

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Discerning God's Will Together

Romans 12:1-8

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE READING

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the new church start in Rome. Unlike other places to which he wrote, he had not ever visited there. He wrote to pave the way for his hoped-for visit after his trip to Jerusalem and before his planned mission trip to Spain. Paul never got to Spain; he was imprisoned for the faith in Rome.

Paul also wrote this letter to help ease the tensions between the Gentile Roman Christians and the Jewish Christians. The way he writes chapters one through eleven is like an essay or a treatise on faith themes important to him. Then, in chapter twelve, he turns to how to put these beliefs into practice as the church. This is why our reading this morning begins "therefore."

THE READING

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,^{*} by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual^{*} worship.
²Do not be conformed to this world,^{*} but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.
³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

SERMON:

There was a woman who had resolved to go on a diet, but her regular commute took her right by the neighborhood bakery. It was a terrible temptation! Driving by on this particular morning, she glimpsed the delicious muffins through the display window. So she prayed, "Lord, it's up to you. If you want me to buy any of those goodies, create a parking place for me right in front

of the bakery.” Sure enough, on the *eighth* time around the block, she found an open space! It *must* have been God’s will.

Of course, God’s will is not always so obvious! Many times when we pray to know what God wants, we *don’t* get a clear word.

Seriously though, the occasions upon which we *do* earnestly seek the desires of the Divine, even with all the guidance we have from the ten commandments, Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on the Mount, and all the traditions of the church about what is right and wrong, there are times when *our* circumstances don’t exactly fit the manual. For instance, when we are trying to decide what God would have us do in retirement, or what job to take when we graduate from college, or what ways to act politically, or what kind of cancer treatment to pursue for the best odds, it can be a struggle; the answers may not be clear-cut. Since I have been at TriCon, I have heard a handful of people comment: “It’s hard enough to figure out what God wants *me* to do, much less to know what’s best for the congregation! How do we decide about the future?”

Let’s return to the bible passage for this morning. To the Roman Christians the apostle Paul reiterates that the highest good is to give themselves over to God’s will and carry it out. Like our president, Abraham Lincoln, responded to a citizen during the Civil War: “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on *our* side; my greatest concern is to be on *God’s* side.”

You see, the church in Rome was starting to go “us and them:” the Christians of Jewish descent that had started the church and the young Gentile converts from Rome. Some years before our reading, politicians had expelled the Jews from Rome, including those who followed Jesus, leaving the new church to find its own path without them until a more amiable regime allowed them to return.¹ Once the two church groups were back together, cultural tensions increased between them. Paul wrote because he did not want them to get sidetracked by their differences, but to focus upon their unity in *Christ* and seeking God’s *higher* purposes.

Until this sermon series, I had not really considered that there was any connection between verses one and two and subsequent verses, particularly verses five through eight. Usually in church worship services, we stop the reading at verse two. This time **I wondered: what does the list of spiritual gifts have to do with discerning the will of God?**

It now seems clear to me that knowing how difficult it is for us to figure out what is good, acceptable, and perfect in the midst of real life – God has blessed the church with gifts to its members to accomplish this end. The word is “charisms,” manifestations of God’s charis or *grace*. The Holy Spirit allots one or more gifts, freely and to each one in the church, whether Jew or Gentile, young or old, educated or not. Different gifts to you and you and you, unique to you; natural strengths that give you joy as you exercise them for others. As Mark Twain expressed it, “The two most important days are the day you were born and the day you find out *why*.” **The greater purpose of your spiritual gifts is for the community; to strengthen the church and help it discern what God wants.**

The good news of this morning is that you and I are not all alone in this, left to our own personal devices when it comes to figuring out what direction we should head. The Holy Spirit

¹N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 406-408.

shows up through the spiritual gifts within the faith community. We have each other to come to decisions, and our varied gifts help us clarify God's leading. **We get to practice this all-important discernment that Paul describes, *together*. Indeed, we need each other's gifts to get to the will of God for ourselves, for the church, and for the world!**

So seven spiritual gifts are named in Romans. (As you can see on the insert, there is a longer list from the bible when you combine them all, and it's not meant to be exhaustive. There are, no doubt, additional gifts we can think of.) One of the seven here in Romans echoes the sermon theme of last Sunday: *compassion*. When compassion is present in a church, it motivates and points us to actions consistent with God's character and will. I know that TriCon has this gift. *Ministry* and *leadership* are two other gifts that this congregation exhibits, because you have a desire to serve (the meaning of "ministry") the less fortunate, and you are blessed with lay and clergy leaders that are diligent, which is so important to being able to perceive and follow God's will! TriCon also benefits from those that are gifted *teachers* and generous *givers*. If there were no one that could convey the story of Christ, and none that gave of their resources, such a church would surely find it hard to discern and do what God is calling them to!

In 1972 J. Irwin Miller, the successful CEO of the Cummins Engine Company, wrote that the church should not play it safe but stick its neck out, speaking up in society. In other words, the gifts of *exhortation* and *prophecy* help it to be true to God's will. Cummins acknowledged that "the role of the prophet is active, often disruptive, and always painful. I know this, because, if the church today were to do its full duty, *I* would be among those called to repent."² I'd be interested to hear from you if you think there are individuals here at TriCon endowed with these two gifts, making you uncomfortable, but helping you go forward in faith.

Beginning in 1745, over a hundred years before the Civil War, the Quaker John Woolman felt called to be an abolitionist. He sought the blessing of his faith community, but as slaveholders, they could not come to a holy consensus to free their slaves and join him. However, they appreciated his gifts and integrity and supported him in following God's will as he had discerned it, by tending his crops, taking care of his family, and providing him income so he could travel and spread the message! Eventually, we have to imagine, partly due to Woolman's gifts, the Quakers decided as a whole to oppose slavery, and did so much earlier than other Christian faith groups in the U.S.³

As the apostle Paul promises the Romans, when we present to God our bodies – plural – (including our minds – our thinking selves) along with our individual spiritual gifts, whatever they are, it is worship, the kind of worship that renews our *minds*, quickens our perception, opens our eyes and ears, and transforms us into ONE body – Christ's body. **When you and I present our spiritual gifts to God it enables us to discern *together* what is good, acceptable, and perfect, and to live it!**

²I wrote this quote down a long time ago, but not its source. It may have been from the denominational magazine, *The Disciple*, as Cummins was a prominent lay leader among the Disciples of Christ.

³Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Tayloy McLean, and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, newly revised edition (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2011), pp. 48-49.