

HOW CAN WE KNOW WHEN GOD SPEAKS?

Preached by the Rev'd Grace Burton-Edwards on the Sixth Sunday in Easter, 9 May 2010, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Acts 16:9-15, Psalm 67. Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5, John 14:23-29.

A question I am often asked by children and teenagers is the question, "How can we tell when God is speaking to us?" Especially, how can we know when God is asking us to do something? How can we know that it is God and not us? How can we know that it is God and not some form of convoluted wish-fulfillment on our part, or some unexamined psychological baggage driving us to unconscious choices, or a voice from some other place? How can we know?

Young people are not the only ones who ask this question. Soren Kierkegaard, the brilliant 19th C philosopher, spent a lot of time thinking about knowledge and understanding and how faith intersects with thought. But he once wrote this in his journal:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do, not* what I am to know. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes *me* to do. What good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had no deeper significance *for me and for my life?*

Emphasis in original. Quoted in *Listening Hearts*, p. 3

I invite us to reflect on this question today because Paul in the book of Acts makes it seem so easy. The story from today's epistle lesson is typical. Paul has a vision. A man from Macedonia asks him to "come over and help us." And he goes. Just before this experience, at the beginning of Acts 16, Paul and Timothy traveled through a particular region, but the writer of Acts says that the Holy Spirit did not let them preach the message there. After that, they tried to go in another direction, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. The message was very clear, apparently, so they kept moving in the original direction until Paul had this vision.

This is neither the first nor the last time Paul felt called by God's Spirit to do one thing or compelled by God's Spirit not to do another. He seems to have some sort of direct line. He prays. He gets guidance. He responds. It's simple.

Some Christian experience does seem to be this direct. I have mentioned before that I am participating in a two-year ministry fellowship at Wabash College funded by Lilly Endowment. The members of this group come from many different expressions of Christian faith – from one lone Episcopalian to several Methodists and Presbyterians to Independent Christians, African Methodist Episcopal pastors, some charismatic, a couple of mega-church guys. At one of our gatherings, one of the participants talked very naturally about her experience with Jesus. She was describing her life journey with her husband, and said things like, "Jesus told us to do this. And then he told us to do this, but he told us not to do this." Another participant responded respectfully and said, "Jesus doesn't usually talk to me like that." Both are very faithful Christians, both pastors in their traditions, but with very different experiences of the spirit of Jesus.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus speaks to his disciples and promises that the Holy Spirit will come and teach them. I want to reflect a bit on what that looks like. How do we discern the presence of the God's Spirit in our lives? How can we tell when the Holy Spirit is teaching us, especially those who don't seem to have a direct line?

I begin with the history and teaching of the Anglican Church, our heritage as Episcopalians. Our tradition began in England in a time of bitter religious strife. You know the ugly history – Henry VIII was a devout Catholic who became Protestant in order to secure a divorce and marry the second of his six wives. Granted, it is difficult to claim Henry as a model of Christian discernment. All we can say there is that sometimes God does good in spite of us. Henry's first daughter Mary tried to return England to the Roman Catholic fold, and she tortured and killed many who stood in her way, earning her infamous nickname Bloody Mary. Elizabeth succeeded her half-sister, kept England in the Protestant fold, but recognized the need to end religious strife and create a church in England that would welcome those with Protestant sensibilities and those with Catholic sensibilities.

The Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of Elizabeth was a careful theologian named Richard Hooker. One of the theological debates brewing on the European continent was the question of authority. Some protestant voices on the continent said that scripture alone was the authority for Christian living and teaching. Catholic voices said that scripture must be interpreted in light of the church's tradition, the history and teaching of the church over the centuries. People were literally killing each other over this question – scripture alone or scripture and tradition. Hooker declared that Christians needed both – scripture and tradition, but he also said that God has blessed human beings with reason, the ability to think and discern and understand. Christians needed to be guided by scripture and tradition and reason. Christian authority and thought rest on this three-legged stool. This is the Anglican way.

What does this have to do with the Holy Spirit? This principle, the three-legged stool of scripture, tradition, and reason – gives us boundaries for discerning whether the voice we hear calling to us or the choices that lie before us are faithful. This principal does not tell us exactly what to do, but it can help us chart a path. It can help us know whether the path we are walking is faithful. When presented with a choice, it can be helpful to ask, is this option faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in scripture? Is it consistent with the history and witness of those who were baptized before me? And is it reasonable? We can trust that God's Spirit does not generally lead us outside these boundaries.

Now I know that many of us have at times been accused of violating scripture in our lives or choices or actions, and many of us have been accused of lacking firm grounding for our actions in one of the three legs of the stool. For me, this played out in a powerful way when I was ordained for the first time nearly sixteen years ago as a Baptist. There were not a lot of women pastors in those circles then – some, but not lots. Throughout that ordination process, I encountered people who asked, “How can you be sure God is calling you to pastoral ministry when the Bible says women aren't supposed to preach or lead?” They usually asked with great sincerity, not malice. They often liked me and wanted me to be a pastor, but they wanted to know that they were not just making up some new direction for the church. They wanted to be

sure that their desire for me to be ordained was faithful, that it came from a solid foundation and not just because they thought I was nice. They wanted to know how to know. I was terribly young then, and at first I did not know how to respond. But though I was not Episcopalian at the time, over time I found myself using Hooker's way of thinking. Yes, some parts of scripture spoke against what I was doing, but the greater witness was the scriptural example of Jesus who called and sent all who followed him. Yes, the recent tradition of the church did not welcome women. This was a change. But the long history was filled with faithful women who led religious orders, wrote theology, and preached the gospel. And, yes, reason factored in my discernment as well. The leadership of women was now accepted in many places outside the church. Why, when there was so much work to be done, would God limit leadership to only half of the population? Scripture, tradition, and reason guided me as I claimed a call that was churning within me.

This is discernment of the mind. It is a useful spiritual discipline, very helpful in charting direction. The practice is modeled in the theological reflection exercises of EFM, Education for Ministry, an intense program of study for lay people developed by one of our Episcopal seminaries. We are beginning a new EFM class this fall, and I hope many will take part. Discernment of the mind is one of the ways to decide whether to trust a certain direction in our lives. Is it rooted in the gospel of Jesus? Is it consistent with the path of the baptized? Is it reasonable?

The book of Acts and the letters of Paul in the New Testament make clear that he did much discernment of the mind. Paul made a sea change in his life when he left Pharisaical Judaism and embraced Christianity. For the rest of his life he defended that decision clearly and articulately. But he also spoke of heartfelt moments of insight in which God's Spirit was at work in him.

I think of those moments of insight and clarity as discernment of the heart. What does that look like for us? I have come to believe, from observation, from my own experience, from listening to others, that there are many different spiritual languages, many different ways for the Spirit of God to work within us. One of my friends seems to hear Jesus, and I believe she does, but not everyone hears the Spirit of Jesus in that same way.

People with greater wisdom than I have noticed some patterns. I offer some clues in the discernment of the heart that come from the Listening Hearts community. Listening Hearts developed as a group of mostly Episcopalians worked together over several years to integrate some Quaker understandings of spiritual guidance with scripture and the writings of Christians over the centuries. The group developed a model for prayerful listening in community, and they applied it over the years with many people, eventually writing a book called *Listening Hearts*.

In their observations of people who felt like God was leading them in a certain direction, they noticed that many people shared some of these common experiences.

- Peace
- Joy
- Disorientation at first, followed by serenity
- Tears, not of sadness, but of peace
- A sudden sense of clarity – like Paul knowing it was time to go to Macedonia

- Separate strands of life experience that begin to come together
- Persistence – the message keeps coming through different channels

(Listening Hearts, p. 46-47)

What strikes me about this list is that it seems so basic, so ordinary. No blinding lights. No messages in the clouds. No bitter struggle, as if God is forcing you to do something you can't stand doing. Sometimes we think that what God wants us to do will be hard or difficult or unpleasant. But I find more and more that God seems to call us through our joys, through the things that bring us deepest delight and satisfaction and peace.

I am not suggesting that we all go out into the world and just do whatever we want to do. I am suggesting that we pay attention to who God has made us to be and live faithfully.

Today we celebrate Rogation Day, a time to bless the fields and give thanks for the abundance of the earth. Today we also celebrate Mother's Day, the blessing of being nurtured in love. As the gardener delights in seeing the flower come into blossom, as the parent delights in seeing the child grow into who he or she is made to be, so our Creator delights as we discover who we are made to be and grow into that fullness. Thanks be to God.

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