

Straight from the "Hart"

June 11, 2023



Sharing the journey
to know, love, and serve

Welcome to Hartland UMC's "Straight from the "Hart"". We are really glad you are here and participating in today's time of worship by reading this service script. This Worship Series, *Embracing God's Friendship*, is loosely inspired by William A Barry, SJ 's "A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace"

For the Mind of Christ (Pastor-regular font, **Reader with Congregation-bold font**)

Let us remember Jesus:

He was rich. Yet for our sakes, he became poor and dwelt among us.

He was content to be subject to his parents, the child of a poor couple's home. He lived the common life for 30 years, earning his living with his hands and declining no humble tasks. The people heard him gladly, for he understood their ways.

May this mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus.

Let us remember Jesus: **He loved people**, yet retired from them to pray... When disciples were tempted, **he prayed for them.**

He prayed for the forgiveness of those who rejected him,

and for the perfecting of those who received him.

He observed the traditions,

but defied conventions that did not serve God's purposes.

He confronted the sins of pride, selfishness, greed and cruelty.

May this mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus.

Let us remember Jesus: He believed in people **and never despaired of them.**

Through all disappointment, **he never lost heart.**

He disregarded his own comfort and convenience,

he thought first of others' needs.

Though he suffered long, **he was always kind.**

When he was reviled, **he uttered no harsh word in return.**

When he suffered, **he did not threaten retaliation.**

He humbled himself and carried his obedience

even to the point of death on a cross. May this mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, God has highly exalted him. Let us unite in a prayer that Christ may dwell in our hearts.

O Christ our Savior, come and dwell in us that we may go forth with the light of your hope in our eyes and with your faith and love in our hearts. Amen.

(Adapted and Abridged from "For the Mind of Christ" in UM Book of Worship)

Music So let's invite the Holy Spirit to inspire through the Word that we might adequately reflect the mind of Christ...

**Come Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire
(to tune of O For a 1000 Tongues to Sing)**

Text: Charles Wesley, 1740

Music: Carl G Glasser, arr. by Lowell Mason, 1839

1. Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire, let us thine influence prove;
source of the old prophetic fire, fountain of life and love.
2. Come, Holy Ghost (for moved by thee the prophets wrote and spoke),
unlock the truth, thyself the key, unseal the sacred book.
3. Expand thy wings, celestial Dove, brood o'er our nature's night;
on our disordered spirits move, and let there now be light.
4. God, through the Spirit we shall know if thou within us shine,
and sound, with all thy saints below, the depths of love divine.

Opening Prayer Lord, we have gathered that you may keep us steady in faith as we journey with you and to you as the waters of your Spirit flow over us and enrich our lives. All of our gifts and resources and time are made possible by your love for us. What we return of our resources and ourselves is an expression of our love for you. Accept them and us to make a positive difference in your world. In Jesus name, Amen.

(Series) Responsive Call to Worship w/ 2226 (Ref only) *Bind Us Together*

Reader: Come, all who have experienced and entrusted their lives to the love of God in us. Come, all who desire to live faithfully in love and in God. God is love, and truly lives in us and we in him if we love one another.

Pastor with Congregation: We have come so that God's love will accomplish its mission in and among us.

Inspired by 1 John 4:16,12b (VOICE)

Bind Us Together

Words and Music: Bob Gillman, 1977 © Kingsway's Thank You Music

Bind us together, Lord, bind us together with cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord, bind us together, Lord, bind us together in love.

Theme Respecting God and following his way, doing the wise thing, having the mind of Christ, can be tricky and confusing times. We are about to hear that people were divided about Jesus and had the added detriment of not being able to discuss it openly because they feared the tyranny of the opposing views that were in power.

In today's theme story, the only thing competing with fear of tyranny was greed.

Once upon a time there was a rich, powerful, and seemingly smart King. But he was also arrogant. So arrogant that he couldn't believe anyone could beat him at his favorite pastime, the game of chess. He sent a message across the land. "I'll give a tenth of my fortune to whoever could prove to be worthy of playing against me. However, if I consider the person unworthy, they will spend his life in the dungeon. (The original story was more violent than that).

Many people from all walks of life and levels of intelligence accepted the challenge in the hopes of a quick fortune. The king was proud, but he was also a skilled player, and the king found every opponent unworthy. As time passed, one reckless challenger after another was locked away. The King was satisfied that there was no one better in the land.

Years later, a poor, homeless man came to the palace to play against the King. People tried to talk him out of it for his own good, but he would not be deterred. He came before the King. He saw his rugged appearance and was irritated that a man like this could have an inkling he would be a worthy rival. He scoffed, "What makes you think you deserve to play against someone like me?" as he signaled for the jailer to take him away before they even began.

The man calmly replied, "This is why I think I deserve a chance -- that I forgive you for what you're about to do. Would you be capable of that?"

The King was stunned by the unexpected answer. He thought, "If I throw the man in jail, the man will prove he was the better man by his ability to forgive. And if I don't throw him in jail, then he would have his life and his reputation as being a worthy adversary.

Without having yet moved a chess piece, the King admitted he had already lost. "Whether I play with you or not, everyone will see my lack of dignity." he complained.

To which the homeless man replied, "You are mistaken, your Majesty. Everyone already knows that! For it is not what position or power or words or wealth that makes a person wise and worthy – it is their deeds -- and your actions have shown how disgraceful and unjust you have become, judging the worth of others at a whim."

The King became remorseful for his crimes and arrogance. He saw wisdom and dignity in those poor man's eyes. Without saying a word, he handed him his crown, and put his kingly robe on him, and made him the new King. And as his last order of as king, he told the jailer to lock him in the deepest dungeon, as a penance for all his crimes.

The new King waited until he was sure the King had learned his lesson, and then ordered him to be set free where he became a leader in the palace, and his sincere repentance became the incentive for some of the best laws that ever came from that long-suffering Kingdom.

adapted from "The Unworthy King" by Pedro Pablo Sacristán in freestoriesforkids.com

I mentioned that people were divided about Jesus and were not sure what to think about him because their spiritual guides, the religious leaders were against him, yet they saw was good he was doing. At one point, Jesus observed that those leaders rejected John the Baptist for his strict practices, and Jesus was rejected for the opposite. A faster and a feaster – it doesn't matter, their opinion rejected them all... Jesus concludes, "Well, Wisdom [a metaphor for God] will be vindicated by her actions [or some say translations say "deeds, works, results"] —*not by your opinions*. (See Matthew 11:16-19 (VOICE)) Opinions and actions. Appearances and Reality. Fasting and Feasting. It is time to go to Jerusalem.

Intro to and Bible Reading 1

Jesus followed custom and went to Jerusalem for one of the 3 annual pilgrimage Festivals when every Jew who could was expected to go to Jerusalem. On the Sabbath during that festival, he healed a man by a pool who had been lame for 38 years. Jesus sent him home with the mat he was laying on. The spiritual leaders saw the man breaking the Sabbath rules by carrying his mat. They confronted, then investigated, which led them to confront Jesus, who answered, "My Father is always working, and so am I." This made them want to kill Jesus, not only for breaking the Sabbath, but for making himself equal with God by calling him his "Father."

This is important because it serves as the background and miracle that is referred to in today's reading. Now another pilgrimage festival is upon them. Since Jesus knew the leaders were plotting his death, he was avoiding Judea. Jesus' brothers (who didn't believe in him at the time) came and challenged him to go to Judea and prove himself, "You can't become famous if you don't show yourself to the world!" Jesus told them they should go, but it was not the right time for him. After the brothers began their trip, Jesus also went, but secretly out of public view. (Sum of John 5:1-18, 7:1-10) Meanwhile,



The leaders of the people at the feast tried to find Jesus and asked, "Where is he?" People were talking among themselves about Jesus. The crowds even got into an argument about him. Some were saying, "Jesus is a good man," while others were saying, "He is lying to everyone. He is leading people to do wrong things." But they were afraid of their leaders, and none of them talked about him out in the open.

When the festival was about half over, Jesus went into the temple and started teaching. The leaders were very much surprised. "How does this man know so much? He has never been taught!"

Jesus replied: "I am not teaching something I thought up. It is the teaching of the one who sent me. If [anyone] really wants to do what God wants him to do, they will know if what I teach comes from God or from me. The person who speaks from his own mind only wants to be great himself. But the person whom God has sent wants to show that God is great. That person is true. He is not a bad man. If I wanted to bring honor to myself, I would speak for myself. But I want to honor the one who sent me. This is why I tell the truth and not a lie.

"Didn't Moses give you the Law? Yet not one of you is keeping the law. So why do you want to kill me?"

The crowd replied, "You're crazy! What makes you think someone wants to kill you?"

Jesus answered: "I worked one miracle, and it amazed you. Moses gave you the law of circumcision. But it wasn't really Moses who gave you this command. It came from your ancestors long ago and even on the Sabbath

you circumcise your sons so that you will not break the Law of Moses. If you do that, then why are you angry with me for healing, for making someone completely well on the Sabbath day? Don't judge by what you see, by appearances. Judge by what is right.”

John 7:11-24 (CEV, WE)

Music Finding and living the mind of Christ is not necessarily an easy task; but the good news is Jesus doesn't expect us to figure it all out and fix it all right before we come to him, we just need to recognize our need of him to guide us, allow him to embrace us with his friendship, and allow God to transform us as he sees fit. Let's sing...

Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy

Words: Joseph Hart, 1759

Music: The Southern Harmony, 1835; harm. by Charles H. Webb, 1987
harm. © 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House

1. Come, ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready, stands to save you, full of pity, love, and power.

Refrain

I will arise and go to Jesus; he will embrace me with his arms;
in the arms of my dear Savior, O there are ten thousand charms.

2. Come, ye thirsty, come and welcome, God's free bounty glorify;
true belief and true repentance, every grace that brings you nigh.

Refrain

3. Come, ye weary, heavy laden, lost and ruined by the fall;
if you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all.

Refrain

4. Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream;
all the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him.

Refrain

Music Confession time. How many of you have ever postponed a doctor's appointment because you wanted to get better at what he told you to do last year before you go to see him again? I *just* did that. We don't need to do that we Jesus, and we probably shouldn't be doing that with our doctors either. Anyway. As we accept and respond to his presence in our life, we recognize that no matter what we face, his Spirit will settle our spirits with his peace and love and equip us to face what we need to face each day..., be it feast or be it fast. Let's prepare our hearts for prayer by singing...

Where the Spirit of the Lord Is

Words and Music: Stephen R. Adams

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Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is peace;
where the Spirit, of the Lord is, there is love.

There is comfort in life's darkest hour, there is light and life,
there is help and power in the Spirit, in the Spirit of the Lord.

(Repeat)

Prayers Lord, you sit on your throne above all, and yet through Jesus you have freely chosen to live and walk among us, even among those who refuse to acknowledge your presence. We come to you as our refuge and sanctuary from the struggles of our week, and we put our hope in you when despondency and despair persistently haunt our spirits. Comfort us and/or convict us with the stillness of your in-spiriting presence. Continue enabling us to sense your open, inviting arms and to trust in the strength of your hands – desiring to free us from the chains of evil temptations and healing us from intentional or accidental wounds; that we may continue to take confidence in you and in your saving deeds and powerful providential care. It is with assurance of who you are and what you desire for your people that we place our requests and praises into your hands.

Petitions We thank you for the rain we have received that farmers have so desperately needed in our area, and pray that they will get just the right amount that they need as the days proceed. We continue to pray * for Renee, a long time waitress at Red Olive, requested by Pat Harton, no details given * for Jan Martin's friend Dave Thompson who has unexplained 40 pound weight loss, * her friend Gaynell, whose sister died in May and whose son Mitchell is in hospice with cancer, * and her brother Reese and his son Calvin whose court date is now set for June 27 for that situation, * and Cheri Holt's neighbor's father, a Methodist minister in Iowa who had a stroke.

And there are surely others among us who remain on our hearts and minds who have not been mentioned our loud or recently. We lift them up knowing that in your timing and in your way, your will will be accomplished in them. --- Now, loving God open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to you, that the whole world may be one with you as you are one with us in Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray. **Lord's Prayer**

Music Much of the guidance for discernment we need is found in God's Word, if we understand it correctly. Let's sing before the reading and sermon...

Thy Word is a Lamp

Words: Amy Grant, 1984 Music: Michael W Smith, 1984 arr. by Keith Phillips
© 1984 Meadowgreen Music Co. / Bug and Bear Music

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

1. When I feel afraid, think I've lost my way, still you're there right beside me, and nothing will I fear as long as you are near. Please be near me to the end.

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

2. Now I will not forget your love for me and yet my heart forever is wandering. Jesus, be my guide and hold me to your side, and I will love you to the end

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

Intro to and Bible Reading 2

God's Word lights our way and keeps us on track. But what happens when those presenting the Word speak their own and other's ideas instead of what God directs? Jeremiah was deeply concerned that spiritual leaders were preaching what the people wanted to hear, and not what they needed to hear: that if the people didn't change, they would run the nation into destruction. Yes, a Messiah would eventually come to fix it, and then the people would no longer say of the living God, "he brought us out of Egyptian slavery", but rather "he brought us home from exile after being scattered throughout the earth. Jeremiah still has a glimmer of hope that all this could be prevented if the people would discern and listen to the right spiritual leaders. Hear the essence of what Jeremiah says the Lord says to the people.

(Sum of Jeremiah 23:1-15)

Do not listen when these prophets "prophesy" to you, filling you with empty hopes. It's all lies, lies, and more lies. They do not speak for Me. They preach their sermon to congregations who openly reject My word and who stubbornly follow their own desires: "Don't worry! The Lord has promised you will have peace! Nothing bad will ever come your way!"

Have any of these false prophets bothered to meet with Me, the true God? Has even one of them cared enough to pay attention to My word and truly listen and live out My word? I never sent these so-called prophets. I have given them no message, yet they claim to speak for Me. If only they had stood in My presence and heard My voice, they'd have preached My

Message to My people. They'd have gotten the nation back on the right track.

I know what they're saying, all these prophets who preach lies using Me as their text, saying, "Listen to the dream I had from God last night." And then they proceed to tell lies in My name. How long do I have to put up with this? Do these prophets give two cents about Me as they preach their lies and spew out their grandiose delusions? How long will they deceive themselves and all who listen to them? They swap and feed on each other's delusive dreams. They are trying to distract My people from Me.

Let these false prophets tell their silly dreams, but let My true messengers proclaim My every word with unshakable faith. Is there not a difference between straw and grain? Does not My message burn like fire? Is it not like a sledgehammer that smashes a rock to pieces?

I've had it with these smooth-tongued prophets who say something as if I the Lord, have declared it. They get all their sermons secondhand from each other or make up stuff and then pretend it's a real sermon. They lead My people astray with their reckless lies, spreading them all over the country, ruining the lives of My people with their cheap and flagrant lies. I've never sent these prophets, never authorized a single one of them. They do nothing for my people.

Key verses from Jeremiah 23:16-32 (NLT, VOICE, MSG)

Sermon Discerning Friendship

Well, if that reading doesn't make a preacher quake in his boots, I don't know what else will. Let's hear another story.

[Green font are pastoral comments separate from the summation of the story]

King Ahab of Israel approached King Jehoshaphat of Israel, saying it has been 3 years since Aram and I have fought. Join us and we will take back the territory that belongs to us. Jehoshaphat agreed wholeheartedly, but first wanted to hear a positive go-ahead from a prophet. Ahab brought in 400 prophets [it doesn't say they were God's prophets, just that they were prophets, but they were clearly established as "official spiritual advisors"] who all said, "Go, fight, for victory is yours!" [They were also clearly trained to speak what would please the powers that be]

"Isn't there a prophet from the Lord?" asked Jehoshaphat. Ahab replied, "There is one, but I hate him because he only tells me terrible things, never good things. [Maybe he should learn from that, hmm?] His name is Micaiah. While they were

retrieving Micaiah, the other prophets continued to spout their prophecies. [For as we know, if you want to convince anyone of anything as truth, especially when it is not, the best way is to repeat it ad nauseum, right?] One of them, Zedekiah, got dramatic [because we also know that the extreme and charismatic grabs people's attention and draws them to want to accept it because they sound so confident when they are doing it] – he crafted iron horns and said “This is God's message: Take these horns to gore the Arameans until they are destroyed. [not literally, metaphorically, I think he means] And the others chimed in, travel to that territory and flourish, God will hand it over to you.

The commander who was sent to retrieve Micaiah warned him – all the prophets' message is pleasing to the king, may your message be as pleasing as theirs. [In other words, bow to the pressure of the crowd, and especially to what the people in power want to hear]

Micaiah replied, “I only say what the Lord tells me, nothing more, nothing less.”

They enter and Ahab asks him if they should go to war.

Micaiah gave the answer he wanted to hear, but with a tone that made it clear he was only saying what they expected of him. Let's see if I can recreate that: [The following is said in a sing song-y tone] “Do as you say and be successful. The Lord will give it to the king.” Can you tell that that was sarcastic?

Ahab could. He said, “How many times have I told you to promise to give a *true* message from God?”

Micaiah then told him that he had a vision – [I won't spell all that out, but the short version of it is] – everyone should stay home and live in peace, if you go to war you will lose, and Ahab, you will die.

The dramatic prophet Zedekiah slapped or punched him depending upon which version you read and then said, – “When did God's Spirit leave me to take up with you without me knowing about it?”

Micaiah replied, “When the time comes, and you are frantically and futilely looking for a place to hide, you will understand.”

Ahab then does what we often see today – people banned and barred from the room when those in power don't like what they hear. “Get him out of here” Ahab demands and gives orders to take Micaiah back to a city with orders to hold him behind bars with crumbs of bread and drops of water until the king comes back safely from battle. [Speaking truth to power may have its consequences sometimes, serious consequences.]

Micaiah replied, “If you come back safely, God did not speak through me. Everyone, mark my words.”

[Long story short, Apparently, Jehoshaphat’s listening to a true prophet was just for show, because they headed off to war in spite of what Micaiah said, and did what they wanted anyway.] But just in case, Ahab had a plan. He dressed down, but Jehoshaphat would remain in his kingly robes as they went to battle. [I don’t know why Jehoshaphat would agree to plan like that, for it made him the obvious and vulnerable leader.] The king of Aram didn’t care about anyone else. He wanted Ahab, figuring if he got rid of Ahab, the war would be over, so he didn’t care about any of the lesser soldiers or anyone other than Ahab himself. And this is what he instructed his captains. So as they were out on the battlefield, they saw Jehoshaphat in all of his kingly robes. They chased him, but Jehoshaphat cried out and they realized it wasn’t Ahab and so they left him alone. And the way the Scripture puts it, in some translations, at least -- a random arrow was shot in the air found its way between the joints in Ahab’s armor, and he was propped up to sit in the back of his chariot, and they made a U-turn to the sidelines where he watched the rest of the battle as he finally bled out that evening. Once he died, everyone that was still alive went back home. And the way they cleaned up his blood and body from the chariot fulfilled what Elijah had predicted about his death earlier.... [The final moral of the story (and all of the stories we heard today) is that not discerning, or discerning but not following what we have discerned of God’s direction -- can have serious consequences, not only for yourself, but for others as well – and in this case – for the whole nation..].

This took place about 850 BC, more or less.

About 250 years later, we heard Jeremiah fighting against all the prophets who had bowed to power and they preached peace and safety, and to keep doing what you are doing and no harm will come. And they built a strong message of building on each other’s ideas and repeating them ad nauseum until everyone had a hard time not believing it to be true and they didn’t worry about the international threats that were building up in the north – and to a lesser degree, to the south. Nothing had changed. Jeremiah felt (probably) like he was again the lone voice hoping to find a way to get the nation to return to God and avert disaster by telling them, just as Micaiah did, that all these other prophets were not authorized by God and were not telling the truth. And I should point out that those in charge got tired of Jeremiah and they lowered him into a dungeon, a cistern, a reservoir built for holding water,

but it had no water, only mire, and he sank down in that mud. Tradition has it that eventually he was in exile in Egypt, where his fellow countrymen stoned him to death.

With this pattern, is it any wonder that when we leap forward 600 years and we again have religious leaders, spiritual guides, scholars, the ones who are supposed to be the experts on God's will were pronouncing one thing and Jesus was saying and doing something else. Like the prophets before him, he acknowledges that they love the law, but then says they all break the law they love so much. Jesus, on the other hand, Jesus says his teaching is not his own, but God's, (he wasn't borrowing from his dreams or talking for himself or building on the false delusions of others (as they did in Jeremiah's day). He says he is true, tells the truth. In John, being "true" is used only used of God the Father, and now of Jesus himself, so Jesus is being ranked as deity in this text. A single voice of truth against a mass of religious specialists. Is it any wonder that the average person amongst the people who is seeking to be faithful is confused by these varied expert voices?

Why were these recognized religious leaders doing all of this? Maybe it is because it brought them attention, maybe because it was profitable, perhaps because they were building on each other's thoughts and it simply carried them down the wrong path, perhaps it was desire of power, or fear of power, at this point, to Roman politics, perhaps... maybe they wanted to avoid the wrath that truth tellers received -- we've already seen how the prophets often didn't have particularly blessed outcomes on this earth. And Jesus also experienced the consequences of those rare and isolated voices that were true and spoke God's truth. I suspect there were even those that were at least doing their best to discern and to be faithful to what they believed was God's will for their people, but something had clouded their view. Let's face it, when all of society, and/or religious society thinks a certain way, it is not always easy to think something else might be what God is telling us.

And if that is true of the experts in God's revelation to humanity, then how do we average followers ever figure it out. It is no wonder that the crowds were arguing (secretly) about the life and teaching of Jesus during that festival. Of course, now that Jesus had died and risen and sent the Holy Spirit, all of this is behind us and just history, right? Now we've always got it right easily, right? [No.]

Every year I attend annual conference I am reminded how people, lay and clergy, some to many who know more than I do, come up to the microphone to state a truth or give an opinion that are on opposite sides of the same topic. Over the last year I have seen not a small number of clips of preachers who are very animated and extreme and drawing crowds and they preach hate toward people who disagree with them as they become more and more entangled with politics as well.

And I don't talk about politics, but I will say this much for just a couple seconds. Even today we hear very good speeches from politicians, that sound noble and true and even inspiring, but then we look at their voting record and what they say and how they vote don't jive. They say one thing and do another, counting on the fact that most people will never look at their voting record, and only listening to their performance in front of the cameras. I see religious and secular people alike using the Bible to support what for they want to declare as a truth, or on the opposite side, to quote other passages to dispute those very same things, and even saw one where someone listed a whole bunch of isolated verses taken out of context, meaning not only the setting in which they were written, but also whether they were poetry, hyperbole, metaphor, parable, or other – taking them all as literal statements to demonstrate why they won't believe in the book.

Expanding on William Barry's thoughts: There are no pure experiences. Everything is influenced by our personal history, our psychological makeup, our sociological, cultural and economic backgrounds, by our nature and nurture, or lack of same; even by the current state of our body, mind and spirit. All of these join together to color our focus and influence our interpretations.

And with everyone making loud, confident, and sometimes extreme claims on both sides of every topic in their expertise, (and how much true expertise they have we don't know, all we hear is them talking)... We as Christians may not be confused about Jesus, but if we give serious thought to the whole of Christ's teachings and how it could and should be lived out in 2023, I suspect we may not have moved beyond the historical pattern that's been laid out in today's readings, and we may be as confused about application of Christ's principles as those in the crowd at the festival who were confused about Christ himself...

So, what do we do as we seek discernment? I John tells us to test the spirits to see if they are from God or are false (See 1 John 4:1), and then goes on to give a litmus test for the conditions in his setting, in his culture for what was the popular false teaching at the time. Ignatius called them rules (of discernment), but they are

more aptly called indicators that may be warning light if you are off track, or an encouraging light if you are on track.

Discerning God's Guidance:

1) Sincerely strive to seek God's way

The first requisite of discerning God's guidance is that you sincerely strive to seek God's way. The fact that you are

here today is a pretty good sign that you are doing that. If you weren't, you wouldn't be here. As long as we keep seeking him with an open mind and heart, God can keep guiding us. Then if we happen to get off course, he can get us back on course – as long as long as we keep our minds and hearts open to him, and keep striving to seek what he is trying to give us.

2) Avoid rationalizing wrongs

Then if we do something that causes us to think "It isn't that bad, everyone does it, or others do

worse things than what I do, I am generally a good person." That might be a sign that we've done something that God may not really be wanting us to do, because we feel we have to rationalize or justify what we have done. Or we may just work to distract ourselves with – anything – to effectively drown out the Spirit, to douse pangs of conscience. This -- not always – but MAY be an indicator that that something is wrong and the Spirit is trying to bring us back, while the temptation is to minimize the wrong so that we will stay where we are in that wrong... . In short: if you are off course, you'll be tempted to think it isn't that bad. Be humble and open to the fact we may have something wrong or missing in our life and listen for course corrections...

3) Avoid self-doubts and questions

On the other hand, if we do something that causes us to feel good about our life,

that we are growing in faith, and it causes us to think "We aren't in that good of a place, it was only a small victory, maybe I am getting full of spiritual pride, do I think I am better than everyone else? (because I follow a good moral conscience while others around me may not be doing the same?) Maybe I should back off of this goody-two-shoes behavior. This MAY be an indicator that something is right in your life and the Spirit is trying to reward you and bless you and make you feel good about it, but the temptation is trying to drag you back away from that and get back of course. In short, if you are on course, you'll be tempted to think that you aren't. Don't let this temptation rob you of the joy of God's gracious blessing and work in your life.

4) Be aware of weak spots

A fourth thought. Temptations tend to attack our weak spots. If we like comfort food that we shouldn't have, then wanting comfort food will be one of our strongest temptations. If we are aware of that as a weak spot, we'll be on guard against it. If we are inclined to doubt ourselves, then when we feel close to God, we will be tempted to believe our feelings are fooling us. If we find self-esteem only in productive work, then whenever we take time off, even for proper self-care, we will be tempted to feel anxious and guilty and depressed because we feel like we gotta be working all the time. Being aware of our personal weak points will help us defend against the temptations so we don't fall to them.

5) Not self-centered

Fifth indicator. When we are discerning God rightly, it will primarily center on God and others, not on ourselves. Even the Spirit's pangs of conscience to correct our course will not lead to anxious self-examination and self-absorption but will simply move us to improving our relationships with God and others. We don't beat ourselves up if we are of course.

6) Peace and happiness

Sixth. God wants us to be happy and fulfilled and that comes from being in tune with his purposes. Despite circumstances, all things being equal, and they very rarely are -- when we are on track we MAY feel drawn up to God and others in hope, and faith, and love and joy, and we will begin to experience in growing measure the fruit of the Spirit. Can you name those 9? I'm not going to try off the top of my head. They are in Galatians 5. (Galatians 5:22-23). And when we lose our way, our souls MAY feel restless, anxious, not happy, and unfocused until we find our way back to God. It doesn't mean life is trouble free, but it is knowing and finding the comfort that God's presence brings even in the darkest of times.

7) Opportunities and barriers

Number 7, Sometimes, circumstances and events themselves will move us toward the course God wants for us. Nowadays, we generally call them open and shut doors. God closes the detours for things he does not want for us and makes a way for things he does want for us. But we have to beware – we need to discern between God closing a door, and opposition trying to keep us from going through the door toward what God wants us to get through... Sometimes there is resistance – we have to figure out whether it is a hurdle or a “No, don't go this way.”

8) Don't do it alone

And that is why, this last idea – don't do it alone. Develop good friendships with people with whom you can begin to

talk honestly about your life so can be more confident about where you are in tune with God, and where you are not; because as I said, our nature and nurture has developed filters in life that make it easy for us focus on certain things and not see other things. And if we have other points of view coming in, we will be aware of things we will not otherwise see.

Just to give an example of other points of view. Take the palm branch. To a botanist (and I am not sure I am going to pronounce this right) it is *Arecaceae* (are ee case ee ay), or perhaps more specifically to Israel -- the phoenix *dactylifera* (feenix dact ah lif urah). To a painter, it is -- green. To a florist, it is a backdrop for arrangements. To the thirsty, it represents a beverage made from the tree's sap. To the hungry, it represents food (depending on the type of Palm tree -- coconuts, (middle east it is often dates), acai berries peaches, and even some nuts. To barbeque people, the leaves represent a foil used to keep the juices in the meat while it cooks, or the cooking oil derived from the tree's sap, or its syrup. So many practical purposes as well as symbolic meanings. How it impacts us as we look at it may depend upon how we have experienced it in the past and in what context we use it, -- So if I say it is green and you say it is a backdrop we think we are not even in the same ball park, not even talking about the same thing. We have to see how other people see. (It will mean something different to us at the barbeque pit than here in the sanctuary on Palm Sunday).

I bring it up because prior to our reading, John names the festival that was read about (with Jesus) as the festival of booths (or tabernacles). Palm branches are an important part of this festival. They made these sukkahs, these temporary booths they spend much time in for a week, the roofs often thatched together with palm leaves. And it was one of those festivals where Jewish people came from everywhere with their different backgrounds and points of view.

There is also a ritual that they would perform, in one hand they would hold a citron (which looks kind of like a rough-skinned lemon), in the other, palm, myrtle and willow branches, bound usually with palm fronds. These three branches and fruit represent 4 types of Jews with differing levels of knowledge and observance – that would come together. (1) those who know it and live it, (2) those who don't know it yet seek to live well, (3) those who know it, but don't live it, (4) and those who don't know it or live it. In Christian circles it is sometimes related to the sower of the seed where the seed falls on 4 different kinds of ground.

But anyway, these items would be held, and brought together in unity. And then there would be a shaking in every direction (6 directions – front, back, side, side, up, and down) as an indication that God is everywhere, and a blessing is pronounced. The palms were also then used as a processional to the Temple where they would call out the words of Psalm 118 that you know -- Hosanna, (Save) and Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Discernment comes as we seek to be one and see each other from each other's point of view and as we remain open to seek the truth – it was very important to them that it all had to be held together as they did all of this journey of faith – and as we remain together to seek the truth of God's message for each of us and all of us in today's world. Our title of the sermon, "Discerning Friendship" does not mean being



choosy about our friend choices – that's a proposition I have heard all my life – "Be careful who you choose as a friend! Their "bad" might get rubbed off on you!" Right? And there may be certain cases where that is necessary – if they are going to rub off on one of your weaknesses you might have to do that. But other than those exceptions, maybe we should be less concerned about what influences we receive from people that gathering together as discerning friends to see what good we can give to others, no matter where they are in their spiritual journey, or lack of spiritual journey. Right? That's a good place to quit...

Let's pray...

Prayer Lord it is easy to look back to Micaiah and realize who spoke truth and who was false, because of what results played out in history. It is easy to know as we look back to Jeremiah, for Jeremiah was vindicated by the unfolding of history. It is easy to look back to the days of Jesus and realize who spoke truth about him because he was vindicated by the unfolding of history. It is easy, after the game is over, to identify all the "woulda, shoulda, and coulda's of life.

But life isn't over. We don't have the benefit of hindsight and history to know what lays ahead. But this we know. You are our friend when we get it right. And you are our friend when we get it wrong -- and you guide us back *as we keep seeking you*. Help us too, to be friends for each other just as you are for us as we never stop

searching your words of life, of peace and of pardon – that you offer to us through Jesus. Amen.

Music Let's sing

Wonderful Words of Life

Words & Music: Philip P. Bliss, 1874

1. Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life;
let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life;
words of life and beauty teach me faith and duty.

Refrain:

Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.

2. Christ, the blessed one, gives to all wonderful words of life;
sinner, list to the loving call, wonderful words of life;
all so freely given, wooing us to heaven.

Refrain

3. Sweetly echo the gospel call, wonderful words of life;
offer pardon and peace to all, wonderful words of life;
Jesus, only Savior, sanctify forever.

Refrain

Blessing Now as a child of the Father, as Christ's friend, go out to the world in the power of the Spirit -- with your heart set on Christ who draws all people to himself and binds us together in love. Amen.



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