recognition itself came through a process of discernment.

And that's one of the first things to note about discernment: it's a process. It's a process of patiently, carefully, mindfully, and prayerfully examining something. That something can be yourself, it can be a relationship, it can be a decision, or it can be God's dealings with you in the world. Discernment is the process by which we pay careful – that is, full of care – attention to the things around us and the things within us. If we're doing it right, discernment is one of the ways we make life better, for ourselves and for everything around us. And that, for my money, makes discernment one of life's best practices.

Now why, you might ask, is it important to go poking around in the details? Why not just accept life as it comes, one day at a time, asking few questions, expecting few answers, making few waves, that sort of thing?

Well, let's start with this morning's reading from the Gospel of John, for instance. It's one of the “I am” sayings of Jesus that we looked at in some detail in our last Lenten study. Jesus calls himself the bread of life. He says that whoever eats that bread will never be hungry, will never be thirsty, and will have eternal life.

Now common sense – the sort represented in the response of the Jews that John includes in this passage – common sense says that this is nonsense. Jesus is not bread, and eating him would not be immortality; it would be cannibalism. And life, as you and I ordinarily know it and live it, is anything but eternal, and even for all those people taking communion every Sunday or every day or two or three times a day – they, too, have a life span, and the grave awaits them as it awaits us all.

So right off the bat, we know we have to look at this text from John in some other way than with simple literalism. Bread does not mean bread as we commonly think of it;

thirst does not mean thirst as we commonly think of it; and life does not mean life as we commonly think of it. There's no taking this passage from John at face value, or you wind up with desperate wishful thinking, magic, hokum, or some combination thereof.

So if we want to avoid being gullible naifs on the one hand, or sophisticated and hollow cynics on the other, we have to start digging around in this text for its meaning. And that's an important reminder that reading the Bible and understanding the Bible are two different things, and the point of the Bible is to understanding it in such a way that you can live it. Or, to put it another way, the point of Bible study is not for you to be able to grasp the Bible, but for the Bible to be able to grasp you. That's the point of studying this ancient text that we believe reveals life's deepest truths, and that study is not the sort of superficial parachuting in every now and then that passes for Bible study in many of our churches. Genuine Bible study – the kind that matters – requires effort and it requires discernment, and we don't live in a world that values either of those, so we're rowing against the tide when we do Bible study right.

Let me give you another example of how discernment works and why it's important. The first religion course I took in college was a course in social ethics. The professor one day asked the question, "Is a woman who sleeps only with her husband a virtuous woman?" Well, of course, we all said yes. But then Professor Smith asked some follow-up questions that got us to look a little more closely at that proposition. What if, he asked, she's sleeping with her husband because she's afraid of getting a disease; does her fear make her virtuous? Or what is she's sleeping with her husband so that he'll continue to give her the material lifestyle to which she's grown accustomed; does her manipulation of his sex drive make her virtuous? Or what if she's sleeping with her husband because it's expected of her; does social convention equal virtue?

And suddenly what at first had seemed a simple yes-no question about virtue was a far more complicated venture than we undergraduates had anticipated, and some of us were launched, by that one series of questions and answers, into a world of asking and answering discerning questions that has made up our careers and, in some cases, at least, our lives.

So it does matter that we ask questions like "In what way is Jesus the bread of life? For whom? To be secured how? To be consumed how? And in what way does one live forever by virtue of having eaten this person-become-food?"

Asking those sorts of questions about a passage from the Bible, and being willing to live without clear and easy and immediate answers, is the beginning of discernment.

The nineteenth-century poet Ranier Maria Rilke gave this famous advice to a young man aspiring to be a poet:

. . . I would like to beg you . . . as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Live the questions now so that, someday, perhaps, you may live your way into the answer. So let me ask you this morning, in words that Sarah Palin might choose, How's that working for you? How is discernment functioning in your life, if at all? Do you ever, as the old gospel hymn puts it, "take time to be holy"? Do you ever take the time and

effort – and it does take effort – to step away from the daily grind of shopping and cleaning and looking after children and coping at work and keeping on top of the bills and playing on the Internet to discern what your life is and what it means? Do you ever stop to ask of God that fundamental religious question, “What do you want me to do with my life?” If you don’t, you’ll never get an answer, because you can’t get an answer to a question you never ask.

Some people – most people, I daresay – find such a prospect frightening. They don’t want to know the answers to those kinds of questions. They’d rather have someone else – their parents, their church, their society, almost anyone except themselves – give them ready-made answers to life’s most important questions.

But life, true life, the eternal life of which Jesus spoke in our reading from John, isn’t ready-made. You have to make it from scratch. Day by day, step by step, you have to assemble a life. Everyone has to do it, and the folks who do it best do so discerning God’s will for what their life can be. As Carly Simon used to sing, “Nobody does it better.”

And that’s not bad news; it’s very good news, because it means that biology is not destiny; neither is psychology, neither is sociology. No matter what your life may be at this moment, it’s not all that you are, because you have the power within you to change, to be something different and to be something better. You didn’t ask for the life you were given, but you also didn’t ask for the life you can have; they’re both gifts, and they’re both to be received with gratitude and joy.

It certainly is true that God places all of us in a particular time and a particular place, and while we all have to start there, none of us has to end there. And where we end, if we’ll discern the path for ourselves, is with God, who is eternal and who is love. That’s the life that’s waiting for those who seek, for those who knock, for those who discern, and for those who accept. Thanks be to God.