

Guiding Light (part two)

August 21st, 2011

Psalm 1:1-3, Judges 6:36-40, Acts 16:6-10

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Church

So here we are: the much anticipated part two of the gift of Spiritual Discernment.

Last week was a bit of an introduction to Discerning God's will in your life and if you missed it then pick up a copy on your way out or check it out online. Understanding God's will in your life has a lot to do with having a close relationship with God. When I went on holiday a couple of weeks ago to a camp in Gracefield, Quebec there was very little cell reception. I had to go to the highest point in the camp and stand in certain way and then I might get one little bar. I might get enough to receive or send a text message but for the most part it wasn't enough to even check messages because it kept cutting out and I would get the message: "Call Failed". Truthfully, it was nice to be cut off. I just gave up and threw my phone in the bottom of a suitcase for a week and let the battery die. But if you wanted to connect with someone and hear what they had to say, then it's a good idea to try to be in a spot that has a good strong signal. It's the same with discerning God's will in your life: you want to lean into God. You need to do things that will draw you closer to God.

It is also important that you be generally open and receptive. You might be in an area with a strong signal but unless your phone is on and open to receiving the signal you won't get much out of your conversation. So the first most important thing is to draw near to God. The second is to be open. Open for signs, open for thoughts, open for ideas and feelings.

Easier for some. Not perfect for anyone. Even those who struggle with hearing God's voice can learn and can get better at it.

Probably the most direct way to hear God's voice is through prayer. Commit to praying about a particular issue every day for a month. It doesn't have to be a long prayer or a fancy prayer. When it's an issue that's causing you anxiety, one of the most powerful prayers I've heard was shared with me by Carla Vanderhelm who hangs out with our praise team Revival. She taught me the very simple prayer: "Thank you God for taking care of this." She says that prayer whenever an issue that causes worry pops up in her mind. This is a powerful prayer of surrender and trust.

When it comes to personal prayer I always like to encourage people to get your prayers out. So write your prayers down in a journal or say them out loud in the car or someplace you can get away with, without family members looking at you like you ought to be committed. If you only pray in your head sometimes it's hard to 'hear' God's voice through all the noise inside. Sometimes when you pray you hear the answer and sometimes the answer comes from another place.

Christian meditation is a good way to directly approach God with an issue. We have a group that meets every Tuesday morning after Prayer and Share. Try walking the Labyrinth outside. Hold the issue in your heart and just walk into the center. In the center, which has some beautiful flowers, just be still. As the Psalm 46 says "Be still and know that I am God". And then walk out again on the path. The labyrinth is a wonderful way to bring a concern to God and to hear God's voice.

Read the Bible. (If you don't know what to read, pick up a copy of the Word for You Today or another devotional and just follow some or all of the suggestions for what to read.) If in your daily Bible readings you hold your issue lightly (don't obsess or focus too hard – be open, hold it lightly even if it feels very heavy) often you will find the reading speaking to you. Hebrews 4:12 says "For the word of God is living and active, piercing to the division of the soul and the spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." When you read the scriptures regularly, you will often hear God speaking through them to you about all sorts of things in your life.

Another way of hearing God is in worship or in another Christian setting. When I go to Christian conferences, like the Leadership Summit, I pay more attention to some of the random thoughts that pop into my head. Of course a lot of the random thoughts that pop into my head aren't worth paying attention to, but I have noticed that because I am in a worshipful space—in a gathering with many other Christians—and because my heart is open to what God has to say through the speaker, often God will speak to me about seemingly unrelated things. So I have made it a habit to write thoughts that might be significant and put a circle around them. I go back later and look for those circled thoughts and try to act on them. What I'm saying is that if during the worship service, for example, you have a thought that you really should go and visit Mary or stop by and see if Harald needs a hand with the renovations because he's been having a tough time lately, pay attention to those kinds of thoughts. Sometimes you will hear God speaking to you directly in worship through a song or a prayer but sometimes you'll hear God in the spaces in between. I'm not trying to encourage random thoughts while I preach, but there is a better chance that you will hear

God speaking to you in this space than when you're rushing through the grocery store. There tends to be better God-cell coverage in here. I do believe in sacred space. The church is not a building; it is people following Jesus together and God is everywhere, but there are spaces, and this space is one of them, that are special, and where you will have a better chance of hearing God.

When you are discerning God's call in your life or some important decision, talk to other Christians who know you and whom you respect.

This is the story of Parker Palmer who is a fairly well known author and educator.



known

During my tenure as Dean at Pendle Hill, I was offered the opportunity to become the president of a small educational institution. ...I was quite certain that this was the job for me. So as is the custom in the Quaker community, I called on half a dozen trusted friends to help me discern my vocation by means of a "clearness committee", a process in which the group refrains from giving advice but spends three hours asking you honest, open questions to help you discover your own inner truth.

For a while, the questions were easy, at least for a dreamer like me: What is your vision for the institution? What is its mission in the larger society?... How would you handle decision making?...

Halfway into the process, someone asked a question that sounded easier yet turned out to be very hard: "What would you like most about being a president?" The simplicity of the question loosed me from my head and lowered me into my heart. I remember pondering for at least a full minute before I could respond. Then, very softly and tentatively, I started to speak. "Well, I would not like having to give up my writing and my teaching... I would not like the politics of the presidency, never knowing who your real friends are... I would not like having to glad-hand people I do not respect simply because they have money... I would not like..."

Gently but firmly, the person who had posed the question interrupted me: "May I remind you that I asked what you would most like?"

I responded impatiently, "Yes, yes, I'm working my way toward an answer." Then I resumed my sullen but honest litany: "I would not like having to give up my summer vacations... I would not like..."

Once again the questioner called me back to the original question. But this time I felt compelled to give the only honest answer I possessed, an answer that came from the very bottom of my barrel, an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it.

"Well", said I, in the smallest voice I possess, "I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it."

I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence—a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan.

Finally, my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up – and cracked me open: "Parker," he said "can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life—so obvious that when the clearness committee ended, I called the school and withdrew my name from consideration. Had I taken the job, it would have been very bad for me and a disaster for the school.¹

Another thing to watch out for especially when we are talking about God's calling is synchronicity. Let's say you feel a call to change careers. When you walk in that direction, do the doors seem open? Does the way seem clear? Are there God-incidences around it? You know things that the world would call a co-incidence but that you know darn well is a God-incidence. Synchronicity should not be taken on its own. Just because you got three green lights in a row and there is a perfect parking spot outside the donut shop doesn't mean God is calling you to eat a walnut crunch. But God-incidences can be a helpful affirmation of God's call.

Take into consideration your own feelings. Do you have energy or excitement around doing something or does the thought bore you? For the most part when it's God's will the feelings that you have should be positive. The one exception is fear. When God calls us to something quite often our initial feeling is fear "I could never do that!" Don't let fear stop you from following the Lord down any path.

Any big calling or sense that God is leading you in a different direction should be tested and confirmed in several ways. Someone gave me an image of a three-legged stool. One leg is prayer, another is scripture and the third is the wisdom of Christians. When you have the three you've got a solid place to sit. One of the best ways to test is by looking for the Fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22 says: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...” God will not call us into something that is against God’s nature. In the end, whatever God asks us to do should lead to more and more love, joy, peace...

God doesn’t just call once. If God wants you to hear something God will tell you several ways and often over and over. The voice of God is persistent and loving. Usually it’s when we look back that we can see it clearly. But always it needs to be confirmed and tested.

Troubleshooting: Sometimes we are open and in a good place for a signal but we don’t get any direction-- that can happen. In that case just keep walking forward. The chances are good that you’re on the right path. There are a lot of reasons why we may not be hearing God clearly. Often when we’re going through a really hard time, strangely it can be hard to hear God. I know that from my own experience. It’s one of those mysteries that I’ll take up with the big guy when I get there. It’s not that God isn’t present, God loves you and is always with you, but somehow sometimes it’s hard to hear even when you feel you need to hear most. Sometimes God just wants you to keep going, and sometimes something is blocking your connection. It could be regrets in your life that you haven’t confessed, or it could be an unforgiveness in your life. Laying down your burdens, saying sorry to God and forgiving others for hurting you all help more than most of us know, to clear the communication lines between us. It helps not because we aren’t good enough but because that ‘stuff’ overloads the circuits and causes interference on the signal.

Lean into God and listen for his voice. It’s not just important for your sake. In fact, most of the time when God calls it’s to help make a difference to someone else. How many times have you had a Spirit nudge that you didn’t act on but later wish you had?

Last week I told you about my desperate prayer of whether I should go to Alberta for my first ministry posting. I had 20 minutes to make the decision before the national church committee would call back. We just wanted to know that this was God’s will. My husband and I prayed that God would give a clear answer and he did. No sooner had we said ‘Amen’ when the phone rang. It was my mother calling to say “If you need to go to Alberta, you go to Alberta!” When I talked to my mother later she told me that she suddenly had a strong impression that she just had to call me at that moment – even though they were in the car. And this was 12 years ago when car cell phones were great big suckers that you used primarily for emergencies, not for conversation and certainly not for long distance calls to Toronto. She had a nudge from the Spirit and instead of dismissing it with an excuse (oh I’ll call her when we get home) as sometimes she and we all do, she acted on the impulse. I’m glad that my mother was open to hearing God calling that day. Had she waited and called later I would have wrestled longer and her thoughts would have felt more like her advice or opinion. Instead because of the perfect timing, through my mom I heard God speak directly to me. I knew the move to Alberta was absolutely God’s will.

Discernment is all about sifting through what comes from our desires and our ego, as well as what other people want or expect for our life, from what comes from God. God can work good through any situation or bad decision that we make, but life is a little easier and has more peace and joy when we follow God’s path in the first place.

God wants to speak to you today. He wants to remind you that he loves you and that you are precious in his sight. Through you God wants others to be encouraged and to be reminded of his love and strong presence.

When we are open to God speaking in our lives, amazing things happen for us and more importantly for others and for our community and our world. Lean into God. Listen to God and act on that all at once gentle yet powerful voice. You won’t be disappointed. You’ll notice a lot more God moments and you’ll be amazed at what a difference you will make by the grace and the strength of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱⁱ Nancy Reeves, *I’d Say “Yes”, God, If I Knew What You Wanted*, 2001 p.203-204