**Discerning God’s Will Series: Live with the Tension**

Psalm 1 Mark 9:30-37

March 14, 2021

Someone has told a story about a little girl named Jan who was 2 ½ years old. One evening she was banging her teaspoon on her highchair while ceaselessly and shrilly demanding dessert. Annoyed by the noise, her mother, heading quickly down to the freezer to fetch her some ice cream, said irritably, "Have a little patience." On her return from the basement, Jan's mother found her little girl in what seemed to be the middle of a convulsion. Her face was bright red, her body was rigid, her fists were clenched, her eyes were fixed in a stare, in addition to which she didn't appear to be breathing. Letting the ice cream drop from her hands and screaming, "What's the matter?" Jan's mother hurried to her daughter's side; whereupon, Jan unclenched her fists, stopped holding her breath, and replied, "I'm having patience."

I’m guessing that most of us struggle with patience and maybe some of us show our struggle in our faces. The line at the grocery store is long and there are only two registers open and we grimace. Or it’s that particular place in town where traffic is slow and everyone is using the known side street short cut. Maybe we end up waiting longer than we had planned at the doctor’s office. Maybe we fume when the computer won’t connect to the web site, or we call customer service and we not only have to wait on the phone for another computer to offer the options, but we are put on hold again when we choose to speak to an actual person. Impatience is a common struggle. We want to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible. When we’re young we want to grow up - fast. When we start working, we want to climb the promotion ladder quickly. When we tell our child or grandchild to clean their room, we mean NOW! And when we need direction, are struggling to make a decision, and wonder where God might be in the midst of it all, we wish clarity would come quickly so we can move forward. But the reality of life is that things are not always resolved quickly. The AA program reminds us that we can sometimes be like children in that we want what we want and we want it now. But that’s not the way life works.

Today we are in week three of our sermon series on discerning God’s will. We began by stating the obvious – if we are discerning direction or clarity individually or in community then we first need to ask the question. It may feel simplistic, yet its not a spiritually immature question to ask for guidance – rather its a gesture of our need and belief that God is interested in the details of our lives. So we ask then pause and open ourselves to wonder, to mystery, to life, to wisdom. Last week we noted that this naturally includes listening. Ancient and modern writers on the spiritual life talk about attending to God…being present to the God who is always present. A living faith, or what we might call the faith of a mystic, not pious or perfect, is one that listens for God in all things - in creation, sacred texts, individual and communal prayer, through concrete involvement with the poor, through involvement in Christian community, in charity and self sacrifice, and in being vulnerable for love as Christ was vulnerable for love. Today we reflect on the notion that discerning includes living with tension. The prophet Isaiah wrote that “they who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.” Discernment includes spending some time in the in-between moments of life. In that space, we trust that in the tension of the unknowing, God is present and at work. It’s like letting the bread finish baking even though it smells so good we want to take it out and eat it. It’s like letting the engine warm up before we rev it. It’s like letting the seed germinate and coming by every morning to watch until it breaks through the dirt. It’s like letting the heart and mind come together in decision and action. Discerning is not like fast food thank goodness - quick, unhealthy and cheap. We don’t get to pull up to the window, order and get our clarity quickly. Discernment takes time, is healthy and what we get is worth the wait.

Our scripture this morning from the Psalms offers a beautiful image of trees planted by streams of water. This natural image reminds us that when the conditions are right, when trees get the nutrients and water they need, they produce fruit... in due season. You can’t rush it. You have to be patient. Farmers and gardeners know this. There is a right time to till the soil, a right time to plant, feed and water for the fruit to come forth. If there is a heat wave and the blossoms come too early, then the cold that is normal for that time of year will kill the blossoms and stop the fruit from coming. If it is too cold too long then the tree is confused – it is used to warm coming and it just stays dormant. The work of nature in plant growth is a slow work as is the work of discernment. For about seven months now, you have been in a time of discernment. You are just now beginning to gather in groups and ask questions about your identity. You have begun a process of listening to one another and sharing hopes, dreams, and frustrations about your ministry together. As you share lots of ideas and preferences, your Transition Team is compiling all your feedback and putting the gist of your desires into summaries that will become part of your Mission Study Report. The goal will be to prayerfully use your preferences to discern who might be the right person to join you in ministry and move forward with you in your hopes and dreams. This is the time when being patient may be a challenge. We want to move quickly, yet there is more to be discussed about who you are and where God is calling you. Discerning God’s will necessarily means we trust the slow work of God. It means we live with the tension of the now and the not yet. One Christian writer notes that the Biblical notion for this is “pondering” and by that they mean “patiently holding something inside one’s soul complete with all the tension that brings.”

Let’s hover here for a moment. Patiently holding something inside one’s soul. Mary is the “ponderer” in the gospels. She ponders what the angels say about her giving birth to a deliverer. She ponders what Jesus says as a boy when they find him in the temple. And as a mother she must have pondered it all as she saw him betrayed and arrested. A life that seeks to discern where God is in our living and our actions is a life of holding mystery in our soul, things unknown and unresolved, with all our questions and hopes, trusting and looking for clarity. I have a rubber band with me here today. If we were in person there would be a few on each pew. We all have played with them. If you have one close by feel free to pick it up and participate. Hold it in your hands and stretch it and just keep holding it - not too far – we don’t want it to break and get snapped on the hand or flip it and hit someone. Living with tension is a stretching of sorts. Premature resolution of decisions sometimes is about our ego - we take the power and push a decision like letting go of one side, so the band flies across the room. No more tension and no discernment. Premature resolution can also be about the exclusion of others - it can be painful like the snapping of the rubber band. We think we have the answer and in essence, we leave God and others out of it. Our scripture from Mark’s gospel shows us that struggling with tension is not a new dynamic. Jesus had just told the disciples that he would be betrayed, killed, and after three days rise again. Mark says the disciples didn’t understand and were afraid to ask questions. When they got to the next town, Jesus asked them what they had been talking about and they were embarrassed. They had been talking about who was the greatest. Jesus had just told them about what would happen to him, the mystery of death and resurrection… pretty important stuff. The disciples preferred the good news. They could not live with this tension so they just talked about what they wanted. Sometimes if we are impatient or if things are not going our way, we just do our own thing - but that’s just it - when we go it alone - we end up alone and keep finding ourselves there again and again. Discernment is inclusive...it pays attention to various sources like in-between moments, broken places, faith communities, trusted friends, all the while being open to wonder and the unknown. As one Christian writer has said, discernment is holding “something in our soul until it is transformed.”

Anyone still stretching the rubber band? Anyone’s hand muscles aching? We can let go now. Living with tension requires some muscle - emotional muscle that is willing to name and live with our imperfections in tension with the promise that we are beloved of God, and God is FOR us. Living with tension requires the muscles of the mind and will – we choose to stay with the tension, affirm that we are not God, and that God speaks in and through community so we can discern together. Living with the tension requires the muscles of faith – we trust that God is at work and we continue living and serving all the while listening for the God who speaks to us in it all. Discernment is soul work...involving the mind, heart, and action. We ask, pause, listen, and live with the tension of not yet knowing. It's a practice of trusting God within and among us – believing that we will find a way together and committing together to go in whatever direction our discernment leads! Can we open ourselves to anticipate what we might learn together? Can we open our hearts and minds to where God might lead? I can’t wait to see what is discerned!