

## *All I ask for is a discerning heart!*

*1 Kings 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-20*

“All I ask for is a discerning heart.” That is what Solomon asked of God. We are all called by God to often do things that we do not believe we are capable of. After King David’s death, Solomon was a bit fearful and trepidatious on what it was that he was being called to do. He knew that he was to be the new king, but he admitted that he was really not that qualified. He was but a little child. Now, whether he was little in age or little in the sense that he didn’t have that much experience.

How many times have we thought to ourselves, “I don’t know about the Bible, or Christianity, to take on a leadership role in the community of faith?” Solomon asked God in this moment for a discerning heart. He wanted some help so that he may serve the world as God intended. God not only grants this request for a discerning heart, but also grants Solomon great wisdom. What does Solomon mean, though, for this request for a understanding mind and heart?

“Discernment, in a most general sense, is the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God, both in ordinary moments and in the large decisions of our lives.”<sup>1</sup> As a leader of God’s people, it makes sense that Solomon seeks to live out the will of God, for that was what he was called to do. In this, he is asking God to help him recognize and respond in a way that would be acceptable to God, and God grants this because of Solomon’s humbleness. Solomon didn’t fall victim to the genie-in-the-lamp, asking for great riches and for everlasting life. What he asked for was skills to help him ensure that the people he served were well cared for. It wasn’t about him in this moment. Solomon was seeking wisdom to do what was right. He said, “Please God, give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” We hear that God grants Solomon a discerning heart, because Solomon did not ask, as I said, for long life, riches, or to defeat his enemies. Solomon was not seeking personal gain from his leadership and did not have a personal agenda. Furthermore, God lets Solomon know that, “If you walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.” We need to remember – for those of you who know Solomon – Solomon starts to go down a dark path later in his leadership. We have to still walk in a way according to God. We are all called to do that; and even when we fall off the path, we are called back to follow God. To put God at the centre of our efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursing God’s Will Together*, p. 10 Kindle Edition

God said that Solomon would be rewarded if he lived in accordance with God's will. Now Paul in the passage to the Ephesians reminds us and them too that like Solomon, we should live as people of wisdom. Making the most of our days. That as Christians, we are called to not be foolish. To not get sucked into things that take us away from God's presence, such as debauchery. But instead to focus in on what it is that God has called us to do. In verse 5, we read, that Paul provides us with some practical advice on how to seek wisdom. (Which comes from *A Life Centred on God*. So in order to determine what is right, we need to listen to God, we need to ask questions that can help us determine the best way forward. What Paul is calling us to do is to be courageous in seeking the will of God, and then making decisions that are responsive to God's will.

So my question for you today is this: what are the barriers to discernment? What are the barriers to Solomon truly following what he asked God for? More often than not, the biggest barrier that we face is ourselves. We often limit ourselves from looking beyond what we already see or expect to see. How often have you looked around and thought, "I don't see God any where. God hasn't talked to me directly." That is an example of us closing off our hearts and our minds to the presence of God. Sometimes our assumptions and our insecurities can be a big barrier. Sometimes it's our impatience for the easy answer. To move forward quickly so we can get our needs met.

We are often spiritually blind. Ruth Haley Barton, in her book *Pursuing God's Will Together*, explains this:

"Discernment is an ever-increasing capacity to *see*, or discern the works of God in our midst, in our human situation, so that we can then align ourselves with whatever it is that God is doing."<sup>2</sup>

Discernment is a practice. It's not something that comes easily; it's something that we have to work on. It's a spiritual discipline which calls us to listen deeply for God's voice and to look at the world from a spiritual perspective in order to see God at work.

Last week in the scriptures, Paul called us to be imitators of Christ, and one of the key ways we can do this is through discernment. Through being wise, seeking wisdom. Jesus often was known to ask questions that no one else dared to ask. These questions help people to reflect in a different way. To see the world in a way that God would want us to see the world. So my question is: what questions are we *not* asking in this world, in this city, and in this community of faith? Can you imagine what would happen if the leaders of the world sought wisdom to do what is right instead of what is evil? Would the world look different?

Discernment, like Sabbath, which we talked about in July, requires preparation. We need to create a space for discernment to happen. Our Sabbath practices can help us prepare ourselves to be open to listening in a spiritual way. We need to create a hospitable space for listening to happen both internally, as well as externally. We need to explore questions that matter. Discernment questions are never a "yes or no" kind of question. Discernment

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, p.19 Kindle Edition

questions get us to dig deeper. They get us to ask questions of what, where, how, and most importantly *why*.

Discernment can be a very individual practice, and in that it can be very powerful as we are seeking to find meaning in our own life. But discernment as a group, as a community of faith, can be transformative. The practice of community discernment starts with a belief that everyone here needs to contribute. That your contributions are valued and essential to hearing what is God's will. If we believe that God has created each and every one of us and has given each of us a unique gift which we are called to share, then the only way that we are able to carry out God's ministry in this world is when we do it together. The practice of discernment involves the cross-pollination and connection of diverse perspectives. We are called to listen to one another, for God speaks through each and every one of us. We are called to seek and identify patterns and insights and deeper questions. And then collectively, we harvest and share these discoveries, which help us to clarify our call and commitment and purpose in this world.

Sometimes, I don't know if you have noticed, but when you are discerning on your own, you end up asking yourself the same questions; you can get too focused in one direction. And in the end, you might not ask the most important question. But when we rely on the collective wisdom and the whole of the community of faith, we trust that God will instill in someone a question that the group needs to answer. Or someone will share something that others would never have ever thought of, that changes the entire conversation and direction that God is calling us to.

So is there a difference between making a decision and doing discernment? I believe that in making a decision, we often seek reasons for why we should do what we want to do and are passionate about. We often search for ways to convince others of why they should be excited about this, because we're excited about this. But in discernment, we can share our ideas, but then instead of trying to hold onto them, we offer them to the group as a gift on which to be built upon. Last week, Paul also implored us to only say things that help to build up each other. In adding to the ideas and coming to discernment, we seek to use all of the wisdom and the gifts that God has provided us with, in order to hear that voice of God.

We are a part of the body of Christ, and therefore we need to be working together. Have you ever had a moment in your life where one part of your body did something completely odd that didn't work with the rest, and you probably ended up falling over and hurting yourself. This happens to me often, and I wish my body would work together. I was often surprised too when I'm weightlifting, the importance of focusing on the muscles that are needed so the other muscles don't overcompensate. When all the muscles are working together, man you feel strong. We can do the same if we listen and ask questions of one another.

So, for the next few minutes, we are going to enter a time of discernment. We have already grounded ourselves at the center of God. God is at the centre of our thoughts. We are going to take a few minutes. In the Quaker style – another faith tradition – their worship is to come together and sit in silence until God invokes one of them to speak something that needs to be said. This can be very uncomfortable for many people, so please know that is

you are uncomfortable, that is okay. We are going to start with a question; we are going to spend some time in silent reflection; and then I invite you to turn to one another, and if God has shared with you a message, I invite you to share it with one another. Trusting that everyone here has something to share.

So here is the question: Robertson-Wesley believes that we are called to be a community of faith – a welcoming community of faith. We are called to welcome all people into this space, into what we do, and in the world. **What's the difference between being a welcoming community of faith and being a loving community of faith?** Is there a difference? What is the difference?

So, in a time of silence, I want you to think about how we have moved from a welcoming community to a loving community. Or how can we, if you don't think we have achieved it yet? Let's spend some time in silent reflection, and then we will share with one another.

*(a few minutes of reflection)*

Again, discernment is about the collective wisdom. So I encourage you to step out of your comfort zone, turn to one another and share what it is you have heard from God in that time. Please share with one another, and don't forget to introduce yourselves.

*(people turn to each other and share)*

For those of you who are online, I would love to hear what God shared with you, so if you like, you can email me at [karen.bridges@rwuc.org](mailto:karen.bridges@rwuc.org). How do we move from a welcoming to a loving community of faith? It might be very different for you who are worshipping online, but I would love to hear your thoughts.

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I'm going to invite us back into our space together. I invite you to take a deep breath...and release it. Take another deep breath...and release it. Take another very deep breath...and release it. The next step in discernment is to take a moment and reflect on what you have heard from one another. Where was the energy in that conversation? What piece stood out for you? Take a moment and reflect.

The act of worship is truly a dialogue between each and every one of us and with God. Not only do we listen for the wisdom in our scriptures, but then we listen for how God is at work in our world so that we can understand what it is we are called to do. So I'm curious: did anything stand out for you that you would like to share?

*(people share)*

- Here at Robertson-Wesley, no one is to be excluded, including the people who are living rough on the streets and everyone in between. That being a welcoming community means that all people are heard and valued.
- We do have a community supper once a month. As people come in, they may not at first feel comfortable, even though we have welcomed them into their space. Part of

being loving is meeting people where they're at, and being gentle and hospitable so that they feel that this is a place for them, where they are loved.

- You've seen in the last 10 years that you have been here, the compassion has really grown for one another and differences that we have. So there is real growth in how we are understanding and reacting to one another.
- So \_\_\_\_\_, in her time here, has shifted her role and is now in a role of being a listening, discerning woman of wisdom in my opinion. So thank you.
- Coming to church, it feels like you're going home. That you're coming to visit family.

One of the questions that we may not be asking ourselves but we might want to as we look towards where God is directing us in the future is to think about what needs are being met. What needs are not being met, both within the sanctuary but also within our community that we're serving. So I hope that you will all take this practice into your daily lives. That you will notice and open your eyes up spiritually to where God is at work. Have these important conversations, because that is where God enlivens everything and shows that we are all loved. I thank you all for participating in our time of discernment today.