

## **God-Listening Hearts**

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### **Acts 15**

People are coming back. Not everyone, but many. Covid did not destroy the church; as we feared it might. Oh my! Conversations with colleagues two years ago were dire, despairing. The conversations are very different now.

What's more, every Sunday, more newcomers are coming to church, checking us out. More and more. The prospective new member retreat last Saturday morning had 17 people.

People are seeking.

Could this be a new revival?

We live in such treacherous times—perilous and promising both—wars, warming planet, erosion of democracy, a tech revolution threatening to hijack our souls, loneliness. *That people are seeking is a very hopeful thing....* souls yearning for the ultimate and not settling for less...wanting to be with others who hunger for “the more”. (William James)

But I do wonder whether these intentional seekers expect something big from the church. That we take seriously our calling to communal spiritual discernment. That we take seriously the need to listen for God's direction. And, pushing it even deeper, that we are indifferent to all but God's will in these perilous but promising times...

Coming out of the deeply unsettling Covid time and the history altering tragedy that happened at 38<sup>th</sup> and Chicago... there may well be many big decisions for this church as we move ahead into our next 100 years. WIAN is but one of these searing issues that demands communal spiritual discernment. Big questions will surely arise about reparations, and about this campus, this building and grounds with regard to climate change and watershed concerns, and about how to respond to white “Christian” nationalism, and so, about our mission, budget, staffing...

Seeking God's will is unsettling business. It's not a don't worry be happy faith. It often asks for sacrifice and courage, but it gives such hope and meaning to our lives and the lives of our children. It marinates us in the ultimate so we can and want to go on. Those churches who are content to stay the way they were in the mid 1900s, more like a

club, a good club, a kind club, a welcoming club, a caring club, but a club nonetheless, I wonder if they will survive in the mid 2000s let alone thrive...

As we prepare for our 100 year anniversary, we look back on the last 100 years and tell stories of how this congregation responded to God's call for loving, courageous, social revolution, for the upending of the unjust and unloving social map, in ground breaking ways...Over and over again Mayflower opened to the new—not just for the sake of novelty, or for human show—but for God's sake..

How will future generations look back on the next 100 years of this church? About how we responded to climate change? And to the George Floyd revolution? And to the anti-democratic forces? Will they see evidence of powerful communal discernment? What stories will they tell about the 2020s, and the 2030s, and about the second century of the life of this congregation?

So! we need to practice the practice. Practice the practice of communal spiritual discernment. We need to get really good at it for this church to survive and thrive into the next 100 years.

And make no mistake about it, this is very counter cultural. Though we so value democracy in the world out there, (we value it more than ever now that it is at great risk from the growing billionaire class and a charismatic wannabe oligarch running for president and increasing attempts at voter restriction), but this, this practice of communal spiritual discernment is not democracy. It's something different. Yes, we want a democracy in our city, county, state, nation, but once we enter the doors of church, this is not our practice. This is not about voting to reflect our individual opinions, what each of us wants, no matter how well informed. This is not about persuasive speech: It's more about silence and listening for God's still small voice within. Anthony Robinson, in his book [Called to be church: The Book of Acts For a New Day](#) writes: "Democracy, which honors important values, seeks the will of the majority. Discernment seeks the will of God.... Too often, church meetings are conceived as exercises in democracy, attempts to discern the will of the majority and to line up votes that will help the position of our choice prevail. Discernment is different: the focus is on being open to and discovering Gods' will for us."

We need to practice the practice so that it becomes our automatic setting when we leave the world of democracy out there and walk through the gates of prayer into church.

Church council has been practicing this for years. Every Fall retreat we, I'm ex officio, do two things: We remind ourselves that we are not a secular Board of Directors, we are a church governing body. And we build relationship, do lots of one on ones, so that there is trust and we can authentically listen to one another and speak *of our* sense of

God's direction, sometimes with passion, during the year to come. And when a decision needs to be made at council meetings, it's not a simple yes, no vote. There are rather, four choices, very quaker. *Yes, I'm for this. Yes, but with some reservations. No I'm not in favor of it, but I'll stand aside. No, I do not believe this is God's will for our church.* (This last one is used rarely, but it's an important option in this small group. It helps guard against communal self-deception)

Can this council culture be yeast for the larger culture of our church through out the year?.. And yes, the question is out there, how do we practice communal spiritual discernment as a larger body, say at congregational meetings, with the big, weighty questions sure to arise in this rapidly changing world?

It may be difficult for us to really understand what was at stake with that major decision that had to be made in our scripture reading this morning from the book of acts. The book of Acts is the story of the beginning and then rapid growth of the early church after Jesus' death. They didn't have a template of how to create a new religion. It just happened. And it was marvelous how quickly it spread across the Mediterranean. But then this hard question arises. And this is smack dab the middle of the book of Acts. : A very difficult decision.... regarding this new faith that evolved out of Judaism... How much of the Jewish practice, do non Jewish converts need to do, like circumcision, dietary restrictions? And so the apostles and Elders meet, a big assembly, to consider the question. "Leaders and missionaries with diverse experiences are gathered. Testimony is given about a new thing that God is doing in a new time and place. This is interpreted in the light of scripture and tradition. The decision to change to a new practice is guided by the spirit, aims for unanimity, and is positively received by the wider church." (NRSV)

Again, spiritual discernment is not about what we want, or what the majority wants, it's about one thing and one thing only... what is God's will for us in this particular time and place? Of course, we can never know with certainty if a decision is the will of God. And sometimes there are even unintended consequences from a well prayed over decision. But we do *know* that God's will, or God's dream as we often say at Mayflower, is for justice; and that there can be no real peace without it; and we *know* that every big church decision should flow from this sacred *knowing*.

Practicing the practice...

When the choir warms-up in order to sing in harmony, to add beauty and truth to the world, they do certain practices that lead to harmonic consolation, rather than discordant desolation . They practice with wee-oh-wee-oh... and ah-ya-ya...

We, all of us, need to always be practicing as a community so that we might all come together in beautiful harmony for the will of God on the occasion of big decisions.

What are warm-ups for this?

We need lots of rest notes, a lot of silence, so we can pray, releasing ourselves from all the colluding forces that storm around us, the mix of self-deception and the external influences of culture; to shed our baggage; so that we can be indifferent to all but God's will,

Then, we need to listen, really listen, to one another in our beloved community, and to listen to those whom God privileges, the poor and powerless, and to listen to God through scripture and the words of the wise ones from our tradition like Thurman, Bonhoeffer, McFague...

Then, we need more rest notes, for prayer.

Then, we need to be open and explore with one another possible creative new paths, open to ideas that spring up in our midst...

Then, we need more rest notes, for prayer.

Then, we need to pay attention to our heart, each one of us does, as we seem to move closer to a decision... Do you feel, deep in your heart, consolation- a sense of peace and movement towards God or desolation -distress and movement away from God?

And then the time will come when we discern a decision.

Yes, there will be decisions that need to be made in the near future and in the next 10, 50, 100 years of this beloved, intense, passionate church, decisions that cry out for divine guidance...

... for divine guidance...like the ancients sought, who consulted the oracles at Delphi...

Oh How I wish!!! we could charter a clean energy plane with seats enough for all of us, and plenty of Scott's award winning Hole-mole chili to feed us, on the way to Greece, to Athens, and then clean energy buses to the village of Delphi where we will climb the mountainside together to find that place, the center of the universe, where we cry out for divine guidance. And where we're given the answer. And then we go back down the mountain side arms linked, a sense of peace and calm and certainty in all of us and courage.... What would we sing then Nancy?....as we are walking down together...

But darn! we can't do that.

Let's do the second best. Engage in loving communal spiritual discernment whenever we have a big decision to make as a church. May it be so.

## Sources

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