

*Discernment*

I saw a funny sign a while back. It said: Eating red meat will not make you sick; eating *green* meat will make you sick. Life is all about learning how to choose correctly: learning what's safe and what's dangerous, learning to choose what's right and what's wrong. The fancy, spiritual term for making such choices today is *discernment*. Making good choices, good discernments, is especially hard when all the options look attractive. We can easily be tempted to say, "It's all good," but it's really not. Only God is good. But learning to differentiate between what is truly godly and right and what only appears godly and right can be tough.

For instance, consider John the Baptist. John was a great man, a great preacher, someone people could admire and trust. No wonder some people who heard him preach and teach questioned in their hearts whether or not he might be the Christ, the Messiah, God's "Anointed One." John was quick though to squelch those rumors and aid them in their discernment. John knew who he was and who he was not. He didn't try to be something he wasn't, he didn't try to do too much. John knew his identity and his purpose. He was the forerunner, the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord, and he was content and happy in that role. We could all be content and happy in our roles with a faith like John's to guide our discernment.

John had discerned that God gave him a message to deliver to make the world ready for Jesus, but it was not message everyone wanted to hear. John didn't preach about butterflies and unicorns and rainbows. John preached

about a baptism with fire. He preached about a judgment where the wheat would be saved in God's barn and the chaff burnt with unquenchable fire. Such talk about God's judgment is rarely heard from pulpits today, but there it is, straight from the Bible, and Luke calls it "good news". God's judgment is good news for Christians because by Jesus' death we are saved from the unquenchable fire we deserve. Hallelujah!

John not only talked the talk when it came to God's judgment, he "walked the walk" as they say. John had the courage, the guts, the intestinal fortitude to take on Herod, the tetrarch, the ruler. John wasn't afraid to speak truth to power. That's the kind of valor we should celebrate and emulate. And what was the issue John challenged Herod on? John discerned that among the many, many evil things that Herod did, Herod's sexual immorality was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Herod was breaking the God-given laws recorded in the Old Testament with his sister-in-law Herodias, and John was not going to stand for it. God gives us good laws not only to keep us safe and healthy, but even more so, God is glorified in the keeping of His law. That's why it's so important for us to discern God's Word correctly.

Where is a voice like John's, a prophetic voice, in the church today? Where is the church speaking out today on issues of morality? Are we discerning God's Word correctly? There are many, many evils we could decry in society today, but let's pick just one like John did. I read a book recently about the scourge of pornography in society today. Do you realize how many marriages are ruined by addictions to pornography? Do you realize how many young people are led into lives of degradation and disease by the

pornography industry? Isn't that something we as church should be speaking out about and taking a stand against? How can we tolerate the smut peddlers in our midst who spread their filth in print and on the Internet?

We should be calling all those lost in the world of pornography and other immorality to repent and believe in the gospel, and experience the forgiveness and grace of Christ – to turn from their sin and live. That's what Jesus is calling us to: a better, happier, healthier life. We don't preach "fire and brimstone" for fire and brimstone's sake. We acknowledge God's judgment to further reveal God's unquenchable love. It's never too late for anyone to make a U-turn from their sins and find abundant life in Christ. That's what God's Word promises us.

As usual, John got into trouble with "the powers that be" for preaching God's Word. That's the way of world: "Shoot the messenger" and change the message. People still today are persecuted and oppressed for preaching and teaching the Bible. John called Herod on the sixth commandment and John wound up in prison. Eventually, John was eventually beheaded for the whole affair. Still, even that tragedy, that miscarriage of justice, served a purpose by setting the stage for Jesus' ministry. We discern that John, the lesser, had to decline, so that Jesus, the greater, could shine. And shine Jesus did!

What a glorious, shining moment Jesus' baptism was! That was the beginning, the inauguration, of Jesus' public ministry. Whatever private discernment process Jesus had been going through up until then, whatever

questions he might have had about his own role, now, here, undeniably present was God's seal of approval on Jesus' mission and the power to accomplish what he set out to do. What a liberating moment that must have been for Jesus to have his identity, his purpose confirmed that way!

At last Jesus was free from the low expectations that the local people must have had for a carpenter's son. At last he was free from the oppressive yoke of the misguided religious authorities and their man-made rules and regulations. At last he was free to be himself, to be who he was meant to be, and carry out his mission and ministry unencumbered by the mistakes and failures of the past. Jesus' baptism signaled a new beginning in the life of God's people, and the history of salvation. God is always giving His people new starts, second chances, more opportunities to make better discernments and get things right.

Just as Jesus was baptized once, so are we baptized only once, but that Baptism has daily, long-lasting, downright eternal effects. There we are identified forever as a child of God and given a purpose in life, that is, to glorify God. Our Baptism was a new beginning that is still new to us every morning. Our Baptism sets us free from the mistakes and failures of our past, and sets us free to follow Christ more closely, more fully. Baptism tells us that come what may, our destinies are safely tied up in Christ. We know who and whose we are. God has already discerned that for us.

If we would read on Luke's gospel we would see how after Jesus' Baptism the Holy Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. What does that say to us? If Jesus was tempted, so are we going to be

tempted. Baptism doesn't mean that our discernment process is entirely over. In fact, it's just the beginning. Our congregation is beginning a very serious time of discernment. Let us listen for God's voice in Holy Scripture. Let us be open to new beginnings. May we discern how God is calling us to greater mission and ministry in our time and place. And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.