

Last Sunday, St. Benedict's entered into discernment about the future of the Abundance Shop, the thrift store in Los Osos that's been a foundational community-outreach ministry of this parish for the past 30 years. The shop's manager has resigned and the parish, all of us together, need to decide what to do next.

Discerning is a hard thing to do. Not because discernment itself is particularly hard, but because most of us (if not all of us) have learned through our lives to tackle or solve most of life's problems in an entirely different way.

We likely approach a problem rationally, we might draw up a list of pros and cons. We might look back at the past to see what we can learn – how did we get here? - before coming up with a sensible plan we think might work well for the future. Maybe we'll put our heads together, brainstorm ideas/possible solutions as a group, see what's most popular, and trust whatever's got the most support is the way to go.

There are lots of very 'sensible' ways to come at a problem, and then there's discernment.

Discernment is a way of deciding what to do, given our reality as people of faith, given God's call to us as church to participate in God's promised future. As Christians, as Episcopalians, our understanding of God is inseparable from the divine longing for the reconciliation of all creation, for wholeness, for freedom and fullness of life for all.

Unlike the conventional 'sensible' route, discernment is the God-oriented spiritual route. Discernment is the way to make decisions, especially the big ones, in a way that draws us, meaningfully, into the life-giving truth of God.

Discernment is really about listening, being attentive to the presence of the Holy Spirit, what are we sensing, what might we intuit. Discernment is a spiritual discipline, by which we learn to sense the movement of the Spirit in our hearts, minds, and bodies – to then respond.

Discerning and then responding is the obedience to God we read about all through Scripture.

Now, we likely wince when we hear that God tested Abraham, having him set out to do something utterly unthinkable simply to prove he's listening, listening and willing to respond to what he hears, whatever he hears. It's one thing to say "here I am" in response to God's call, it's another thing entirely to head off into the mountains because God has asked you to offer your son as a sacrifice.

Setting aside what would have been an unthinkably traumatic experience for father and especially for son – and that's hard to set aside – this shocking story from Genesis is a story about obedience. It's a story about someone who's committed to listening to God, to being responsive to God's call, and to faithfully doing *whatever* he's called to do.

And that's the really hard bit about discernment, what we discern might not be the same as what we think we want, or what we think we should do. Yet another reason why this life of faith, this life of Christian discipleship is hard!

The world we live in loudly insists that if we focus and work at it we can have or achieve anything we want. And the world we live in is also really good at telling us what it is that we want.

So, without the practice of discernment, without the spiritual discipline of discernment, we'll go ahead and decide, choose, and act, primarily, in response to what this world is telling us to do – whether we're aware of it or not.

However sensible and well thought through our decision-making, the influences of the world will be working on us behind the scenes. We might make a decision out of habit, or out of fear, or to play it safe. We might make a decision based on pressure from the folks around us, out of duty, or because we can only see one possible way forward.

... without discernment, without attentiveness to God, we can't know that the decision we're making will be a faithful response, a faithful response to the presence and action of God in our lives and in the world.

It can feel like a massive risk to set down familiar ways of navigating life in favor of developing, and trusting, the spiritual dimension of this human life.

But this is how faith becomes more than something we have, something we claim, this is how faith becomes our life *lived*, it's how faith becomes a force for transformation.

Cultivating trust in the vast cosmological, invisible reality of our life in God, which is so much more than we can engage simply and directly with our senses, cultivating trust in the true fullness of the mystery, the fullness of the embodied human experience, placing high value on our spirituality as an absolutely necessary and **real** part of what we are really changes everything.

By the time we reach adulthood in this society we've had lots of practice navigating life with the tools we're given by the world. We have ways to figure stuff out, ways of responding to the things that come up in life.

The Church also offers us ways, ways to become equally proficient, maybe even more proficient at navigating life, by using the spiritual tools we've inherited from our ancestors in the faith, ways to be attentive to the presence and action of God, so we might respond as we discern we're called.

Discernment is entirely dependent on our willingness to pray, first; and then on our willingness to practice listening, learning ways to quiet down the noise in our minds, and develop an attentiveness to the "sound of sheer silence"¹ (as it's described in the book of Samuel) in which God can be sensed.

As we practice, we will begin to notice, what brings a sense of life, what way will draw us toward love, what choice stirs up compassion or generosity or courage ... and by contrast, what options have us feeling limited, diminished, closed off, or fearful?

We engage in the process intentionally, giving it the time that it needs, and with conversation partners, noticing together the movement of the spirit as we sense it in the heart.

¹ 1 Kings 19:12

In discernment we ask which way will deepen our trust in God, which way will bear the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?² and which way will build up the body of Christ and serve our neighbor?

By discerning we commit not to our will, conditioned and influenced by the world we live in, not to the way we think we want to go or to the way we think we should choose; by discerning we commit, to the best of our ability, to honor the covenant we've entered into with God, and to long, with God, for the healing and reconciliation of the world, and for freedom and fullness of life for all.

The spiritual path is easy to find but, in this world, with all the competing demands on our time and attention, the spiritual path can be really hard to stay on, really hard to trust; this is why church matters.

Church, this church, is here, it exists, to teach us and to support us and encourage us and give us the courage we need to stay on the Way. This church invites us to take up, together, time-tested spiritual practices that will help us respond to God, together, with growing confidence; and together, wherever we're led, whatever our call, it's on the spiritual path that we'll live into our life and mission, trusting, with all that we are, that God will provide.

² Galatians 5:22-23