

**Sermon: To Decide or Discern**  
**Scripture: I Corinthians 2:1-13**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: February 6, 2011**

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I'd like to talk for a few minutes this morning before we enter into a time of communion together about a little word that Paul uses in the scripture, a little word that contains a huge concept and that is "discern". Paul is contrasting the wisdom of God and the wisdom of this world as two very different things. The wisdom of God is Jesus crucified, he says, and this seems to be folly, ridiculousness to the world. "We speak of the wisdom of God," he says "secret and hidden... not the wisdom of the rulers of this age." (I Corinth 2:6-7) There are the spiritual and the unspiritual, he says, and the unspiritual cannot understand God's wisdom but the spiritual seek to discern all things." I'm not sure how prevalent the word discernment is in your personal usage, but in religious circles it is quite common. When I became most familiar with the word was during the 4 years I spent in seminary because when you are in seminary, you are around people who are in a "discernment" process. The people in seminary didn't just decide to come to seminary, they discerned it and they do not *choose* where their ministry will take them so much as they seek to discern what their ministry path is.

According to Webster's "to discern" is to perceive or recognize something while "to decide" is to come to a resolution in the mind as a result of consideration. So when we are confronted with a situation in our lives that requires a decision, a choice, like whether we buy Crest or Colgate or take Rte 7 to Price Chopper or Dorsett St. to Hannaford's then obviously we are talking about something that we need to *decide* upon. However, not all decisions in our lives are quite so practical, simple and clear cut, but have much deeper implications for ourselves and the people around us and if we have a belief in God then with larger decisions we will be more likely to enter into a time of discernment than decision making. To discern something is not a matter of having a couple of options, weighing them and then deciding on one thing or one course over another. Rather to discern is the effort to perceive or to recognize some way that has already been identified or chosen, we just can't see it or understand it yet. To *decide* about which particular path is the best one to take is a different thing from *discerning*

which is the best one to take and the difference, from a spiritual perspective, is in the belief that some higher power; namely God, holds something of the answer already.

11 years ago this Spring I was out in Berkeley, CA at the end of my last semester in seminary and Tracy and I were in a discernment process about where to go from there. We were thinking about it, discussing it and praying about where we felt led. We were in conversations with churches who were looking for pastors, reading over profiles, and particularly engaged with 2 churches in Maine and one in Colorado. With each of these we were certainly considering it with our minds, looking at the pros and cons of each, but also asking God to make it clear to us where we should be. And there wasn't much clarity. There were some good things about each church and some not so good things, but we felt a lot of ambivalence. And then we came across the profile for a church in a place called Charlotte, Vermont and it sounded interesting. So we had my profile sent. Soon there after, I was walking out of our Berkeley apartment with 3 year old Haliana bouncing up and down in my back-pack as she was prone to do when the husband of one of my classmates called from across the way and said – “hey Will, how’s the search process coming?”

I called back “Well the latest thing is I sent my profile to an interesting sounding church in Vermont, a place called Charlotte.”

He stopped in his tracks and said “are you serious? Come here, let me show you something.” Curious, I followed.

He took me inside his apartment and pointed to this beautiful photograph on his wall of a landscape with hills, farmland, colorful foliage surrounding a beautiful lake and he said “that is CharLOTTE, Vermont, and it’s the town I grew up in.”

The picture was taken from Mount Philo. It turns out he was the brother of Allyson Ladeau who is currently my kids’ music teacher at CCS. It seemed like a pretty cool coincidence, if you wanted to call it that, but it was to be the first in a number of signs that led me and Tracy to discern that Charlotte was where we belonged, that God was calling us to Charlotte. The other moment was when we came out to Vermont for my candidating sermon and interview with this church’s search committee and the Wetmillers, Mark was the president of the church at that time, offered to take Haliana and our 1 year old Naomi for us and give us a little breather time to rest and relax. And

Marilene Luxton-Jones, in a manipulative move, drove us to the Shelburne beach, said she'd come back in an hour or so and Tracy and I were left sitting on that grassy slope overlooking the glorious Lake Champlain with the Adirondacks in the distance and thinking to ourselves, "I think we've discerned enough. This is it!"

But there really was this striking difference between our experience of engaging the other churches and engaging this one. There were good things about each of the 4 churches we were looking seriously at, but in each case it was a matter of weighing the positives and the negatives while for this church it almost ceased to be a decision altogether, it just felt so right, so much so that the relative weight of the positives and negatives were really irrelevant. It was as though the decision was made beyond us and we only needed to be patient and attentive enough to discern what that decision was that had already in a certain way been made.

Or had it? Had God actually chosen our way for us and if so what then of our free will?

And with that question a hornets nest opens up because the problem that arises in talking of discernment, I think, is this often too static notion of God's will - we need to discern God's will for our lives - as though God knows exactly what is ahead of us in all the days of our lives and we just have to figure it out and follow it in order to do what is right. When it's put in such a simplistic way, I cease to believe it. And yet, I am also convinced that we are not alone in this and that it's also not as simplistic as it being purely up to us, either, to weigh the alternatives and make our decision. I've personally had too many experiences, as I've just described, of having a clear sense of guidance and being pointed in a direction by something beyond my reason and my will. But where is that line between listening for God and seeking God's will or even "desire" for our lives, as some have suggested, and being creative individuals free to do what we most desire to do?

I wonder if it's like walking or breathing, finally, where in order to continue forward you need both, you need the breathing in and you need the breathing out, you need the right foot forward and then the left foot forward, you can't really choose one over the other without becoming immobilized or dead. Somehow we've got to live within the tension of both - seeking God's will or God's desire for our lives, paying

attention to the signs and the directions that seem to be granted to us from beyond us, but also not relinquishing or abdicating our own power, creativity, responsibility. Or for each of us individually it might be that right now in our lives we are needing to lean more heavily upon one side or another – seeking God’s will or acting out of our own desires and agency. Which one is it for you right now? Is it a time of deciding and acting or listening for God and discerning? You decide... or discern!