

# Discerning Spirits: Focusing on the Light

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, 3 February 2019.

Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 76:1-6, I Corinthians 3:1-13, Luke 4:21-30.

That day in Nazareth started in a special way. We read about it in last week's lesson. A beloved son had returned to the people who knew him best. You know what it is like here when people who grew up at St. Thomas return as adults. Even if you did not know them as children, you may know their parents, so you are excited to meet them. Joy is in the air. That is how I imagine this day in the synagogue.

They handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. And everyone knew it was true. There was a sweet, sweet, Spirit in that place. The gospel reads, "All spoke well of him." We might say they were gushing over him. Can you believe this is Joseph's and Mary's boy? Remember how cute he was? I used to babysit him. When did he become so wise?

And perhaps if Jesus had shaken a few hands and left at that moment today's lesson would not have happened. But Jesus had something he had to say. After his baptism, Jesus had spent time in the wilderness sorting out his calling. Because he loved these people, he wanted to tell them himself that he would not be staying in Nazareth. He knew he would not be effective there. A prophet is not accepted in his home town. He had to venture out. God was calling him to the poor, captive, blind, and oppressed.

Jesus went on to explain that he saw his call as part of the larger work of God in the world. God had always reached out to outsiders - to widows from Sidon and Naamans from Syria. God always turned the attention of the faithful outward. What Jesus was doing was consistent with what God had always done.

And in that instant, their pride turned to resentment. The people in the synagogue stopped listening to Jesus and started listening to the murmurings of their own hearts. They were filled with rage. They drove him to a cliff and almost pushed him over the edge. But he walked through them and went home.

Later, of course, this whole scene happened again on a larger scale. The city was Jerusalem, not Nazareth. The people questioning him were political and religious authorities, not family and friends. Instead of driving him to a cliff, they nailed him to a cross. The rejection at Nazareth led to the rejection at Calvary.

But we miss the point if we read today's lesson, or the story of the crucifixion, and say, "How in the world could *they* do that to Jesus? How could *they* be so misguided? Why didn't *they* listen to him?"

The real question is why don't we? Why don't we listen to Jesus?

Today's lesson illustrates the Super Bowl, if you will, that is always playing in our hearts and minds. Forget the game this afternoon. The more important game is the one inside us. On one side is team Life, coached by Jesus. The players are love and freedom and respect and healing and hope. The other side is team Death, coached by the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. The players are hatred and resentment and entitlement and selfishness and fear. The teams don't wear uniforms. It is not always easy to sort out who is who.

Thank goodness, we know how the game will end. We know Team Jesus is stronger and more enduring. He shall reign for ever and ever. But the game is not over yet. Team Death will keep trying to make a comeback all our days.

So it is necessary to learn a skill that Henri Nouwen called *discernment of spirits*. I mentioned last week that in these Sundays after the Epiphany we are talking about discernment. At Christmas we celebrated the light of Christ that shines in the darkness. Now we consider how we seek and respond to this light in our own lives. That's discernment. As a guide over these weeks, I'm referring to Henri Nouwen's book *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*.

Discernment of spirits, as Nouwen described it, is a particular kind of discernment. Some discernment is for big decisions. This is more for the every day. It sounds a little spooky or mysterious but it's not. What Nouwen had in mind is simply learning to distinguish wisdom from falsehood, good guidance from harmful messages. Throughout our lives, we have to sort out which coach we are playing for in a particular moment, whose voice we are hearing. Even Jesus had to decide whether to listen to the voice of God he heard at his baptism, the voice that assured him, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased," or the voice of the mob that wanted to throw him over the cliff.

Because the truth is both are real. Team Life and Team Death are playing inside *all* of us *all* the time. So we do not need to waste a lot of energy diagnosing the motives or struggles of someone else. We have enough work to do on our own. Discernment points us inward, helping us search our own hearts.

And while the struggle is real, Nouwen says the reality of the struggle is actually a good thing. If we are sensing a struggle, that means the voice of Jesus is there, coaching us to Life. His voice may be drowned out or hard to hear but it is there because we are God's beloved people. God will never give up speaking to any of us.

Nouwen described an experience of walking through a seedy neighborhood somewhere. It was a place of violence and emptiness and exploitation. It led him to think of other struggles that

plague our world, most of which begin in the human heart. He couldn't stop thinking about where the destruction he saw around him would lead.

But then he walked into the chapel nearby. As he walked in, a nun invited him to pray. There were candles on the altar and pictures of saints on the walls. He could feel the prayers that had been prayed in that place for decades. And he reflected, "Where evil seems to hold sway, God is not far away, and where God shows his presence, evil may not remain absent very long."

So the Super Bowl within is a sign and promise that God is with us, working within us to overcome death and bring us life.

But it is a lifelong game. We want Jesus to keep possession of the ball for most of it. We do that by staying in spiritual shape, practicing the vows of our baptism, continuing the Way of Love that we talk about so much here. Spiritual practices help.

But Nouwen also has one more bit of advice for discerning the spirits. It is a lesson he learned from Teresa of Avila. We talked about her at our Advent series and adult formation in Advent. Teresa was a Spanish nun and religious reformer. She lived during the Inquisition and often got in trouble with the religious authorities. They questioned her motives and her teachings on prayer. She went through times of real despair. But through it all, she prayed this prayer. "God alone is enough."

Nouwen says the key to discerning the spirits is to focus on God. Don't pay attention to the other team. Don't give it the power of your energy or time. This afternoon, Jared Goff is not going to listen to Bill Belichick and Tom Brady will pay no attention to Sean McVay. We need to focus on our head coach as well and listen to that voice.

Years ago, early in my life as a pastor, a woman walked into my office. She wanted to talk with a pastor. She was convinced she was hearing the devil speak to her, and she wanted to know what to do. As far as I could tell, she wasn't a danger to herself or others. I connected her with a place where she could get some mental health treatment because I felt like she needed it, and she was willing to go, but that's not why she walked in that day. She wanted spiritual guidance. She wanted to know how to pray.

I was fresh out of seminary, not quite ready for a situation like that. I had never experienced what she was experiencing. The way she described the devil was not the way I think about the evil powers of this world. But from out of nowhere these words came to me. "Maybe you should quit thinking about the devil so much. Focus instead on listening to Jesus. He loves you. He's with you. Listen to him."

I never saw her again. I don't know if that helped her, but I still stand by it. To discern the spirit of truth from falsehood, to choose life rather than death, listen for the voice that loves you most. Listen for the love that is patient and kind and never ends. That's the voice of God, the voice of Jesus, the voice of life. It's the voice Jesus heard at his baptism, the voice I trust Jesus

was still hearing as he walked away from the mob at the edge of the cliff. You are my Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Beloved friends, listen to that voice. Discern that Spirit. God alone is enough for us all. Amen.

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