

“May I Have This Dance?”
John 16:12-15

For the last couple of months we have been hearing about the BP oil spill in our gulf area. The longer this crisis continues, the harder it seems to find solutions to the problem. There does not seem to be a way out of this mess. What is really hard in all of this is to find out for ourselves our role in this crisis. What is our responsibility as Christians in protecting God’s creation and the people who are affected by this crisis? This is especially difficult to watch for those of us who have been to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and saw how devastated the area was. Such situations arise in our world every day and we can feel overwhelmed in trying to respond to all these needs. I know that this is true for our mission committee. We often want to do so many things, but it is hard to choose. Even as we look at our own community and the issues we face, we can see that there are so many things to be done and sometimes not enough time and resources for all the needs! Think of your own life. Sometimes it seems hard to figure out what to do when you face a new challenge. What is God’s will? How do I know if my decision is right or wrong? A few weeks ago, there was a psychic convention here in Batavia and from what I read in the paper, people waited for hours in line to go in and get help in sorting out their issues. The need for this kind of direction is so real in our lives. We have the freedom to make choices. Yet, it is not always easy to figure out what to do.

In our Bible story today we hear Jesus’ answer to this human dilemma. This passage is part of Jesus’ farewell speech to his disciples. He knew that they would be left on their own to continue his mission. He knew that they would be faced with difficult decisions and challenges. He knew that after he is gone from them, they would have to find a source of strength and guidance. Even though he had spent an intense time of preaching and teaching with them, he knew that real life demanded a lot more than just remembering his words and teachings. Also, he knew that there was no way to cover every topic on the face of the earth before his death. Life is dynamic and its challenges are always changing. Once we figure out how to deal with something, another thing comes our way. Even though they had the scriptures and the teachings of the prophets of old, they needed something more. Jesus gives them the promise of the Holy Spirit, the advocate, the guide who will be with them to guide them through all of life. The only problem with this advocate though is being invisible and only speaking through others or very quietly. The advocate whom Jesus promised to the disciples will be more than enough to help them continue his mission of offering an alternative vision for the world for justice, compassion and love. It is exactly what they needed to help them oppose the tyranny and domination systems of their time. But the key to all of this was their ability to learn a new way of connecting to God. With Jesus being in their midst, it was much clearer and easier. Even though the challenges they faced were very difficult, having Jesus physically with them, made it easier to discern what the next step would be for them. But with his imminent death, what were they supposed to do? How were they supposed to find the guidance needed for their mission? What the disciples had to learn very quickly is that God’s presence was never taken away from them. They had always had God with them. It was just a matter of learning how to communicate more openly with God. Jesus’ last lesson for the disciples was about learning how to be attuned to God’s voice even when God’s presence with them may not be so visible, as they experienced it in Jesus. They had to learn that the future before them was open. Things were not predetermined for them and they just had to follow some eternal plan that was set before the creation of the world. They had to learn that what they knew was not enough. For all the time they spent with Jesus and all the things they experienced, there was still more learning to come! Even though they were supposedly part of the inner circle of learning, they did not know all to be known because faith is a process. In fact, life is a process and the point of our relationship with God is not having all the answers ahead of time readymade for every situation we face. Life was

to present the disciples with unique challenges and questions after Jesus was gone from them. What they needed to learn is a way to find the answers within themselves instead of being given the answers from on high.

This teaching of Jesus about the Holy Spirit stands in stark contrast with the way many people of faith would see their relationship with God. Often times we hear people of faith being full of certainty that they have all the answers to life's problems and struggles and their tool is of course the Bible. There is a great temptation for all of us to fall for such easy answers where we can just quote one passage from the Bible and universalize it for all times and places. What this approach deprives is of our ability to truly listen to God. It is much easier to quote a theologian, the Bible and even Jesus himself than to actually pay attention to what God is saying to us today. This does not mean that the Bible does not inform us today, but it has to be read in light of our relationship with God. That is why as Presbyterians we are always invited to pray and ask for the help of the Spirit whenever we study the Bible. Novelist Doris Betts says that religious faith is not "synonymous with certainty – but a decision to keep your eyes open."

Our Bible story for today is truly about learning the art of spiritual discernment. This is one of the hardest lessons of faith. But at the heart of it is the very simple practice of learning to listen to God in our lives so that we become attuned to God's voice in such a way that discernment becomes part of what we do every day. The key to discernment is our practice of the presence of God. If we are to grow in our ability to listen to God in our lives, it is essential for us to practice our faith every day. In a book called, *The Discerning Heart*, Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au note the importance of practice. They write, "Regular practice of discernment sharpens sensitivity to the creative Spirit hovering over our world. Living with a discerning heart requires ongoing practice, much like maintaining the proficiency of a concert pianist. At the height of his career Arthur Rubenstein, one of the world's most renowned concert pianists, said: 'If I don't practice for one day, I know it. If I don't practice for two days, the orchestra knows it. If I don't practice for three days, the whole world knows it!' The same can be said for living spiritually attuned lives based on discernment. Like any other complex art, discernment cannot be learned offhand. To grasp the theme of God's presence and action amid the discordant notes of our lives requires a proficiency acquired through ongoing practice."

Yet, discernment has not always been looked at positively in our world, even in our churches because by its very own nature discernment may mean more freedom to seek the truth which may contradict the teachings of the hierarchy of an organization or the church. This does not mean that every time one of us would get a wild idea, we need to go full force behind it because we need the discernment of the community. However, this may mean that I, as the pastor, could be wrong and that as a congregation we may need to listen more carefully to what the Spirit is saying to us. It also means that we have to trust that spending time with God and learning how to be in the presence of God is really one of the most useful ways we can use our time. I think the best image for discernment is that of learning how to dance. Dancing is usually about learning to fall into the rhythm of music. If you try to control everything, dancing loses its magic and joy. It becomes just another task. In her book, *May I Have This Dance?* Joyce Rupp notes that, "We must also let go of thinking that we have to have something to show for our efforts, for our time spent dancing with God. Just choosing to be with God is valuable. We cannot control what will happen. We must simply trust this Wise Companion with our lives, trust that God will never harm us or lead us anywhere but into greater harmony and integrity. Prayer is not about 'feeling good.' Rather, it is about learning the dance of the Holy One, which is the dance of truth and wholeness."

But this is not easy for us. One of the books I read early on in my ministry is called, *Working the Angles*, by Eugene Peterson. In this book, Peterson gives tremendous insights to pastors about their task in ministry. He notes that, “The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeepers’ concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money...The pastor’s responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God. It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades.”

Our most important work as followers of Christ is paying attention to the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our world. We, like the first disciples, have been gifted to have this amazing companion and guide in life, but the work for us is learning how to be open and how to listen to God in our lives. In your bulletin today, there is a little insert of a simple exercise that you can do every day to help you pay attention to God’s rhythms in your life. It is called “Stop, Look and Listen.” I hope that you will take this home with you and try to use it. Maybe you will use a part of it or all of it. But whatever you may choose for a practice every day, I invite you to be faithful to it.

The Quaker teacher and theologian Parker Palmer tells the story of a time in his own life when he made use of a Clearness Committee for his discernment. In the Quaker tradition, a Clearness Committee is an intentional process in the community of faith to help people listen to God’s voice in their lives. The idea of such a committee is to have a group of four to five people help a person open up to new insights through open and honest questions. These people are not there to give the person advice or tell them what they think. They are there to help the person listen to the deeper truth that is within them. Parker Palmer gathered a Clearness Committee around him because he had just been offered a new job as the president of a large and prominent educational institution. He was excited about the possibilities of more income and more influence and recognition, but he wasn’t sure whether he should accept the offer or not. So, he called together his committee of trusted friends. The early questions involved his vision for the school, and the like, but then someone asked him, “Parker, what would you like about being president?” And immediately, Palmer started listing things that he thought he would not like. He would not like the fundraising piece. He would not like the political piece. He would miss teaching. And so they asked again, “But what *would* you like?” To which he responded, “I wouldn’t like to give up my summer vacations.” And so they asked a third time, and finally from deep within, he answered with the only honest answer he could find, saying, “I guess what I’d really like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word ‘president’ under it.” And then the group was silent for a few minutes, until finally someone asked, “Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?” It had become clear that this was not the right job for him.

God is inviting us to this dance of guidance and love, do you hear the music? Are you listening to the rhythm within your soul? Are you ready to have God as your dance partner on this journey of life?