

Mark 14:32-36

Acts 15:1-21

May 2, 2021

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FINDING GOD'S WAY TOGETHER

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It was two days after Thanksgiving, Saturday, November 29, 1997, and I was sitting in the Blue Room off of the Fellowship Hall, talking with the Pastor Nominating Committee. This was our second meeting and I was excited about the possibilities. The interview had gone well and the conversation seemed to be drawing to a close. Then David Johnson said, "Phil, I have a question. How do you discern the will of God?" Well, that is a good question, but it's kind of like opening your final exam and reading "Explain the meaning of life (use back of page if necessary)." I guess my answer must have been satisfactory, because here I am! That's a conversation David and I have continued these many years. It's an important question, not just for us as individuals but also as a congregation.

The question is particularly on my mind this morning. Immediately following worship today, I am driving to another church where I will join two colleagues to meet with members of the congregation. Matlynn, Kaye, and I were appointed by the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina to serve as an Administrative Commission to help a congregation discern God's will for their future. The three of us are serving as the session of that congregation. Our main goals this afternoon are to listen to their stories, find out their hopes and dreams, share information about available options, and begin the conversation about possibly entering into a process of discernment.

My role in this afternoon's meeting will be to explain the available options and the process of discernment. That process is meant to help a congregation (1) recognize and acknowledge what God is doing and what God desires; (2) see a situation from God's perspective; (3) listen to the Holy Spirit who prays within and among us; and (4) hear and obey God's voice.¹ One resource I will share with the folks today says, "Communal or congregational discernment takes dedication to prayer, a willingness to let go of personal agendas, and a faith that not only does God speak to us but we can develop 'ears to hear' that voice."²

You might think that such a "process of discernment" is a modern invention. However, today's story from Acts about the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem shows that God's people have asked the question "How do you discern God's will?" throughout their history with God.

Let me set the scene. After the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, they went out and proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. Lo and behold, the Gentiles heard and believed the gospel and received the Holy Spirit, just as those first

Jewish believers had done. As the word about the Gentile mission filtered back to the church in Jerusalem, “certain individuals from Judea” maintained that “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1) They weren’t arguing against evangelizing the Gentiles. They were arguing that the Gentiles had to become Jews — circumcision was the sign of the covenant and acceptance of the law — in order to become full members of the community and be saved. As it turns out, some of the early believers who happened to be Pharisees agreed and argued, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.” (Acts 15:5)

So, the church called a presbytery meeting! No, I’m not suggesting the first church was Presbyterian, but the elders did gather to figure out this situation (note: We get our name “Presbyterian” from the Greek word for “elder.”). The notice went out with the issue stated: Must the Gentiles be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses? The church leaders gathered in Jerusalem and the roll was taken: certain individuals from Judea; Paul; Barnabas; believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees; the apostles and the elders; Peter; James, the brother of Jesus; Judas called Barsabbas; and Silas. There were probably others there for the discussion.

Although Luke doesn’t say so in his story, it’s hard to imagine that this group of church leaders gathered and didn’t pray, sing, read scripture, and probably eat a meal together. All of this would have been part of their process of discernment, along with hearing reports and testimonies from Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James about what God was doing in and among the Gentiles. Their decision reflected James’ comments, who said, “I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.” When the council wrote their letter to the Gentiles explaining their decision they concluded with this words: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.” In other words, we expect from you the minimum of what the law expects of everybody, Jew and Gentile. And what was the reaction of the Gentile believers? The letter was delivered to the congregation in Antioch and “when its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.” (Acts 15:32)

Two thousand years later, the issues might be different, but the process of discernment is the same for us Presbyterians. Look at the picture on the screen. It was taken at the 2018 meeting of the General Assembly in St. Louis, Missouri.



There's a familiar face right in the middle of the picture — our own Ruling Elder Curt Simpson. You might not recognize the other people in our presbytery's delegation, but when the roll was taken Ruling Elders Paul Pope, Curt Simpson, and John Baker and Teaching Elders Mamie Hooker, Steuart Link, and Bill Young would have answered "Present!" Having served as a commissioner to General Assembly, I know those folks — along with about 600 other ministers and elders — prayed, sang, read scripture, and ate meals together. They heard reports and testimonies from commissioners and representatives from across the United States and around the world about what God is doing among his people and in the world. And they sought and trusted in the guidance of God's Holy Spirit as they made their decisions, which were then reported to the congregations back home.

On Monday, May 17, ruling elders and teaching elders (ministers) representing 180ish congregations throughout southeastern North Carolina will gather via Zoom for a meeting of the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina. The business and issues to be discussed will be announced ahead of time. Attendance will be taken. We will worship, hear scripture, and pray. Then we will hear reports and testimonies about what God is doing Down East and beyond. We will make decisions will be made and report them to the congregations back home.

On May 18, Wayne, Sam, Lindsay, Fred, Patsy, Darleen, Hayes, Greg, Kelli, Hope, and I will meet via Zoom for our monthly session meeting. I will email the agenda to the elders on Monday, May 17. At the meeting, the attendance will be taken and a quorum declared. We will worship, hear scripture, talk about our faith, and pray together. Then we will hear reports and testimonies from the different Ministry Teams about what God is doing in and among our congregation. And we will listen with our hearts to hear what God is calling us to do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church. We will strive to discern God's will for the life and ministry of our congregation. We will report these decisions to you by email and in the June newsletter.

These meeting descriptions validate something one of our seminary professors said: “Being a Presbyterian isn’t the only way to be a Christian, but it’s a good, faithful, and biblical way to be a Christian.” At our best, our process can help us discern God’s will for our individual Christian lives and God’s will for our corporate congregational life. Discerning God’s will is always important, but perhaps no more so than right now in the life of the Wallace Presbyterian Church.

As we begin to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and look to the future, it will be real tempting to try to “return to normal,” to do things exactly like we did them up until March 8, 2020. But the reality is, we can’t go back to those times, and we probably shouldn’t go back to “business as usual.” That doesn’t mean erasing all of our history and ways of doing things, but we now have the opportunity to build on the changes that have been thrust upon us as a church during the pandemic.

The question of circumcising Gentiles isn’t high on the agenda of any General Assembly, presbytery, or session meeting in 2021. But the principle is the same. God’s people then had to discern the amazing new thing God was doing with the Gentiles in their midst and they had to decide what that meant for their faith and their church. As God’s people now, we have a golden opportunity to discern the amazing new things God is (always) doing in our midst. We have to decide what that means for our faith and for our church. Just this week I read an offertory prayer of dedication that included the sentiment, “Lord, let me give joyfully, not to the church of the past but to the church of today and the church that is yet to be.”

Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane — “Abba, Father, not what I want, but what you want” — was probably the hardest prayer he ever prayed. It certainly is for us, because we bring our own agendas, likes/dislikes, and wants to our process of discernment. As we think about the apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to discern God’s will for the church, let us be mindful of our own discernment. Will we decide ahead of time what we want and then ask God to bless us? Or will we pray, “Father, guide us to what you want”?

As we find God’s way together in the coming months, with humility and open hearts, let us ask ourselves these questions:

1. Is this leading in keeping with the Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ through Scripture?
 2. Is this leading self-serving, or is it motivated by love for God and others?
 3. Is the ministry of Jesus being continued in what we do?
 4. Will the community benefit — will the outcome build up the body of Christ?³
- Father, not what we want, but what you want.

Let us pray: Eternal God, send your Holy Spirit into our hearts, to direct and rule us according to your will. May your hand guide us through all our days, shielding us from all evil, strengthening us to do justice and love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Victoria G. Curtiss, “Guidelines for Communal Discernment,” Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Louisville, at www.macucc.org.

²Teresa Blythe, “Congregational Discernment: Finding God’s Way Together,” November 3, 2010 at www.patheos.com.

³Curtiss, “Guidelines.”