

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 16, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Able to Discern

1972 and the year leading up to it was a significant time of discernment for me professionally and personally. As I share aspects of this significant time of discernment for me, I also invite you to consider times of significant discernment for you. The dictionary definition of discernment is “Keenly selective judgment”. Since we are exploring, today, our ability to discern in the context of worship, I want to add this understanding to the definition of discernment: Discernment is opening ourselves to understanding and experiencing what it is that God wants from us. Our primary text for this morning from I Kings gives us insight into the discernment process of Solomon as he considered his appointment to be King of Israel.

In 1972 I was scheduled to graduate from Yale Divinity School in June. I had a desire to fulfill my covenant with God, my church, my family and myself to find a “called” ministry position that would meet the requirements for ordination. I already shared with you back in July of this year some of my early church background as well as my professional development that led me to consider both called positions within the church and to consider other positions outside of the ecclesiastical authority of the church. I circulated my church profile, I took a state exam for becoming a parole officer or to be considered for other social service positions, and I networked and scoured all avenues to find a fulfilling professional position. On a personal basis I also had a covenant with the person who was then my wife and with myself, to begin to start a family after three years of marriage.

With all of these things to consider, what were the components of my discernment process? My wife and I engaged together on all aspects of this discernment process. I spoke with mentors and other soon-to-be seminary graduates. I had discussions with leaders from my denomination and with potential employers. I also reviewed my history of church involvement and ministry engagements. This history review was most important in considering my future. I prayed that I might be open to God’s call. I believe that each of these activities were helpful in my being able to move forward and not to be paralyzed by the challenges. I offer them to you as possible tools for your discernments personally and as a faith community. The tools I have identified are: 1.) gathering necessary facts; 2.) reviewing history to learn from successes and avoid repeating past mistakes; 3.) seeking wisdom of trusted others, and, 4.) most importantly, the use of prayer and meditation in seeking God’s guidance.

What life decisions might you consider that you have made, are making or may make in the future that requires this kind of discernment? Please let me suggest that all of us, especially those of us, seeking to follow the path of Jesus and seeking to nurture our faith in this community, and seeking to live a life publicly professing our faith, have many decisions that require “keenly selective judgment” and that have been, are or will be enhanced if we consider what God might want from us. These decisions include a decision to remain single

or to be married, whom we marry if we choose to marry, whether or not to have children and how many children if we choose to parent, educational choices for ourselves and our children, and what vocation or employment choices we might pursue. In certain circumstances, discernment may also be required to end a marriage or significant relationship. Such endings are certainly enhanced if we consider what God might from us as we consider such a transition. We also are required to make decisions around our civic responsibility as a citizen regarding voting in elections and other political activities or even running for public office ourselves. At points in our life we may also have to discern whether or not to participate or support military activities in defense of our country.

All of us by our presence here today, have also made, are considering or will make decisions about our faith in God and in our relationship to Jesus. I am looking forward to the opportunity to engage our seventh and eight graders in the discernment process that we call confirmation during the coming year. Every year members and friends of this faith community are privileged to have several opportunities to discern the ways in which we both offer our time and talent to ministries of this church and to discern our financial giving. This year on Rally Sunday – September 13 – our ministries are preparing to invite members and friends to both learn about all the ministry activities planned for this year and to offer the opportunity to sign up for additional covenants with this church. The Fall Stewardship campaign will invite you to discern your capacity to increase your pledges and giving from a perspective of abundance. As you already know, more of both time and talent and of our financial resources are needed in order to live into our Mission and Vision and to remain a vital church. May God help each of us, particularly, during this Interim Ministry Time.

Our text for today describes a time of discernment for King Solomon. Solomon's history review is contained in versus 11 and 12 of I Kings, chapter 2 by remembering the reign of his father, King David, and his ascension to the throne: *"The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established."*

Solomon's time of discernment continues in chapter 3, verse 5, we read: *"At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you."* Biblical commentator Sean A. White, describes Solomon's discernment process for how to answer this question from God: *"Before answering, Solomon humbly reflects upon his father's legacy. While David's military prowess and political achievements were more than noteworthy, something much deeper proved foundational to his success. In Solomon's eyes, YHWH's "steadfast love" made David great. He was "your servant," Solomon tells God, and "walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart" (3:6)¹*

Following this reflection, Solomon's only request is: *"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil..."* (Chapter 3: vs 9). This request for the ability to discern between good and evil, we are told, pleases

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16).

God. It pleases God that Solomon did not ask for personal wealth or even for long life. Therefore God bestows wisdom on Solomon. It is this wisdom, bestowed on Solomon by God, for which Solomon has been known from the time of his reign down throughout all of history.

Finally, let us turn to our current discernment process for this church? It has been a privilege to participate with you over the last week and a half in two formal sessions of history review of Edina Morningside Community Church. I also have had the opportunity to hear your joys and challenges of the past during about 12 one-on-one appointments and informally in many other committee meetings, small group and one-on-one discussions; email messages; impromptu times in the church office and during fellowship times. Thanks to all who have participated, shared your memories and offered your understanding and wisdom.

This process of remembering our history has been primarily an intellectual process. What year did that particular event occur? Who was involved? What impact did it seem to have, from your own perspective, on this faith community? What circumstances brought about certain ministry opportunities? Why did we stop offering a particular ministry or activity? Who was primarily responsible? What was the role of clergy or other staff?

Even though I have said that the history review was primarily an intellectual process, it also certainly had an emotional component. Tears of joy were shared. Many - maybe hundreds - of joy-filled memories were shared of joining this church, of baptisms, marriages, outreach and mission experiences, fellowship times and small group fellowship experiences, times of pastoral care from clergy and from one another, Christian education of our children, holiday celebrations and pageants, participating in and watching theatre productions, spirit-filled singing by the congregation; inspired and meaningful offerings of special music and choir anthems, powerful preaching and meaningful worship. Thanks be to God for the these 113 years of memories. Not all of our memories were joy-filled. Recalling and speaking about past church conflicts certainly triggered feelings of anger, anxiety, frustration, confusion and disappointment.

The next step in our discernment process, as a faith community, is to add the spiritual component. What wisdom does God have to bestow on us? Biblical commentator Sean A. White also offers us these words: *"According to the wisdom tradition, wisdom is 'more than human ability to master life; it [is] hidden with God and [has] to be given to human beings.'"*² Our prayer today is that as we move forward to discern how this faith community is to live into our Mission and Vision Statement, as we seek to discern which ministries need to be continued or renewed or discontinued, as seek to discern the needs of our facility, as we seek to discern more effective ways to govern ourselves, as we seek to discern how to prepare ourselves for the search for a new pastor, that we rely not only on human ability to develop these plans, but rather, ask God to bestow true wisdom on all of us. May we listen for the Still Speaking God to guide us each step along this journey. May it be so. Amen.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16).