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Discernment in the Midst of Real Life

For months now I have been thinking about where vocation, spirituality, conscience, and discernment meet. For years, actually, and I am here to tell you it doesn't make life easier when you think about this stuff all the time. There are no experts at all in discernment, and if someone tells you he or she is such a person, run very quickly the other way.

How can anyone be an expert in discernment, let alone vocation? The only sort of expertise or excellence we could find in any of these concepts – like vocation and discernment – is a particular person who seems to be at peace with the path of her life. And to be at peace with the path of her life is to accept both one's past, which is full of pain and anger and frustration as well as joys and pleasure, and to accept one's future, which is unknown and beyond our control. The only expertise in discernment and vocation is the practical wisdom we develop, person by person, in the context of our own lives. I am hoping that our conversation tonight can be a sort of experiment in practical wisdom.

Discernment is very much an outgrowth of practical wisdom. Football players, pianists, seasoned movie viewers; those who cook, sew, repair cars, write newspaper articles, care for children, and climb mountains are those who know what I am talking about here, even if they don't know that they know it. In each one of these endeavors is a sort of practical wisdom: the ability to make judgments based on the situation and pursue response to the situation which gathers the most good out of it and helps the path towards excellence. I

have a student in my class right now who is a center on the football team. He has to make all sorts of observations – about the opposing teams, the play the Hanover Panthers are working, the weather, the quality of the ball, the information and direction he got from his coach. In the midst of this, he has to figure out the best way for him to do the best job of getting the ball to the quarterback and then quickly joining those who are protecting the qb and blocking.

For an oboist to play one of my favorite pieces of music ever – the Grand Partita #10 by Mozart - she would have to know her instrument well. She would have to be aware of what sort of physical condition she was in in order to perform, she would have to be aware of the way her fellow musicians – especially the clarinetist – played their parts, and then there's responding to the conductor.

You get the point. Each and every one of us knows what I am talking about because somewhere in your life you know how to do something. Discernment for you – the only relevant expert in your life – will entail bringing that skill of judgment to bear on the rest of your life. The point for us this evening is not to think we have to come up with new skills and get good at something at which we are not at all good, but the point is rather for us to draw on the strength and resources we already have and integrate them with the rest of our life.

Discernment and Vocation

Discernment and vocation are not the same thing. But they are a canoodling couple and they don't like to be away from each other for very long.

Vocation is a concept, broadly embraced in our culture now, which refers at the very least to a deep sense of purpose in the core of human beings, and at the most to the voice of God calling the beloved child to be and to become all that she was created to be for God, herself, and God's work in the world. Vocation, or calling – the word comes from the same word that gives us “voice” – refers most specifically to purpose, meaning, and identity in life.

Discernment refers to figuring out what we will do in a given situation. Discernment, as we are well aware, pervades our lives in mundane and profound ways. We are in the process of discerning when we try to figure out the best arrangement for our living room furniture so that we can accommodate the guests we love to have over. And we are in the process of discerning when we try to figure out what college to go to, should I marry this guy?, how do I preach at this funeral?, is there life after 40? When we are in the midst of discerning, we weigh information, insight, intuition, values, faith, commitments to others, and available possibilities for action.

But we can already see how the two are intertwined, right? Even when thinking about furniture arrangement for the guests we love to have over, we are assuming values to which we are committed and which identify for us what is good in life, what we think we are about, a sense of our place and purpose in the world. And, when we are in the midst of thinking through vocational issues, we take up discernment to help us. We have to weigh all sorts of things, ponder who we are and what brings us joy, in order to develop a sense of God's calling to us in this world.

Tonight our perspective on this canoodling couple – as we ask them to leave their embrace so we can seem them more clearly – is to look closely at discernment. Thursday morning I will look more closely at vocation as I address the students.

Discernment in the Midst of Real Life, Which is Messy

I think one of the reasons the movie *Parenthood* was so appealing was because they were a regular family. Well, except for the enormous, gorgeous house: have you noticed how the “little” apartments and “typical” family homes always have lovely French doors and fireplaces, somewhere? You watch and see.

Anyway, they were a regular family. Their lives were messy. Sometimes chaotic. I am not referring to icky-messy, but to the fact that when you have all sorts of people you love in your life; all sorts of responsibilities to things like jobs, school, children, spouses, extended family, values; when your own life is full of longing and confusion and dilemmas like a marriage needing a jump start years down the road or a sister whose son is trouble or a surprise pregnancy when you’re passed what you thought was your prime or you’re insecure about your job or you’re tired of being uptight but you don’t know how to change, that’s the messiness of life.

Let us be clear that this is not bad messy. This is life, at least a life lived well and fully and with the taking of risk. When you love people, you are no longer safe from life, when you care about your work, you take a risk, when you have a deep passion or yearning or a vivid dream about what could be, when you deeply desire good for yourself and those around you, life gets messy by definition.

Discernment in the midst of real life is in the midst of circumstances that come to us, that we do not define or control. If we are going to truly love people, then we take what comes with them as they are. If we are going to commit ourselves to a way of life, to values we hold dear, to something bigger than us that makes us better and more full of

joy, then we take life as it comes. And it comes with an organization and structure and rhythm and sense that is way beyond what we are able to understand or discern.

Discernment in the midst of real life is just that, it is in the *midst* of real life.

This is the very first thing we have to admit. Our lives involve more than us, and because they do, we are involved with a reality way beyond our control or manipulation. We are faced with things we do not choose. We are faced with things that make our lives and our hearts dark. We come to the brink of an abyss from time to time, wondering how on earth we will survive this next thing. We will have to let go of those people and things we hold tightly and close to our hearts, so that those people and ideas and visions can be what they are.

This is the very first thing we have to admit, that our discernment takes place in the middle of our lives which stretch way beyond us. The reason we would admit that is because we are convinced that there is good, there is something to discern. In other words, in the midst of our lives, we seek a way towards Goodness, and Wholeness and Peace.

One of the presuppositions I bring with me is that at bottom, most of us are people of faith. I have a colleague who disagrees with me, and says that all of us, every last human being is a person of faith, because it takes faith, literally, to get out of bed in the morning and move forward. He doesn't mean this in a dark way, but in the common sense way that there is an over-arching commitment we have in life that gives shape and meaning to what we do and that frames our decisions and choices. We get out of bed for a reason – a vocational reason.

I would hope that this wouldn't come as too much of a surprise from a clergy person!

But I want to make this very clear, because I am not talking about discernment as something that human beings, as individuals cut off from one another, do. To my way of thinking, discernment is what we do to get through life and get through it well, and our discernment is better or worse depending upon how open we are to God's openness to us. If faith is a part of our make-up, and if we affirm our belief in a Divine life and power in the universe that whispers love deep in our souls, then our discernment will work for our health and healing and peace to the degree that we are open to God's openness to us. For we are a part of God's universe, just like the single sparrow who is so precious and who doesn't fall without God knowing.

Openness to God

If we are people who discern because in our guts and in our minds we seek a good life and a life of goodness, and if we are people of faith who in varying ways affirm God at work in this universe and involved in our lives somehow, then openness to God becomes almost obvious. Almost! The form this usually takes for us is in saying that we seek the will of God, or we follow the Ten Commandments or something like this. Openness to God has sometimes actually been willingness to be told what to do, willingness to have the order and structure of my life formed from the outside in. Truthfully, for people of faith in the Christian tradition, this is certainly part of the deal. Speaking personally, I can't ignore the Ten Commandments if I desire to be open to God. If I desire to be open to God, I must be willing to let God be God, and if I commit myself to God, then I take God on God's terms.

This is not much different than developing a strong long-lasting friendship or marrying. We must take these people as they are – just as we must be accepted as we are – if we are

going to love them. For me to love my husband and mock or care nothing about his passion for library work is not to love him. I do love him, and so I take on that interest and passion almost as my own, I provide ways for him to pursue it, make space and time for him to excel at the person he is. I respect his boundaries and his limits, and realize that as a student, he does not write everything in the last 4 hours, like I do, but he actually outlines and preps and starts drafts at least a couple of weeks early. I cannot be open to my husband and deny who he is.

This makes me sound like a good wife. I'm not that good a wife. Because I fail at this a lot. The point is, in our everyday lives we all know this: we know that we sometimes do well and sometimes do poorly the work of our commitments to other people and various endeavors. We also know that love of work and human beings and so many other things requires this particular attention. You know what you need to do to love your spouse or coworker or dear friend or brothers and sisters. You know that this person cannot be talked to when they're in this mood and that another person *must* be talked to when they're in this mood.

Our affirmation of a Divine life and power of the universe that whispers love deep in our souls is an affirmation of a particular God. While we affirm this, we also disbelieve other things, for instance that God is a God of hate. So being open to God does mean taking seriously the injunctions that we believe are grounded in God. And being open to God's openness to us does not mean that we are open merely to what we want. We are open to Reality. We cannot think that in such a way that we make it anything we want: discernment requires that we take God, God's world, God's people, and God's work in the world as it is.

Receiving God

Openness to God, in addition to being open to the particularity of God's own desire to be open to us, means receiving God. Discernment in the midst of real life, if we seek this goodness of God, means receiving God in the midst of our lives. Christians, for instance, affirm faith in a living God, present and active. We Christians must take this seriously, especially if we long to be in fellowship with God. Because we cannot be open to God unless we are willing to be *with* God. Again, like the friends who are dear to us: we cannot be open to them if we are not willing to receive them, their humor, wisdom, challenges, comfort, companionship as part of our ***very own lives***. This is what makes our relationships rich, and what makes us long for those whom we love: we miss our children when they go to college because their presence made our lives richer. We miss loved ones when they pass from us through death because our lives are poorer for their absence. When we change jobs we miss the rhythms and pleasures of having gotten used to these people. We receive them, and we aren't even aware of these intimacies, how we are open to them, how much we have received into our selves.

In fact, the disconnection we sometimes experience reveals just how vital this openness is. Sometimes we get to points where we are unable to be open to others, to receive health and love and comfort and joy. Parker Palmer, in his book *Let Your Life Speak* describes the utter despair and lack of feeling he experienced during his two awful bouts with depression. In fact, he couldn't feel anything, literally, in his body, mind, heart or soul. He was completely cut off in his deep, deep pain. He had glimpses of connection, but what stands out is the one friend who found a spot in his body where he had feeling –

his feet. The friend would come and simply massage his feet, day by day. This was the chink of light in Palmer's deep dark place. He could receive nothing at all from God or anyone except this one very small thing. Receiving God's goodness into his heart and his body was his salvation.

Of course, receiving God is a terrifying thing to think about, especially if our image of God is of a law-giver, judge, a wrathful deity who is disappointed in us. Of course, this is not an image of a God who is open to us, and frankly, to the degree that notions of God have basis in scripture, this image is Biblical only to the degree that it rejects the majority of scripture.

My students are very fond of distinguishing between two Gods: the God of the Old Testament who is all about anger, they say, and the God of the New Testament who is all about love. Yet one look at any of the OT prophets brings us image after image of a God who, yes, is angry because fellowship has been broken by human beings, but a God who just cannot hold on to the divine wrath very long, a God who melts into tears and cries out that God's beloved ones – whom God calls by name and whom belong to God – God's beloved ones will not be Desolate. They will live in the houses they build and they will eat the crops they grow, and there will be no destruction for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the water covers the sea. It is the Peaceable kingdom that is the work of God in this world.

The reason God is a jealous God? *God desires us.*

And so our openness to God does not stand alone but is our openness to God's openness to us – born out of God's desire to be with us in intimate love.

In other words, discernment in the midst of real life means receiving the very particular God who desires us , *us!*, who is passionate for us, who pursues us doggedly until we find grace irresistible and we can receive the rest and comfort that God longs to give. Jesus said “Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.” And Jesus said “Oh how I long to gather you under my wings like a mother hen gathers her chicks.”

But Life is Messy

I know that most of you can't hear Ann Pederson's sermon tomorrow, and I'm sorry about that because it's terrific. Reflecting on Philippians 2:12 and 13, she observes that openness to God is openness to life, and it is fundamentally life-affirming. Remember, this is not openness to our old images of God, or to any image of God, but openness to God Godself, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of us and all creation. In Deuteronomy we read God's message to the people “I set before you life and death. Now choose life.” Choosing life means letting go of the stranglehold of death in our daily lives, and it means opening ourselves to even just the possibility of health and joy.

Discernment in the midst of real life is openness to God's openness to us. Discernment in the midst of real life is a stance that affirms life and seeks ways to prosper life and joy and goodness. In the midst of our messy lives – lives full to overflowing, like a closet of family treasures and memories – receiving God means receiving goodness and joy and the very passion of God for life into our very own selves, our very own lives.

But life is messy, and here is where all this stuff has to make sense in a typical day in the life of Lena and Ole.

Openness to God cannot be some sort of an abstract, dreamy “I’m really just a spiritual person” kind of a thing. Discernment in the midst of real life means that we are trying in the midst of this:

Laundry

Crying babies

Troubled marriages

New marriages

Old marriages

Boring marriages

Stressful jobs

Boring jobs

Insecure jobs

Financial worries

Taxes

War

Depression

Diabetes

Cancer

Car accidents

Scholarship awards

Success

Failure

Joy

Sorrow

Anxiety

Fear

Passion

Adventures

Trips to the store

Trips to see family

Cleaning out the car after the trip to see family

Rebellion against parents

Rebellion against children

Spouse's shoes in the middle of the floor AGAIN

Resentment

Regret

Alcoholism

Kisses etc.

Squeeze the tube from the bottom <sigh> please

paying for the food on the table

Actually getting the food on the table

Getting the car in for repairs

Getting the furnace person to fix this %#\$!! heater/air conditioner

Lust

Anger

Unexplainable sadness

Wondering if there is enough money for bills

Wondering if there is enough money for that music you wanted

Wondering if there is enough money for retirement

Wondering if anyone will ever want to go out with you

Wondering if anyone will ever go out with you now that your long-term relationship is over

Wondering if there is any purpose in our lives

So openness to God cannot just be another nice thought that only deepens the ache of our lives even more.

It has to be real.

Getting Down to Brass Tacks

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a person who knew something about discernment in the midst of real life by way of openness to God. Some folks automatically think of his actions during WWII to oppose Hitler and stay true to his country and his faith, and for good reason. The integrity with which he took up his actions and accepted their consequences took guts because he was in the midst of real life – the very real threat of being hauled off to a prison camp or killed, both of which he was. Some folks automatically think of these actions. I think first of the fact that Bonhoeffer was a party guy.

Obviously not in the *Animal House* sense of the phrase. But he was the life of a party. He played piano and would keep people singing and entertained. When he was studying up in his home, he would throw candies out the window to children playing below. In his home growing up, broken glass, spilled milk, smudges on the wall were not punished as mean-spiritedness and lying were. Discernment in the midst of real life is not just about making decisions or solving dilemmas; it is about living fully with God in the ***here and now*** in the abundant life promised by God.

Listen to what Bonhoeffer says about discerning the will of God. Citing Romans 12:2 and other passages – “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed in the

renewing of your mind,” Bonhoeffer says this:

These sayings show the error of the view that the simple recognition of the will of God must take the form of an intuition which excludes any sort of reflection and that it must be the naïve grasping of the first thought or feeling to force itself upon the mind, the error, in other words, of that psychologizing misrepresentation of the new life that has begun in Jesus. ***It is not said at all that the will of God forces its way into the human heart without any further ado***, charged with the accent of uniqueness, or that it is simply obvious, and identical with whatever the heart may think. ***The will of God may lie very deeply concealed beneath a great number of available possibilities***. The will of God is not a system of rules that is established from the outset; it is something new and different in each different situation in life, and for this reason a man must ever anew examine what the will of God may be. ***The heart, the understanding, observation and experience must all collaborate in this task***. It is no longer a matter of a man’s own knowledge of good and evil, but solely of the living will of God; our knowledge of God’s will is not something over which we ourselves dispose, but it depends solely upon the grace of God, and this grace is and requires to be new every morning.

In other words, we work out our salvation with fear and trembling because God is already at work in us both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure. Discernment in the midst of real life has to be worked out, and it is a collaboration of our heart, understanding, observation and experience. All these things are what we should bring to bear as we seek to discern the goodness of God in the midst of real life.

So let’s talk practicalities. We cannot go on a retreat or take a day off every time we have to figure out what bills get paid, or respond to our child who seems to be withdrawing from us, or figure out how to deal with a co-worker. In fact, I would argue that our real lives are precisely the place we need to be to discern the goodness we seek in God. So discernment must be possible in real life.

1. We need to listen to our hearts. Believe me, I know it sounds corny, but as a chaplain I am sick to death of the tendency in our society to ignore our hearts. We get our selves

into real pain and damage to ourselves and others when we ignore the joy and sorrow that our hearts call out to us. Practically, we listen to our hearts by practicing allowing ourselves emotion, and we can practice that by allowing others their emotions. Interestingly, the more we can do this for others – letting them feel what they feel – we will be able to do it ourselves. We tend to want people not to be angry, for instance. The more we give others the freedom to feel what they feel – even if we do not give them permission to beat a windshield with a baseball bat – the more we give ourselves permission and the more we listen to the voice of God in us to pay attention to the creature we were created to be and become. One qualification here: listening to our hearts does not mean ignoring the hearts of others. Neither vocation nor discernment are valid if they entail our willful denial of the hearts and calling of others, at least in Christian terms.

2. We need to click our understanding into gear. We need to reflect, ponder the things that come across the dining room table of our lives. No, we don't have a lot of time to sit back and say to ourselves "hmmmmmm....what do I think about the fact that my 2 year old Henry is clocking his 4 year old sister in the head with a flashlight?" But we can practice patience, with ourselves and others. We do not have to rush decisions. We can slow them down, take a first pass at that financial priority thing, reflect on our options, come back later and discuss what we thought. If we are going to discern well, we need to listen to our hearts and our minds, these places where we receive God. We need to be patient. Practically, this means choosing good decisions as a priority and placing value in the goodness of decisions instead of the quickness of decisions. By practicing patience we will be ready when there is no reflection time allowed, like when the flashlight just has to be yanked out of the kiddo's hands.

3. We need to draw on our observation. We cannot discern well unless we know what life we are in the midst of. We need to train ourselves to notice things. To discern well, we must realize that the goodness we seek must be embodied in the real life we live, and if it is to be embodied, we must notice what is going on. We must be willing to pay attention to the looks on our loved ones' faces and how they change; the resources we have available to us, like what our bank balance is and how much food is in the fridge, and so on. When figuring out whether or not the coach of our 7-year-old's soccer team is out of line we need to pay attention to all sorts of things, not only the fact that the coach only plays 4 out of the 13 team members. Are the children happy? Learning about sports and competition in a healthy way? Do they enjoy a bond with the coach? Does she communicate with the kids? You get the point.

4. We need to draw on our experience. In other words, we need be willing to learn and we need to be teachable. If a certain approach has never worked with our teenage daughter, let's put it aside and try something else, like asking her a different question about the boy she's dating. Instead of saying "You will not go out with him" we could try "Tell me, sweetheart, everything you really like about this guy. I want to know what's important to you when you think about loving someone." We want to be partners with our loved ones in discernment, rather than alienated enemies. Experience also allows us to admit the fact, for instance, that if we don't plan ahead, we will be stressed with last-minute details. We might want to avoid that in the future (not that I would know anything about this.)

Perhaps most of all what we need is space for discernment, and space for discernment in the end is nothing more than a transformed understanding of time. We need to develop practices that open us to God's openness to us. There is book after book available today

about the Sabbath. This weekly point in the rhythm of our lives is finding popularity in communities and voices way beyond those of synagogue, church, and mosque. Sabbath practices provide some hints for us here as we find ways to pause, take a deep breath, and take pleasure in being with the goodness of God. Is it really going to kill you if one meal a week with your kids is make your own ice cream Sunday night? What about finding one hour a day or a few times during the week when you go to a place that you tell absolutely no one about, so you can sit quietly and read the Bible or People magazine. Make taking a hot bath a ritual. Make going to your workshop or your computer to write or out on the deck with a drink a ritual. What about a corner in the house with your pot of coffee or tea every morning before you join your family or roommates? Choose one small, basic thing you can do right now that gives you pleasure, and make it a purposeful part of your life on which you will not negotiate. When we make something a ritual we elevate its status and we place a high value on it. If it is God's goodness you seek in discernment in the midst of your loves, responsibilities, and lives, then make a small ritual for goodness, and keep it and treasure it.

Because the discernment you seek in the midst of real life is the profound beauty with which and for which you alone were created, and only you can discern this beauty in the midst of the mess and details of *your* life. Although our discernment is about the decisions we make as we live life with and for others, no one else can discern your life for you. We may discern with each other, but ultimately, discernment in the midst of real life is a fundamental task for each and every one of us. Discernment is the task of being open to the God who is open to us, who is for us, and who desires us so much that steadfast love will always overwhelm wrath.

The Zen of Organizing, Regina Leeds

Let Your Life Speak, Parker Palmer

The Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle

Music of Silence, David Stendl-Rast

Sabbath, Abraham Heschel

Sabbath, Wayne Muller

Receiving the Day, Dorothy Bass

On Writing, Stephen King