

Sermon: The Discernment of Peter (Discernment Series) 10/13/24

Acts 5:1-11 (pg.122)

Opening Story: 7 Million Children Vanish

One spring evening at midnight in 1987, 7 million children disappeared. Now, although the disappearance was expected, no one anticipated just how many would simply vanish.

It was April 15th and the IRS had just a changed a longstanding rule. Instead of listing the names of each dependent child aged 5 and older, tax filers were now required to also provide a Social Security Number for each child.

Suddenly, 7 million children who had existed only as phantom exemptions on the previous year's 1040 had vanished without a trace :) Believe it or not this change represented about 1 in 10 children at the time in the United States! All of a sudden the IRS was flush with cash.

I share this story because fraud and dishonesty have been a part of the human story for as long as we can remember. As Christians we are called to live differently in the world and to be honest even when no one is looking. If discernment is seeking God's wisdom for God's benefit, then dishonesty is seeking our own wisdom for our own benefit. Our story today from scripture highlights such a story.

Acts 5:1-11 (pg.122)

5 But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ 'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!' ⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.' ⁹Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Scripture Reflection

This story is really interesting because it compares the value of discernment vs. the value of relying on your own wisdom. Peter uses his discernment from God to determine that Ananias and Sapphira are lying. Peter says it's a big deal because they are not just lying to him, but more importantly, lying to the Holy Spirit. We learn in the previous chapter that the earliest Christians *"Were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for [many] sold houses and lands and laid the proceeds at the apostles feet to distribute them to the needy."* At the end of chapter 4 we have a contrast to the story of Ananias and Sapphira. It says, Barnabas "sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:37). In this story we have an example of selflessness, honesty, and devotion. On the other hand, in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we have a story of deception and greed. Now to be clear, Ananias and Sapphira's sin is not that they didn't give all of the money from the sale to the apostles.

Their sin is that they said they did, right? They lied about their gift. They pretended to be something they were not. We don't know why they did this. Maybe they felt like they needed the money. Maybe they had trouble trusting God with it and giving it all away. But one thing is clear, they do not consult

the Lord. They do what they think is best for them and then expect the same praise as Barnabas receives.

Too many times, when we make important decisions, we make a habit of leaving the Lord out of them. **Discernment invites us to make God a part of everything we do. It invites us to consult God on every important decision we make.** The tragedy of Ananias and Sapphira is they try to be something they are not when their gift would have been accepted if they had just been honest. They withhold what they had committed to give to God, and it's like God doesn't even want their gift anymore, because it comes from a place of dishonesty and deceit.

Discernment Part 1: Embracing the Practice in Solitude (2 of 2)

As we continue to explore Henri Nouwen's book on Discernment, we look at the ways that we can grow in our relationship with the Lord so we can hear God's voice in our lives more clearly. Nouwen says, "Discernment allows us to see through the appearances of things to their deeper meaning." In order to gain this kind of insight Henri talks about the importance of first inviting Jesus to see us. **We must ask ourselves the question, "Do I want to be fully seen by Jesus?"** Of course God sees all and knows all, but this is an invitation by us to God to be seen. It's an invitation to personally be vulnerable and open before God. Henri says, **"Only when I allow God to see me, all of me, even those parts that I myself do not want to see," can I learn to see the mysteries of God in a new light.** This type of sight is about owning our own story--our tendencies, our mistakes, our successes, and being totally open with God. **The first part of discernment starts with being honest about who we are with God.** We can fool others, we can even fool ourselves sometimes, but we can't fool God.

The Lord knows the heart. Now, this needn't be an act of judgement but an act of contemplation and reflection. "Henri believed that we were all the beloved of God, and he wouldn't shut up about it, until others came to realize it for themselves." He believed we were all flawed humans, and sinners in

need of God's love and grace, but at the same time he believed that God loved us so much deeper than we realized.

Nowen said it is important to practice discernment as a community but first "It is good to begin this spiritual movement in solitude."

He says, "The challenge is to develop a simple discipline or spiritual practice to embrace some empty time and empty space every day." This could be for 10, 15, 30 minutes, an hour, 2 hours. It's about intentionally carving out time to be in ongoing relationship with the Lord.

Henri's first practice for developing discernment is Biblical meditation.

Simply select a particular scripture verse from the gospels or the psalms, or one of Paul's letters and read and recite it. He says, "Sometimes it's helpful to take one word or phrase from the text and repeat it during your solitary prayer time. Some find it helpful to sit quietly to center themselves in prayer, others need to move around and walk slowly to let the mind and body come into God's presence." Henri says, "It is good in the beginning when you are easily distracted, to **remember and repeat the word or phrase that attracted your attention.** Then **your focus and awareness can gradually descend from the mind into the heart and be held there for an extended period,** close to the heart of God."

Henri's second practice for developing discernment in solitude is, *Lectio Divina*, or spiritual reading.

In this exercise you will read a biblical text 3 times, "stopping to ponder the word, phrase, or image that calls our attention." This is a way we can become "more aware of the active presence of God's spirit within us." This exercise is not reading for the sake of knowledge. It is a devotional exercise in which we "allow God to read us." *Lectio Divina* means reading the Bible with reverence and openness to what the Spirit is saying to us in the present moment." It is a "slow, deliberate, meditative reading in which we allow the words to penetrate our heart and question our spirit." Henri says, "Most important is how we read-not to understand or control God, but to be understood and formed by God."

Henri's third practice for developing discernment is intercessory prayer-or praying for others who are in need. This is a popular spiritual practice that most of us already do in one form or another. Henri says, "People we pray for regularly come to receive a very special place in our heart, and in the heart of God, and they are helped." He says, "The spirit works deep within us, so deeply that we cannot always identify its presence." Sometimes with all that's going on in our families, communities, and the world it can feel like we're not getting anywhere with intercessory prayer, but Henri stresses the importance of sticking with it and making it an everyday practice. He says, "Even if nothing in our minds, hearts, or bodies wants to be there. . . Simple faithfulness in prayer gives the Spirit of God a real chance to work in us and help us be renewed."

So biblical meditation, Lectio Divina, and intercessory prayer are three tools we can practice in solitude to grow in our relationship with God and to develop our ability to discern; to hear God's voice in our hearts and minds. In all these things he stresses that **it's less of a "step-by-step process" and more of a rhythm we enter into.** He says, "**[Creating] a rhythm of life in which sacred times and places are scheduled gives us much [needed] spiritual support.**"

Conclusion

So may you cultivate a spiritual rhythm that works best for you.

May you set aside time each day for the practices of meditation, scripture reflection, and intercessory prayer.

And as you faithfully honor those practices may God speak his discerning words into your heart for the renewal of your spirit and the renewal of the world.

Children's Moment: Lost Money 10/13/24**Object:** Money Bag

One day when I was in high school, I was walking home from school and I found a 100-dollar bill on the ground by the flagpole. I would be lying if I told you I wasn't both surprised and excited. In that moment I had a decision to make of whether to keep the money for myself or to turn it in. What would you have done?

What do you think God would have wanted me to do? What do you think I did?

I decided to turn it into the office. The secretary said that if no one came to claim it after 1 week that I could keep it. Well a week passed and I went back into the office. It turns out no one had claimed it and the secretary handed me the envelope. As I walked home I imagined what I would do with the money. To my surprise my mom suggested that I consider donating it. What? I thought. I waited a whole week and it was finally mine and now I was supposed to just give it away? She said, "You know, it was God who directed you to that money so it's only right to give some of it back to him. How about you keep half of it and give the other half to God?" I thought about it and the next day I decided that on Sunday I would give half of it at church.

I tell this story because it's important to do the right thing, even when nobody is watching. So next time you find yourself in a situation where you find something that doesn't belong to you, I pray you will do the right thing and turn it in. God always blesses us when we choose to do the right thing.