

Lenten Study

Discernment

Finding Clarity in the Chaos

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Lent 2020



UNITED PARISH IN BROOKLINE

American Baptist • United Church of Christ • United Methodist

Soulful Small Group Practices

(Adapted from Parker Palmer)

Presume welcome and extend welcome. We all lead busy lives, which is why our time together is precious. Know that you are welcome, that you belong, and extend this welcome by your words and actions toward others in the group.

Assume good intention. Each of us has come to this place because we care about our community, its past, its present and its future. Let us join with one another in that common intention.

Come to this work with 100% of yourself. This means three things: to attend as faithfully as possible, to be as present as possible to the other members of the group, and to bring all of who you are – your joys and successes, your fears and failings.

Speak for Self. A helpful practice is to use “I” statements. Share from your own unique story. No individual speaks for an entire group, or a whole profession. This is a space to set aside competition and to celebrate the different ways God works in each of our lives.

Share the air. Pay attention to how much of the group time you take. Every voice is important and no single voice ought to dominate. Make sure everyone has spoken once on a topic before you speak a second time.

Listen to Silence. Silence is rare gift in our busy world. Allow silence to be another member of the group.

If the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you find yourself feeling uncomfortable with the perspective shared by another, try not to allow judgment to set in. Instead, become intrigued. Ask for more information, and be open to the experience of others. Differences offer us an opportunity to learn from one another.

Observe confidentiality. This is especially important in creating safety and building trust. Vocation is a deeply personal topic, and we hold one another’s stories as sacred.

No fixing. Offer advice or reflection when invited to do so, but otherwise avoid the temptation to fix, set-straight, or counsel another group member.

Pray for one another in meetings and between meetings. Lift each other’s lives and stories to God in prayer as you leave your time together and through the week until you meet again. This is one of the greatest gifts we can give to one another.

Believe that it is possible to emerge from our time refreshed, surprised and less burdened than when you came. Expect that our time together can provide for renewal, refreshment and helpful perspectives as you listen for God’s call in your life.

Session 1: What is Discernment? (Week of March 1)

75 minutes

Purpose of this five-week study

To expand our individual understanding of discernment as a “gift of the Spirit”
To learn and share spiritual practices that support us in discernment
To discover and experiment with how we may be most authentic with God.
To appreciate that each of us has our own unique approach to discernment.

Purpose of this session

To introduce the definition and spiritual practices for discernment that have been used in many Christian denominations throughout the ages.

Open with short prayer *(you may use this prayer or your own)*

You may also ask each person to contribute to the prayer by saying out loud in a word or simple phrase whatever they are thankful for, have concerns about or have hopes for.

Loving God, in this time together,
we ask that you would be with us as we explore what it means to connect with you
and with our own souls to find clarity and be grounded.
Help us discern your spirit speaking within ourselves and through those around us,
that we may expand our souls and deepen our faith, and find a path forward.
Amen.

Explaining this is a preview session --

Icebreaker *(10 minutes)*

Allow time for each participant to respond

What is your name? How did you come to United Parish?

Why did you sign up for this study?

Review Small Group Practices *(5-10 Minutes)*

Each person can take turns reading them aloud. Does everyone agree to work with these practices? Any to add?

Talking about Discernment (15-20 minutes)

What word or phrase best describes what discernment means to you?

Some definitions and terms for “Discernment”:

- To separate or distinguish;
- To distinguish good from evil;
- To find the authentic and valuable and recognize the counterfeit
- To see the heart of the matter with spiritual eyes, from God’s vantage point, beneath the surface, beyond the immediate and transient;
- To locate the immediate and particular within the broader or distant landscape
- To possess immediate and direct insight (of God’s will).

Would you say you are in the midst of decision-making and discerning some particular or weighty matter in your life right now?

If so, what are they? (you can keep private or share with the group)

Discernment as a heart of United Parish’s vision

more organic

more spiritually engaging

micro- vs. macro-discernment

not just finding people to do and fill jobs

Scripture and Discussion (15 -20 minutes)

To get at just one of the many Biblical examples of discernment, we'll start with the Hebrew Scriptures, in the first book of Kings.

Elijah has defeated the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel. In response, Queen Jezebel has threatened to kill Elijah within 24 hours. Elijah traveled some distance with the protection of angels to get to Horeb, the mount of God, to do some discerning.

1 Kings 19:9-13

Read aloud.

⁹ At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"¹⁰ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

¹¹ He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Discussion

What jumps out at you about this passage?

How is Elijah feeling? Have you ever felt like Elijah? When? Why?

If you identify at all with Elijah's story, what was pursuing you?

In your life's story, what have been the wind, earthquake, or fire for you?

This version of the scripture (New Revised Standard Version) translates the end of verse 12 as “a sound of sheer silence.” Other translations call it the “still, small voice.” The Hebrew word, דְּמָמָה “demamah” translates as “quiet—calm, silence, still, gentle.”

What does this description say about God?

When have you experienced “demamah”? or “sheer silence,” or the “still, small voice”?

Exercise in Silence 5 minutes

Facilitator: set a smart phone timer for three minutes. Offer the following instructions:

We’ll begin our session with three full minutes of silence.

Find a way to sit comfortably in your chair, sitting up straight, feet on the floor, hands folded gently, open-palmed on your thighs or in your lap.

Just concentrate on your breath, not forcing it. Just notice your breath. Take a few deep breaths as you need to. If you get distracted by thoughts, come back to your breath.

Begin with the words:

May the still, small voice, the calmness of God’s Spirit be among us now.

Facilitator: conclude the silence with something simple like

Help us to take comfort in silence and breath as a gift of your Spirit, throughout the coming week, Amen.

Reviewing the Outline of this Study

Week 1: What is Discernment?

Week 2: Discerning our God-given gifts

Week 3: Practices for Discernment

Week 4: The Practice of a Clearness Committee

Week 5: Taking Discernment with us into the Church and the World

Goals of the study

Some suggested practices for the week ahead

These are some easy-to-try spiritual practices that may help you as you launch on a season of discernment. By no means do you need to try all at once. We invite you to try them out as you see fit, see how they feel and then report back to us next week.

Examen: Learning a Spiritual Practice to Use this Week (10 minutes)

A spiritual practice derived from St. Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish Basque Catholic priest and theologian, who gave up a life of nobility and co-founded the religious order called the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in the 16th century. The examen was developed in the 1500s as a core practice is used to this day by Jesuits and other religious groups.

Find a quiet, comfortable place to spend about 10 minutes at the end of each day this week:

1. Give thanks for all God's gifts and benefits
2. Ask for light/ God's presence
3. Review the day: thoughts, words, deeds, desires, consolations, desolations
4. Express gratitude, sorrow or purpose of amendment
5. Ask for the graces you desire for tomorrow

Repeat the practice throughout the week.

Practicing Gratitude

Another practice is to name and write down each day three *specific* things for which you are thankful. It could be anything: time with a loved one, a delicious meal, an unexpected break in your day, a kind exchange with a stranger.

The point is to make it specific, and spend some time in your mind re-living the experience, savoring the feelings and thoughts they brought up in you.

This practice is a core practice that neuroscientists suggest in helping change some of our brain patterns.

An online "data-driven" daily discernment practice

Methodist colleagues of ours at the Harvard-Epworth Church in Cambridge have created a daily discernment opportunity, in which they email you a question each day to answer, in a discernment practice.

You can sign up and check it out at 4oform.org/signup

Scripture for your Week ahead

Chewing on the Word. Each week, we will give you some scripture that you might want to try reading and re-reading during the week, paying attention to how it lands with you at different times and in different situations.

This is the Psalm that we heard chanted in worship this week.

Psalm 139

- 1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
- 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
- 3 You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
- 4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
- 5 You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
- 7 Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
- 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
- 9 If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
10 even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
12 even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
- 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

Prayer Partners – 5 minutes

During Lent, if you are interested in continuing with this Lenten class, we encourage you to sign up for a Prayer Partner and do a weekly check-in with them between classes.

You can also sign up at: unitedparishbrookline.org/prayer-partners-during-lent

Close in Prayer *(you may use this prayer or your own)*

Loving God, we have come together to discern your presence and guidance in our lives. Bless us in our Lenten commitments, help us find time for soulful moments in our week. Remind us of your presence, and help us mutually support each other in this journey through Lent. Turn our eyes and hearts toward the kind of world you imagine.

In gratitude, we say, Amen.

Look Ahead - Next Session

Next week we will look at the discernment of our individual spiritual gifts and talents, and how to nurture them.

We will send out a spiritual gifts inventory assessment before the next session to do a little prep beforehand.

For more info, check out unitedparishbrookline.org home page for “Opportunities during Lent”