

# Discernment

by Sue Hamilton

## Stop, Look and Listen

*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."  
(1 Samuel 3:2-10)*

### Reflection

I was five years old and in the cherub choir at church. It was Sunday morning and I was about to sing for the first time in worship and to wear a white choir robe with a big red bow tied in front. In my braided hair were red ribbons to match. As we neared our downtown church I could hardly wait for dad to park the car. We were lucky to find a space right across from the choir entrance. Out the door within seconds, I was about to dash across Market Street when I heard my mother's blood curling scream. Paralyzed with fear I stopped dead in my tracks; I never saw the car coming. Falling into her arms I dissolved into tears. Year's later she would tell me that morning took ten years off her life!

Stop-Look-Listen – wise safety words for the street, but ones that offer wisdom for other areas of life too. In the hurried and busy world in which we live developing the habit to stop, look and listen creates mini pauses within the day. Such pauses can be momentary as in noticing a beautiful sunset or a smile on a child's face, or they can be structured as in taking time to exercise, having lunch with a friend or sitting down to pray. When we stop, the world as it is opens to us through that which we see and hear, think, or feel. When we focus on that which has caught our attention, be it just a minute or longer, there is often the blessing of fresh insight or understanding, or simply renewed energy. Practicing awareness helps us notice the ways God is present in our lives and in our world.

Teachers are all around us. Joyce Rupp writes, "I try now to approach each person, event, creature, with two questions; How are you my teacher?<sup>i</sup> What am I meant to learn?" Becoming aware of our "teachers" and being open to their lessons can make each day an opportunity for discovery.

In our scripture passage both the willingness to learn and to receive is evident. A young Samuel hears his name spoken. Assuming it is Eli he goes to him, only to find out that the priest had not called him. Told to go back and lie down he obeys. Again Samuel hears his name called, and once more learns that it was not Eli. The third time Samuel comes, Eli perceives that it is the Lord calling the boy. This time he says to Samuel, *“Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”*

We may not hear our name spoken audibly as Samuel did, but God does communicate love to us. Sometimes we miss these messages due to other “voices” vying for our attention, such as the voices of culture or our family, telling us what is important and who we should be. During this week we will focus on how to listen for God’s voice amidst the others, as we reflect on the spiritual practice of discernment. Elizabeth Liebert writes, “The Latin root of the verb ‘to discern’ means to discriminate. Thus, in the Christian spiritual tradition, discernment refers to the process of sifting out what is of God, discriminating between that which expresses God’s call and anything that runs counter to it.”<sup>ii</sup> Underlying this ability to sift well is the skill of deepening awareness. Jeannette Bakke notes, “Our ability to discern is influenced by our willingness to observe.”<sup>iii</sup> A good way to begin is to take mini-pauses each day and to stop-look-listen to people or things that beckon our attention. Where is God in this moment, and what might God be wishing to communicate?

### **Activity**

Find or purchase a small little notebook that can fit in a purse or backpack, briefcase or the glove compartment of your car. As you go about your day notice that which beckons you to stop-look-listen. If you can pause for a few minutes at that time – great, if not, try writing down a word or phrase that might help you remember later when time is available. Try applying Joyce Rupp’s questions to these moments, asking; “How are you my teacher? What am I meant to learn?” Keep this little notebook with you throughout the remainder of the week.

### **Prayer**

God of all wisdom, increase my awareness that I might observe your presence in the “teachers” you place before me. And when something or someone catches my attention grace me with the discipline to pause and listen as you speak. Amen.

### **Key Thought**

Our ability to discern is influenced by our willingness to observe.

## Sleeping with Bread

*“O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely...Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”  
(Psalm 139:1-4; 23, 24)*

### Reflection

“During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, ‘Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.’”<sup>iv</sup>

It is difficult to imagine the sorrow these children experienced, but I am intrigued by the ingenuity of the person that created for them, in the midst of such difficult circumstances, a means to sleep peacefully. We are indeed blessed by having a place to live and food to eat. Still, this story offers a helpful metaphor for our consideration. Is there anything we can hold on to at the close of the day that would promote a sense of peace and well-being?

One simple tool many find helpful is what St. Ignatius of Loyola called the Daily Examen. Commonly known as “The Review of the Day,” this exercise can be practiced at any time, but I like to do it before going to bed at night. This prayer encourages one to look back over the past twenty-four hours and observe where God has felt real and alive, or as Rose Mary Dougherty suggests, noticing “the unique invitations to love that have been present during that time and how we have missed, responded to, or resisted those invitations.”<sup>v</sup>

The psalmist reminds us that God knows us completely. Even so, God desires our friendship, and that we share honestly what is important to us, while asking God to reveal anything in our lives that leads us away from God’s desired best. Entrusting to God at day’s end the shortcomings for which we sorrow, and embracing with gratitude the blessings received, can have the same effect in our lives as holding a loaf of bread did for the children orphaned. Unresolved issues or hurt will not disappear overnight but they can be momentarily set aside; how much better to hold the day’s goodness, and ask for the grace of a peaceful night’s rest. Consistently practicing a Review of the Day can reveal patterns of thought, such as noting where energy or personal satisfaction lies, and conversely what detracts from it. Observations noted over time can prove helpful by providing valuable insight as we make choices, both big and small.

## **Activity**

Practicing a Review of the Day is generally done through the answering of several questions. Margaret Silf suggests:

- “What has given me life today?”
- What has made me feel more alive, more human?

These questions might then lead us on to reflect:

- In what ways have I been a source of life, hope, encouragement, trust or love to other people and to the rest of creation?
- For any ways in which I have failed, and for the many opportunities I will have missed, I confidently beg God’s forgiveness and entrust tomorrow to God’s care and keeping.<sup>vi</sup>

If you choose, note your observations in your notebook. Practice the Daily Examen for the rest of the week. Do you notice any patterns or similarities?

## **Prayer**

God of all wisdom, help me notice and respond to the unique invitations to love you present to me. Forgive me for the ones I miss, resist or choose to ignore. At the end of the day may I gratefully remember those moments which have given me life, trusting you will guide my steps again tomorrow. Amen.

## **Key Thought**

God desires our friendship, and that we share honestly what is important to us, while asking God to reveal anything in our lives that leads us away from God’s desired best.

## What is God's Dream for Me?

*They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:46-52)*

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. (Psalm 25:4)*

### Reflection

As a child I enjoyed imaginative play. My best friend Kathey and I would spend hours playing school, or putting together dramatic plays that somehow we got the neighborhood kids to participate in. One year at Christmas I ventured down a different path of imagination when I put on my mother's bathrobe, which I suppose I envisioned as some sort of liturgical garment, and led our family in worship. I don't remember too much about this, but there are photographs that document the event! There was candlelight and a bible on a table covered with a white cloth, and my brother playing the piano. Something stirred my young heart to engage in this form of imaginative play, and I am grateful my family did not hinder it. Looking back, I believe I was beginning to entertain God's dream for me.

Rose Mary Dougherty, a sister in the Roman Catholic Church, tells a delightful story concerning a recurring dream she had. For many years this dream seemed to show up to announce some kind of transition in her life, though she did not always see it at the time. In the dream she was trying to decide whether or not she should enter a religious community, and would go from one wisdom figure to the next, listening to each person's opinion. Years later she had this same dream again. Only this time as she approached each wisdom figure to elicit their advice something told her not to ask. Finally she came upon a young boy about five years old. To this child she posed her question, "Do you think I ought to be a sister?" He looked at her for a long time and then responded simply, "Do you wanna?" Rose Mary acknowledges that from this moment on she began to encourage herself and others to listen to the "deep wannas" of our hearts.<sup>vii</sup>

Frederick Buechner observed: "The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>viii</sup> What is it that makes you glad? What are the "deep wannas" of your heart? Jesus asked the blind man, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Can you imagine Jesus asking you this question? How would you respond? Naming our deep desires are important; if we are unaware of what makes us glad how will we know if we are doing it? Perhaps we might be afraid of our dream or mistakenly think

that expressing desire is not a good thing. We can trust the core of our being; we can also seek guidance from voices of trusted individuals. If our heart is directed towards God and God's service, our deepest desire will also be in tuned with God's dream for us.

### **Activity**

Find a quiet spot where you will not be interrupted. In the stillness imagine Jesus sitting with you. Talk to him about your day. What went well; what do you wish had gone differently? What are you excited about? What is it that concerns you? After you have emptied your mind and heart of some of the day's fullness, remain in the quiet. After a few moments imagine Jesus asking, (your name), what is it you most want? See what arises from your heart; note anything that comes to mind, jotting down each response. Take a few more moments and rest in the quiet. Look again at your list; can you identify what most clearly expresses your heart's desire? Talk to God about this in prayer. Thank God for this "deep wanna" of your heart and ask God to guide you in it.

### **Prayer**

God of all wisdom, lead me to discover and reflect upon the "deep wannas" of my heart, trusting you are present in the midst of them. Nurture and shape them as you see fit. And when the time is right allow my deep desire to find voice and enhanced meaning as I share it with others. Amen.

### **Key Thought**

If our heart is directed towards God and God's service, our deepest desire will also be in tune with God's dream for us.

## The Push and Pull of Feelings

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)*

### Reflection

Many years ago there lived in the Basque region of northern Spain a boy named Inigo Lopez. Born to noble parents in 1491, he was the youngest of twelve children. At fourteen Inigo is sent away to train as a royal page to the king of Spain. There, he grows and is shaped by society's expectations. Desiring glory and fame, he begins to dream of serving his country as a soldier and winning the affection of a noble lady. At twenty-two his employer, who had ensured his favor with the royal court, dies. Inigo begins serious military training. However, the direction of his young life will soon be interrupted. At the age of twenty-six while fighting a battle against the French, Inigo suffers a serious leg injury when a cannon-ball shatters his leg and breaks his knee, and also his ego. While recuperating he asks for books to read. He desires adventure and romance but all that is available to him is a book on the life of Christ and another on the lives of the saints. With nothing else to do he reads.

Interspersed with this new reading Inigo daydreams. Some days he spends hours thinking about future battles and tantalizing romances. These grandiose thoughts are at first exhilarating, but as Margaret Silf describes, they "are the dreams of what might have been,"<sup>ix</sup> and though they lift his spirits momentarily, they soon leave him feeling empty and dissatisfied. Conversely, after reading about Christ or one of the saints, "Inigo begins to wonder about how this Christ-King might be served and even dreams of out-sainting the saints. He is still daydreaming but notices an important difference in their after-effects. These dreams leave him feeling inspired, energized and eager, and these dreams do not go away."<sup>x</sup>

As Inigo recuperates he records his observations. In the quiet and stillness he becomes aware of an invitation coming from deep inside him, to follow and serve not an earthly king, but Christ the King. Known today as St. Ignatius of Loyola, his principles of discernment, derived from this period of convalescence, continue to guide the spiritual journey of countless people around the world.

Noting personal moods, feelings and reactions is like looking into a mirror, for they are good indicators of what is going on in the heart. In the story of Martha and Mary, we assume Martha is happy as she welcomes Jesus into her home; she wants to be the perfect hostess. Her sister, Mary, however, is not operating from this agenda. Her focus is to sit and listen to Jesus. Martha becomes irritated with Mary's lack of help; there is a recognizable shift in her

mood. Asking Jesus to intervene, she is surprised at his response, *“Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”* What do you suppose her mood is now?

Ignatius, a master of self-observation, understood that human thoughts and feelings are like a pendulum, sometimes swinging towards the love of God and others, and sometimes away. He used the words consolation and desolation to describe these opposite movements of the heart. Jeannette Bakke offers these definitions: “Consolation is when we feel energized, hopeful, and alive with godly contentment. (Sometimes when we are in painful, dark places we are also in consolation because we sense we are going toward rather than away from God.) Desolation is when we feel our energy is sapped or that we are being drawn away from God.”<sup>xi</sup> Elizabeth Liebert suggests that “Ignatius’s use of these terms was rooted in an underlying faith that the reliable sign of the Holy Spirit’s work is an increase of faith, hope, and love. He believed that we can sort out our feelings by that touchstone; if they foster an increase of faith, hope, and love, we are discerning aright. But if you find yourself with less faith, hope, or love, be suspect that the path you are on is not the best way to follow God.”<sup>xii</sup>

### **Activity**

Think of a decision you are contemplating. Consider various alternatives and write them down. Discard any that are not feasible. Label viable choices, A, B, or C, if necessary. Imagine you have chosen choice A, and everything is settled. Live with this choice for a day or two. What do you notice within? Are there any feelings of unease or tension that this decision may not be right? Do you notice feelings of inner peace, or joy that this decision might be right? Allow the same amount of time for choice B. Share your observations with a trusted friend. This activity does not commit you to anything but it may prove enlightening.

### **Prayer**

God of all wisdom, help me be aware of my moods, thoughts and feelings, and where they are leading me. Where lack of faith, hope, or love exists in my life, redirect my path, so that the Holy Spirit has freedom to work. Amen.

### **Key Thought**

A reliable sign of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives is an increase of faith, hope, and love. But if we find ourselves with less faith, hope, or love, there is cause for concern that we are not on a helpful path.

## Traveling Light

*Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere. (Luke 9:1-6)*

*Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."  
(John 8:31-32)*

### Reflection

Following my freshman and senior year in college I was fortunate to travel in Europe, singing with my college chorale. High school friends teased me for going to a small town school, but years later I was able to kid back, "Look how much of the world I got to see!" I especially remember that first trip. Our director told us to pack lightly. Every couple of days we would be changing hotels and cities, responsible for carrying our luggage to and from the bus, up and down hotel stairs. As young freshmen, my roommates and I listened to his advice, and were grateful we did, as we watched others lug large suitcases with increasing difficulty. Frequently we hand washed clothes at night, and grew tired of the few outfits we brought. Still, we were glad for our small suitcases, and the lesson of traveling light.

Traveling light is also beneficial in decision making. Each of us lugs around baggage daily, some which we are aware of and some not. We might carry disappointment from a past failure, hurt from betrayal, or anger from unfair treatment. It is easy to see how such baggage creates heaviness of spirit. But not all baggage is negative. We also carry needful things such as belief, determination, and vision. Yet, even good things can weigh us down, if we become rigid in them; no longer willing to listen or consider another point of view.

Ignatius refers to the baggage that keeps us off-balance, worried or distracted, or from living out of our best selves, as inordinate attachments. Such attachments consume energy, money or time. "For example," writes Margaret Silf, "We have a natural desire to be safe, healthy, and unharmed, but if this desire becomes excessive, so that we don't dare to go out of the house, then it has become compulsive. We have become the slave of our own desire, and we start to live in dependency upon it."<sup>xiii</sup>

Noticing strong attachments is particularly helpful when considering a decision. For instance, a family considers a job promotion that will require a move out-of-state; an increase in income but also geographical distance from aging parents. A college student wrestles with choosing a major knowing there is expectation to one day assume a role in the family business. The strong pull of attachments can be the result of internal or external pressure.

In John's gospel, Jesus speaks to his disciples about living in spiritual freedom, and making choices that lead to life. When we are bound by unhealthy attachments choosing wisely is more difficult. Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." A good way to grow in the ability to discern truth is to spend time in prayer, in the reading of scripture and in fellowship with fellow travelers.

There is a beautiful piece of music our college chorale sang on tour as we encircled each audience. Written by Maurice Durufle, the piece is called "Ubi Caritas," which translates, "Where there is love, there is God." When we focus on loving well we will also choose well.

### **Activity**

Since 9/11 many who travel by plane have learned to pack lightly. Imagine you are taking a trip. What would you pack? Is there anything in your suitcase that would slow you down at check-in? What might you do to make your trip more enjoyable and less stressful?

Now, consider your life. What internal baggage do you lug around that weighs heavily upon your heart, making it difficult to move on? If you have difficulty with this try noticing in what situations you say the words, "I can't." Often the word can't translates more truthfully into the word, "won't." Naming our baggage out loud or to a trusted family member or friend is a good step towards inner freedom and removing it from our life.

### **Prayer**

God of all wisdom, help me recognize the unhealthy baggage I lug around, that weighs heavily upon my spirit making it difficult to move forwards. Help me understand why I continue to carry it, so that I might be able to finally set it down. Then, with a lighter load, encourage me to engage in actions that will increase the well-being of others. Amen.

### **Key Thought**

When we focus on loving well we will also choose well.

## Letting Go

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:11-18)*

### Reflection

I was excited to attend my senior class overnight trip to Disneyland. Shortly before leaving, my family received word that my grandmother had had a severe stroke. Saddened, my folks still encouraged me to go. When I returned dad was there to greet me. One look into his eyes and I knew grandma had died. I had several hours to pack, before our family would board a plane for the east coast. The evening following the funeral I walked in the field in front of my grandparent's house; it was a beautiful star-lit night. My heart was full of memories. It was also the night of my high school graduation. I wondered what the ceremony was like but I was not sad, for the love I had for my grandma was deeper than this milestone. I knew I was where I needed to be.

Sometimes we find it necessary to let go of something important to us, in this instance a graduation ceremony, but it really isn't too difficult because our love for something else is significantly greater. However at other times, it can be quite challenging to release our grip on something we value.

How does this apply to decision making? The more vested we are in a decision the greater the tendency to try and control or shape outcome. Our attempts may be well-meaning and constructive, but if we are operating from a belief that an outcome depends solely or even largely on us, we will miss opportunity to listen and learn from God and others. Rose Mary Dougherty writes, "Often, what is most important about the act of discernment is not really the decision itself or the process we use to arrive at it, but rather the process of opening to God through the decision and the learning that takes place in the process."<sup>xiv</sup>

How do we open ourselves to God? Julian of Norwich, an English mystic who lived most of her life in the latter half of the fourteenth century, responded to a friend for whom she prayed with these words: "I look at God, I look at you, and I keep on looking at God." Julian

obviously cared for her friend but as she prayed she sought to look beyond her way of seeing her friend and even what she wanted for her friend, and instead, as Rose Mary describes, “turned her eyes beyond her friend, perhaps through her friend, to the God within.”<sup>xv</sup>

In Jesus’ resurrection appearances he desires a similar way of seeing for those who meet him, for he knows they will have to learn to experience him in a new way. He tells them not to hold on to him. We can imagine Mary’s surprise. Grateful he is alive she wants to embrace this one who has given her fullness of life. But as Margaret Silf writes, “Jesus won’t let her do this because he is calling her forward to how things will be. He knows that she can never be free to move on with him to this wholly new and unimagined reality as long as she clings to her dependency on the limited realities of what she has known so far.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Jesus desires the same for us. If we cling to the limited realities of what we know, it is difficult to move toward the unimagined reality that Christ envisions for us. Discernment is the process that helps us navigate our way. Joan Mueller writes, “The task of discernment is to perceive, in order that one might understand, so that one might know how to act.”<sup>xvii</sup> A key challenge in this process is often the reluctance we experience to loosen our hold on that which we hold dear. Jesus said to Mary, “*Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.*” Clinging to what is still earthbound prevents a perceived ending from becoming a new beginning. Only empty hands can receive the gift of something new.

### **Activity**

Re-read the scripture passage. Focus on Jesus’ words to Mary: “*Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.*” Imagine you are meeting with Jesus outside the empty tomb. What might he say to you? Is there anything in your life that he might urge you not to cling to, because it is still earthbound? Be gentle with yourself, and allow the Lord to open your eyes to any earthbound treasure that you dread to lose. Jesus redirects Mary’s gaze to the need to share her experience with his other friends. In what ways might he be asking you to move beyond the things you cling to?<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Prayer**

God of all wisdom, reveal to me those places in my life where I cling to my limited reality. Help me to release my grip on these situations and with open hands and heart, be able to perceive, understand and know what action to take. Amen.

### **Key Thought**

The task of discernment is to perceive, in order that one might understand, so that one might know how to act.

# Small Group Meeting: Discernment

## 1. Path of Community

Go around your group and let everyone share their answers to these questions:

- Each day we make choices; many are small and inconsequential, while others are of great significance and merit careful thought and prayer. What is a decision you have made recently and how did you go about making it, or what is a decision you are currently contemplating; are there ways this past week's readings have been helpful in your process?

## 2. Path of Learning

Today we will review the spiritual discipline of discernment. Discuss these questions in your group.

- Jeannette Bakke writes, "Our ability to discern is influenced by our willingness to observe." Do you agree with this statement? What are some instances this past week where you stopped, looked and listened?
- What was it like to practice a daily review? Did you notice any patterns about what gave you life or made you feel more alive each day?
- What is a "deep wanna" of your heart? How are you honoring this desire; are you taking any steps towards implementation?
- St. Ignatius learned a great about himself during a period of convalescence. When have you grown in self awareness? What did you learn? Do you believe, like Ignatius, that a reliable sign of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives will result in an increase of faith, hope, and love?
- Traveling light can be challenging but also freeing. Are you aware of any strong attachments in your life that might get in the way of your moving forward with a particular decision?
- Rose Mary Dougherty writes, "Often, what is most important about the act of discernment is not really the decision itself or the process we use to arrive at it, but rather the process of opening to God through the decision and the learning that takes place in the process." Can you think of a decision you have made that bears truth to Rose Mary's words? How did you notice yourself more fully opening to God?
- As you conclude this week of meditations, what sticks out in your mind that you would like to remember; do you look at the process of discernment any differently?

## 3. Path of Service

Plan for your group to take part in a form of service to others – whether separately or as individuals – by the end of next week's study. Finalize your plans. During the final week, evaluate your project, celebrate what went well, and learn from those things that could have been better.

## 4. Path of Invitation

Brainstorm some people you can invite to be part of your group. Commit to inviting them the next time you get together. Now that you are approaching the latter part of your study, you might want to plan a social event to which you could invite newcomers. This would be especially helpful if you elect to continue meeting as a small group after Lent. Start thinking about whether you would enjoy continuing this kind of small group experience.

## 5. Path of Worship

Share any highs or lows from the week. After each person shares, the group may say together, "We share your prayer." Other options include participants taking turns in leading prayer, or having a time for silent prayer after all have shared.

Close by saying the Lord's Prayer together. (You may wish to join hands for this!)

## 6. Path of Stewardship

Help your host clean up. If appropriate, turn out the lights as you leave.

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## Stop, Look, Listen

<sup>i</sup> Joyce Rupp, *The Cup of Our Life: A Guide for Spiritual Growth* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1997), 36.

<sup>ii</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>iii</sup> Jeannette A. Bakke, *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 212.

## Sleeping With Bread

<sup>iv</sup> Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>v</sup> Rose Mary Dougherty, *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 2009), 25.

<sup>vi</sup> Margaret Silf, *Companions of Christ: Ignatian Spirituality for Everyday Living* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 30.

## What is God's Dream for Me?

<sup>vii</sup> Rose Mary Dougherty, *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 2009), vi, vii.

<sup>viii</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 28.

## The Push and Pull of Feelings

<sup>ix</sup> Margaret Silf, *Landmarks: An Ignatian Journey* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998), 23.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>xi</sup> Jeannette A. Bakke, *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 222.

<sup>xii</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 128.

## Traveling Light

<sup>xiii</sup> Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), 98.

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## Letting Go

<sup>xiv</sup> Rose Mary Dougherty, *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 2009), 50.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>xvi</sup> Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), 115-116.

<sup>xvii</sup> Joan Mueller, *Faithful Listening: Discernment in Everyday Life* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 115.

<sup>xviii</sup> Margaret Silf, *Wayfaring: A Gospel Journey in Everyday Life* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2001), 219.