

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

1 Now, Israel, in light of all that, listen to the regulations and the case laws that I am teaching you to follow, so that you may live, enter, and possess the land that the LORD, your ancestors' God, is giving to you. **2** Don't add anything to the word that I am commanding you, and don't take anything away from it. Instead, keep the commands of the LORD your God that I am commanding all of you.

6 Keep them faithfully because that will show your wisdom and insight to the nations who will hear about all these regulations. They will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and insightful people!" **7** After all, is there any great nation that has gods as close to it as the LORD our God is close to us whenever we call to him? **8** Or does any great nation have regulations and case laws as righteous as all this Instruction that I am setting before you today? **9** But be on guard and watch yourselves closely so that you don't forget the things your eyes saw and so they never leave your mind as long as you live. Teach them to your children and your grandchildren.

James 1:17-27

17 Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. **18** He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created. **19** Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. **20** This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. **21** Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you. **22** You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. **23** Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. **24** They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. **25** But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do. **26** If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. **27** True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

1 The Pharisees and some legal experts from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. **2** They saw some of his disciples eating food with unclean hands. (They were eating without first ritually purifying their hands through washing. **3** The Pharisees and all the Jews don't eat without first washing their hands carefully. This is a way of observing the rules handed down by the elders. **4** Upon returning from the marketplace, they don't eat without first immersing themselves. They observe many other rules that have been handed down, such as the washing of cups, jugs, pans, and sleeping mats.) **5** So the Pharisees and legal experts asked Jesus, "Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?" **6** He replied, "Isaiah really knew what he was talking about when he prophesied about you hypocrites. He wrote, This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me. **7** Their worship of me is empty since they teach instructions that

are human words. **8** You ignore God's commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you."

14 Then Jesus called the crowd again and said, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand. **15** Nothing outside of a person can enter and contaminate a person in God's sight; rather, the things that come out of a person contaminate the person."

21 "It's from the inside, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come: sexual sins, thefts, murders, **22** adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. **23** All these evil things come from the inside and contaminate a person in God's sight."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

We are in the midst of a series called, "Postures in the Life of Faith." So far we've talked about wisdom and guidance, which are two interrelated aspects of developing a deeper discipleship relationship with Jesus. When we seek guidance, we're ultimately seeking wisdom, and when someone offers us wisdom, we receive with it guidance to help shape our future. For more on that, you can find the previous sermons on our website. Now, from this footing of wisdom and guidance we move today to the act of discernment.

When I say the word "discernment," what comes to your mind? For me, it's one of those churchy words, the kind that you hardly hear anywhere except within the church. But once you enter Christian circles, all of the sudden

discernment becomes incredibly popular. In practically every church, seminary, or faith based nonprofit I've entered, I haven't left without hearing the word discernment at least once. "I'm discerning how to proceed with this next fiscal year," said the financial secretary. "We should discern how best to structure the staff dynamic," said the executive pastor. "We've got to discern what steps to take next for the growth of our community," said the council president. Every decision seems to be about discernment. I haven't heard it yet, but I wouldn't be surprised to go to a deli with some Christians and hear someone murmur, "I'm discerning between the roast beef and the chicken salad."

When we talk about discernment, though, we're not just talking about choices, not the random forks in the road of everyday life. We don't discern sandwiches, at least not in the Christian sense of the word. When we discern, we look

for God's presence and God's preference in the world.

Discernment is seeking God's presence and God's preference in the world. We're looking for what path God is on and where God is calling us to follow.

What do I mean by that? Well, we make many decisions daily that aren't necessarily discernment decisions, like what to eat for lunch, that aren't looking for God's presence or God's preference, at least on the surface. God likely doesn't care if we eat roast beef or chicken salad at that deli. But if we chose to eat lunch at that deli because it is locally owned, uses sustainably farmed ingredients, and some major chain restaurant competition moved in down the street that threatens the livelihood of this owner, then that just might be a discernment decision, a decision we made because we believe God created this earth, called it good, and called us to care for the earth's goodness through our vocations as Christians. So

discernment is about God's presence and preference in the world.

That shows us two things: that we believe God is at work in the world, and that we believe we can, at some level, identify that work. We believe God's here and that we can find God, point to that work that God is doing, somewhere along these trails of life. So discernment begins with trust that our Creator still cares about creation to be involved, a belief that God hasn't abandoned us to the effects of sin but rather is at work to make grace a reality that all people may experience.

Admittedly, that's a hard belief to hold onto sometimes. Just this week a reporter and camera operator were murdered in Roanoke on live television, and the Roanoke and New River Valleys still reel from the shock of that event. We still swim in the wake of institutional oppression, biases based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and wealth.

Rather than become co-creators and shepherds of the goods of our God-given earth, we abuse the environment in the name of profit. And often, religion becomes a tool to excuse such divisive behaviors rather than the source of liberation. Where is God in all of this? How do we discern God's presence if it is so hard to see God at work amidst the brokenness?

Part of what we need is new eyes for discernment, new vision to help us see where God's at work when our eyes are weary and fear that the suffering in the world is hopeless. James tells us that "every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above...from our Father in heaven." At first, we might think of the big gifts. Salvation. Freedom from sin. Conquering of death. Life abundant. Those are perfect gifts that we can surely attribute to God in heaven. But James doesn't just say every massive gift comes from above, or every mysterious gift comes from above. Every good gift

comes from God means that everything good in our lives arises as a gift of God. The goodness in our lives points us directly to God's presence and God's preference for us.

So where do we see God at work in the good gifts of everyday life? These things might seem otherwise mundane, very simple, but in them we see the blessing of God's presence and learn to identify God's preference for life.

Something that reminds me, quite simply, of God's faithfulness is the way that my dogs like to cuddle. Stan and Jack cuddle with blankets, with one another, with Michelle, with me, they just love to be close. They remind me that, even across species, we're not meant to be alone. Whether in joy or in sadness, we face this life together, offering reassurance, companionship, strength, and hope in the presence of one another. That's a good gift that comes from God. The same can be said of a home cooked meal, dark garden dirt in your hands, fresh and rushing water of

the river or ocean, a surprise call from an old friend, the smile of a child, the first bite of a ripe peach, the excitement of a game, kiss of a partner, the sound of a baby's coo, a soaring melody, an intricate harmony, a dancing rhythm. God's giving us good gifts and calling us to see the divine life at work in the world.

God is present in our world, so part of discernment is learning to recognize God amidst all the good gifts that we have before us, that we experience in our everyday lives. These are not just chance, not simply the chaotic randomness of life, but the presence of God sustaining and supporting abundant life.

Once we begin to recognize God's presence, we may begin to see more clearly God's preference. Looking for God's preference is important because, while God appears to us in many goods throughout our lives, there's a sort of hierarchy that we must give attention. God may rejoice in

many of the paths before us, but may still have a preference for our actions, for our futures. For instance, many of us might see God at work in a good cup of coffee. The scent as it perks us up, the warmth on a cool morning as it hits our bellies, all present very good gifts, and definitely God given. But does God care what kind of coffee we drink?

At first glance, we might think not, but if multinational corporations refuse to pay farmers in the global south a living wage for the beans they grow and have forced out all other competition for purchasing, then perhaps God does care, not about the temperature of our cup of coffee, but how we source our cup of coffee. Even in the mundane things like buying and brewing coffee, we're called to discern what's best for the world, how best to support abundant life for our neighbors in Africa and Central America whose livelihood, whose very lives, depend on the

coffee we drink. That's why we at CLC have moved to using coffee from a fair trade co-op called Café Justo, Spanish for Just Coffee, because rather than barely covering the costs of the farmers, this company is owned by the farmers themselves, who grow, roast, bag, and ship the coffee. Rather than lining billionaires pockets, when we buy this coffee, we support the life and growth of families far away, helping to educate their children, lift families out of debt, and restore family lands to the families who've owned them for centuries. We see God's presence in a good cup of coffee and God's preference for life abundant through our fair acquisition of that coffee.

This becomes most critical because it helps us to see God at work in difficult places, even in those places where it is hard to see any good at all. It's easy to choose the presence of God in a comfortable place like concert, in the beauty of a melody and the power of God's praise, over

the presence of God in an uncomfortable place like visiting sick people in hospice care, or feeding hungry and homeless persons, or fighting for justice alongside refugees, or working with relief workers in the wake of a hurricane.

Those are goods too, not because God made those terrible things happen – hear me clearly when I say that God doesn't put all the evils in our lives – but instead God refuses to abandon us when we face adversity. When all hope seems lost, when even our very lives seem at risk, the cross of Jesus Christ is planted in the midst of us, for in Jesus' suffering he comes alongside us to suffer with us and bring hope for a future, full of good and perfect gifts.

These are definitely places where God is involved. But good doesn't mean easy. Good doesn't mean comfortable. Good means life-giving, so that's what discernment is really about, seeing and seeking God's presence and preference for life. Even that presence and

preference for life amidst suffering is a good gift, and one to which we must attend, one which we must choose over the easier goods in life.

Why is discernment so important, then? Because it's fairly simple to walk through life without discerning a thing. We can float through the days and not attend to the goodness of God's presence in the laughing child beside us, the profound conversation we just had with a friend, the powerful beauty of thunderstorms, the power of a sunrise on a crisp morning or the simple but essential reality of the air that we breathe. These and countless other goods come at us every day as gifts from God, and they are only the beginning, for we know that salvation, that life abundant, belong to us as well, for every perfect gift, from the smallest to the most unfathomable, comes from God in heaven.

These come as reminders when it is hard to see God amidst the suffering of the world, of the pain that we see.

When it's hard to see God's presence or preference in certain situations, discernment helps us to remember that all is not lost, but instead, that we are called to become that presence and preference. Not only is Jesus there for companionship and hope, but Jesus calls us to that place of profound ministry as well. In the face of tragic deaths, of hatred and oppression, of hunger and pain, we're called to become the presence for abundant life. We're called not to use discernment as an opportunity to escape the powerful struggles of the world, but instead to see where God's at work and where God wants to bring an end to those struggles. We're called to see the good of God in the hardest of places, the cross, suffering alongside those who need the presence and preference of God most. Most of all, we're called to prefer that ourselves, to not just see God there, but to become the hands and feet of God, the

presence of God working to bring abundant life into even the direst of circumstances.

That's the double edged sword of discernment. As we discern God's presence and preference, we're encouraged that the evil of the world will not win out, for God's preference for life is relentless. Yet, it also sends us to become part of that solution, to become life bringers alongside the God who works to bring good gifts in all things through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.