



Discernment~Grounded in God's Vision

As important as self-understanding is for the fruitful practice of discernment, it is not all that is required. We also need an understanding of God's ways and God's vision for the world. Because our gifts are given to bring glory to God and to enable us to participate in God's renewing work in the church and in the world, our personal discernment must take place within the larger context of God's desires for our world.

Critical to understanding God's ways is the capacity to recognize **where God is** and **where God is not** in any given experience. How do we recognize God's presence? One mystic used symbolic language to describe God's presence as a *fragrance left behind* – we can tell where God is at work by a characteristic fragrance!

When John the Baptist was in prison, he wondered whether he still recognized God's presence. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus did not answer the question. Instead he pointed to the same Signs of God's presence as the prophets of the Old Testament had proclaimed:

*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the
blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the
lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are
raised, and the poor have good news brought to
them* (Matthew 11:4,5).

In other words, God is surely present wherever freedom, healing and reconciliation flourish. Whenever we see life coming forth from death, we recognize an unmistakable sign of God at work. Each Christian is called to discern how his or her little life fits into the larger story of what God is doing or desires to do in the world.

Describing this intersection, Frederick Buechner once defined vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Though we may be tempted to work at God's agenda with our own energy and vision, such efforts eventually falter. Discernment is not about doing more. Even though God's vision is immense, God isn't asking any of us to bring it to fulfillment alone. When we have discerned our particular call in light of the world's need and act in obedience to that call, we discover amazing reservoirs of energy and purpose. Parker Palmer says,

*When the gift I give to the other is integral to my
own nature, when it comes from a place of
organic reality within me, it will renew itself –
and me – even as I give it away. Only when I
give something that does not grow within me do
I deplete myself and harm the other as well, for
only harm can come from a gift that is forced,
inorganic, unreal.*

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation. pp. 49-50.

What's more, we discover the wealth of the Christian community as each offers the gift that has been given. Palmer goes on to say:

*Abundance does not happen automatically.
It is created when we have the sense to choose
community, to come together to celebrate and
share our common store. Whether the scarce
resource is money or love or power or words, the
true law of life is that we generate more of
whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and
passing it around...*

*Abundance is a communal act, the joint
creation of an incredibly complex ecology in
which each part functions on behalf of the whole
and, in return, is sustained by the whole.
Community doesn't just create abundance –
community **is abundance** (pp. 107-108).*

Jesus' disciples learned this amazing lesson when they found themselves facing a hungry crowd without enough food to feed them. Perplexed and perhaps a trifle irritated, they asked Jesus, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" As he often did, Jesus responded with yet another question: "How many loaves do you have?" In other words, "What do you already have that can be used here?" Taking stock, they found they had seven loaves of bread, which Jesus blessed. After they distributed it to the crowd, who ate and were filled, they gathered up an incredible seven baskets full of leftovers (Mark 8:1-9).

Instead of being overwhelmed by the world's great needs, Christians are called to pay careful attention to the intersection of need and gift: when we perceive God at work in the midst of human need and when we discern our deep gladness, then the time for action has come. Someone has said that discernment is **where prayer and action meet**. As a listening life of prayer issues forth in action and as we trust God to bless what we give, God's reign is fulfilled on earth as in heaven.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes of the abundant satisfaction that comes from being grounded in God and offering our deep gladness to the world:

*May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.*

*Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,
streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.*

*(Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God.
Riverhead Books, 1996, p. 58.)*

Excerpts from *Biblical Foundations for Personal and Group Discernment*:
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