

Sixth Sunday of Easter
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church
 May 25, 2025
 Stephen H. Applegate

+In the Name of God: Who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

“They [Paul & Timothy] went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.” Acts 16:6

This morning, I want to talk about discernment – our theme for this program year that’s drawing to a close. We’ve been praying for discernment at the end of our services, our eNewsletter each week has begun with, “Discovering & Discerning.” So, although it’s unlikely that the word “discernment” is foreign to you, let me provide a definition: Discernment is the process of seeking to understand God’s will and direction in one’s life *or* in the life of a parish church like St. Paul’s.

The word is sometimes used in the context of choosing a vocation – for example, sorting out which direction to take after graduating from high school or college, deciding whether to marry, answering the call to serve the church as a deacon or priest, or making other important decisions. Discernment involves prayerful reflection, listening for the beat for the Holy Spirit’s wings, and taking a pause to consider the factors involved in determining the most faithful path.

I love the service of Holy Baptism, and my favorite part is the prayer that’s prayed right after someone’s been baptized. It’s a prayer I pray regularly for my own children and grandchildren since it’s an appropriate one to pray at any time. Here it is: “Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.”

Who wouldn’t want these things for their children and grandchildren . . . or for any other person – for God to sustain them – for them to be inquisitive and curious – to be able to figure out what they are supposed to do – to be courageous – to persevere – to love God and other people – and to have the kind of joy and wonder a toddler has when they splash through a puddle on a rainy day or chase soap bubbles across a playground

I especially want to lift out that one phrase in the prayer where we ask God to give the person being baptized a discerning heart, because the ability “to hear with our hearts,” is, I think, sorely lacking these days. And if anything is absolutely critical now, it’s to be able to discern between truth and lies, between caring and cruelty, between right and wrong. Too few people engage in critical thinking. Too few people care about the common good. Too few people can distinguish between different kinds of spirits to use Biblical language, even though it should be obvious which spirit is which.

We should be able to discern between an accurate depiction of the historical record and a depiction based on historical denialism or revisionism. We should be able to discern between the real

stories of the Holocaust, Nakba, the Armenian genocide, and the transatlantic slave trade and some whitewashed or sugarcoated version of them. Why can't we?

One answer comes from a post currently trending on social media that says something like, "Our current is the result of 40 years of football coaches teaching civics classes." That statement may be unfair to football coaches, but it does highlight how ill equipped some people are to discern how dangerous the breakdown of the separation of powers is, or to discern the danger of foreign influence on our elected officials when the emoluments clause of the Constitution is ignored.

Back in 2006, Diana Butler Bass wrote a book called, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. I've talked about the book before. At the time the book was published, it was accepted wisdom that America's mainline Protestant churches were declining and being eclipsed by the evangelical mega-churches.

Diana Butler Bass wondered if this was, in fact, true. So, she set off to find out and conducted a three-year study of centrist and progressive churches around the country. And what she found was that not all of the mainline Protestant churches were declining. In fact, some churches were flourishing.

When she examined why, she recognized that the thriving churches were good at providing signposts that pointed spiritual travelers in the right direction. The signposts she identified were ancient practices – activities that people do together in community, long part of the Christian tradition – things like hospitality, contemplation, healing, and justice.

One of the practices – as you may have already guessed given the subject of this sermon – was discernment. Diana Butler Bass calls discernment, "listening for truth." She says it's the belief that human beings have the capacity to hear, see, touch, and feel God – that there can be a genuine sensing of truth and beauty through which we know God and know God's will. Some Christians depict this capacity as a supernatural gift or a profound mystical experience.

Others think that it's more of a mechanical process. Remember Rick Warren's "forty days of purpose?" That's an example of a more mechanical process. Go through forty days intentionally and at the end you will have a "purpose-driven life" – a direction – a path laid out in front of you.

Christian tradition understands discernment as something that's more mundane. It's a practice that can be developed simply through reflecting on our lives, asking questions, waiting quietly in prayer, and sharing in community.

When Diana Butler Bass reviewed the results of her three-year study of congregations, she realized that, after hospitality, discernment was the most widespread spiritual practice among effective congregations. She wrote, "this makes a good deal of sense. Since we live in a 'country with no maps,' discernment must guide contemporary pilgrims." Vital Christian communities, and our own vital spiritual lives, necessarily involve the practice of discernment.

Which brings me around to our first lesson this morning – the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Because the lesson is the story of how St. Paul discerned where he was supposed to go and what he was supposed to do after he and his companions experienced significant roadblocks.

Paul began what is known as his second missionary journey. His starting point was Antioch, one of the ancient centers of Christianity. He made a tour of the churches in Syria and Cilicia. Then he revisited the churches in the regions of Derbe and Lystra. It had been five years since Paul had been there, and he was looking for someone to join him in his travels. Paul found a young man named Timothy – someone who represented the next generation of Christian leadership – to go with him.

The two of them made their way through various cities encouraging the little churches along the way. All seemed to be going well until Paul and Timothy ran into one major barrier after another. Paul was thwarted. He didn't know what he was supposed to do next. It was an uncertain time for him. He may have even thought he was failing.

Let me read you a contemporary version of the story: "Paul and Timothy went to Phrygia, and then on through the region of Galatia. Their plan was to turn west into Asia province, but the Holy Spirit blocked that route. So they went to Mysia and tried to go north to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them go there either."

The book of Acts doesn't give us the details about what happened. It doesn't say that, as Paul and his companions tried to turn west, the road was closed, or that Paul was suffering from whatever the illness was that he once described as a thorn in his flesh. The record just says, "the Holy Spirit blocked that route." The same thing happened as they tried to go north to Bithynia – no go! "The Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them go there either," scripture says.

Imagine Paul and Timothy sitting at the table one night, after the dinner dishes were done, wondering what are we supposed to do next? Paul believed that God had called him to undertake a second missionary trip. God had provided Timothy to be his companion. They were both ready and eager to go, but they seemed to be stymied at every turn, so they had to listen for the truth. They had to take the time to discern what God wanted them to do.

God seemed to be on a different timetable than they were, and God clearly had different plans for them than they had for themselves. God's plans wouldn't be revealed until later that night after they were both sound asleep. It was then that Paul had his dream/vision – a vision that directed him to a place that he hadn't thought about going at all – to Macedonia – to Europe – to the place where Alexander the Great had been born and from which he would go on to conquer the world.

Christianity would also conquer the world from Macedonia – not by the might of an army but by the power of love. And it would happen because Paul and Timothy did the work of discernment – asking the Holy Spirit to help. When their own plans were thwarted. . . when they were blocked from going west and prevented from going north. . . they were forced to stop and ask, "where is God in this?" What is God up to? What does God want us to do? because it's pretty clear that Plan A is not working. And it's pretty clear that Plan B is not working. They must have wondered just how far down the alphabet they would have to go.

Practicing discernment is something I'm still working on. Much of the time I am not present enough in a situation to ask the kinds of questions I need to ask.

I'm talking about the sorts of questions I would ask if I had an inquiring and discerning heart: "God, how are you speaking to me now? What are you saying? What do you want me to take with me, and what do you want me to leave behind? What am I meant to learn from this disappointment or failure? Why are you saying "no" when I was certain the answer was going to be yes? Is it too late to do something, or is there still time to act?"

These questions presume that God is active in the ins and outs and options of our lives, our country, and our world. Yet, too, too often, we do not pause long enough to listen deeply. I wonder what would happen if that changed. I wonder what we would hear if we were as open as Paul was in today's reading when he had a vision of a man in Macedonia calling to him. He could have said, "that was an interesting dream" and let it go at that. But he didn't. Instead he discerned that God was in the vision. As a result Christianity sailed to Europe with Paul.

This much I do know. We will not receive any such visions if we do not open our eyes, our ears, our hearts to the God who never stops trying to speak to us. I can't say how God will talk to you. Each of us is different. Some of us will respond to a quiet, gentle nudge from God. Some of us – and I am describing myself here – will only respond to a good, swift kick in the pants.

Whatever it takes, O Lord, give each of us an inquiring and discerning heart, and – when we recognize your voice calling us – whether it is to speak or to act – give us the strength we need to do what you are asking us to do.

Amen.