

"Discerning the Presence of God"
Mark 3:20-35

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Sometimes when I read the weekly Gospel reading from the lectionary I am tempted to look for a different passage from scripture for my sermon. I felt that way when I first read our Gospel reading from Mark. At first glance, it sounds dark and confusing – not exactly the text for a Sunday of celebration. If we take a closer look, however, the scripture is filled with wisdom and grace.

Our text tells us that Jesus has returned home after some time on the road. Before he had a chance to eat, he is surrounded by people who demand his attention. When his family heard that a crowd had gathered, they went to restrain him because they had heard that people were saying Jesus was out of his mind. Apparently, scribes who had come down from Jerusalem were accusing Jesus of being filled with Beelzebub because Jesus was casting out demons. Jesus responds to this accusation by teaching a parable. "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand." (Mark 3:23-24) He continues by saying that if Satan had risen up against himself he would be divided and weakened and his end would come. However, a strong man, who is not divided, must be tied up before his house is plundered.

Jesus' teaching continues as he explains that people will be forgiven for their sins and the blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of eternal sin. (Mark 3:23-29)

The crowd has made a mistake. They have named the power of Jesus' healing as coming from Satan instead of the Holy Spirit. They have seen it as evil rather than sent by God. They have missed seeing that Jesus is a gift from Heaven.

This is a story of discernment – discerning God's presence in our lives. Scripture teaches that it is important to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. That might seem rather strange because it isn't something most of us have been taught to do. We've been taught to pray specific prayers like the Lord's Prayer, read scripture and study about God but we haven't really been taught to listen and watch for the Holy Spirit.

So, how do we discern God's presence among us? How do we discern the presence of the Holy Spirit?

One way is to listen to the stories of scripture and apply them to our lives.

As some of you know, I love rainbows. When I was a little child someone taught me the story of Noah's Flood. While the story of the animals arriving two by two captured my imagination, I was really struck by the story of the bow in the sky and God telling Noah the bow

was a sign of covenant – the promise that God would always be present from that point forward.

Just a few weeks ago, I was feeling dispirited. I had returned from my pilgrimage to Iona, Scotland, a very spiritual place for me, and became immediately immersed in day to day activities. I felt the inner peace I had experienced on pilgrimage had shifted and I missed feeling the presence of God. While I was folding laundry late one afternoon a cloud came over the house and it started to rain. The sun was out on both sides of the rain, but we had a nice little shower. Then, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of a rainbow. I raced up to my office window to see it – the early spring leaves and green grass in the backyard sparkled in the rain and a brilliant small rainbow arched in front of the trees. It was magnificent. I remembered the story of God's promise to Noah. It was as though God was saying to me "I am with you wherever you are even when folding laundry."

The ancient teachers also instruct that we are to learn to listen for God's presence in our lives with our hearts – to trust the messages we receive.

Over the past few years I have had the great privilege to become a friend with a woman from the Pentecostal tradition. She lives in another state and is involved in complex social service work around addiction issues. She is also a minister in her congregation, although she isn't paid because she is a woman. Over the years we have been talking about her call to ministry. I have never met someone so filled with the Holy Spirit. She is a huge container of God's love. People seek out her leadership, wisdom and guidance and ask her to minister to them, but because of her tradition that has kept women from pastoral positions, she never believed that she could be a minister. In our conversations, we have been discussing how the Holy Spirit calls her to do her work. It is important for her to pay attention and honor the message from God that she has been receiving all of her life and to understand that she has a call to the ministry.

Finally, a way of discerning God's presence with us is to listen for the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Many years ago when my spiritual director was guiding me to trust my experiences of God's presence in my life, I questioned her about how I would know something was really from God. She explained that I would know it by its fruits. When the experiences result in a sense of love, peace, joy, light, understanding, goodness, kindness we can trust they are from God because these are the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

One day at the end of the pilgrimage on Iona three women showed up late to our evening meeting. Two of them were sisters and one of them was a friend. They had all decided to attend the pilgrimage together. Both the sisters and the other woman were mourning the death of their brothers. Both men had died unexpectedly because of complications with addiction. None of the women were particularly religious, but they decided to hike up to the hills of Iona and offer a brief prayer releasing their brothers into God's care. While they stood on the hill to begin their ritual, a small bird came and hovered over them. It stayed with them until their prayer was over and then it flew straight up, up, up into the sky until it could not be

seen anymore. They were filled with peace. They knew they had encountered a sacred presence. We can trust our experiences of sacred presence by their fruits.

Our scripture teaches that we need to recognize the presence of God among us. If we pay attention to the stories of scripture, the tender leadings of our hearts and the presence of the gifts of the Spirit, we will begin to discover how to trust our experiences. It is a language worth learning.

May God be with us on the journey. Amen.

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