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Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done
Matthew 6:5-12; Romans 12:1-2

Decisions! Decisions! Decisions! Life is an endless series of decisions. Every day we make hundreds of decision, most of them very routine. Do we hit snooze when the alarm sounds or do we get up? Then I need to decide if I will do my back exercises. When I was 22, I was a passenger in a car that plowed into a parked doing 40 mph. The physical therapist says, "Your back took quite a jolt, but if you do these exercises daily, you might avoid surgery." She's right! If I do the exercises daily and wear hiking boots, my back is fine. If I don't, my back eventually goes out, leading me to pray, "Lord, take me, RIGHT NOW!"

The decisions continue. What should we wear? Do we take a shower, turn on the news or take time for devotions? Do we eat oatmeal, Lucky Charms or a bagel? Hoping in the car, do we listen to WDWS, NPR or WBGL? Or do we drive to work in silence, planning and preparing for the day?

We make routine decisions on autopilot. But some decisions have much more gravity because they can be life changing. In his book, *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell tells of Caroline, a chemistry student, who ranks in the top two percent nationally in science in High School. But she goes to Brown. There everyone is in the top two percent, and suddenly she no longer excels: she's average or below. She's so demoralized that she leaves chemistry, her first love, to major in sociology. Later she figures out – "if I had gone to Maryland, I'd be a chemist." Decisions have consequences.

Early in my ministry I visited a young teen in jail. One Saturday night two older boys talk him into breaking into a machine shop. When a silent alarm alerts the police, the older boys escape, carrying off valuable tools. Young Joe gets caught, while the older boys sell the tools, pocket the profit and get off scot-free. If only Joe chose different companions that fateful Saturday night.

Decisions can be life changing! Do we have a third child? Do we get out of a troubled relationship? There's no abuse, but nor is there any joy. But how will that affect the kids? Is this the breaking of our marriage vows, or creating a healthier future? How do we make a decision when we don't know what is best? Do we stay home with young children or serve others through our profession? Do we say "yes" or "no" to a volunteer commitment? Do I retire when I still love ministry, but when we too infrequently see our sons and their wives and all our extended families who live at a distance.

Historically Christians seeking to make wise and godly decisions speak of

spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment offers our Lord the nitty-gritty of our lives and invites Him to help us see what is “good, pleasing and perfect.” Spiritual discernment isn’t just for monks or clergy. It isn’t esoteric and otherworldly. Spiritual discernment takes seriously this petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy Kingdom Come; Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven.” Let’s listen:

Matthew 6:5-12; Romans 12:1-2

What’s the most important decision that you’re facing right now? Most likely it isn’t an easy issue. How do we balance work and family? Do we fire a marginal employee? How do we get through to a granddaughter, who’s heading down the wrong path? Some decisions can be agonizing.

When Russian chess prodigy Anatoli Sharansky is 29, he vocally supports the right of Jews to immigrate to Israel. Knowing he’s tempting fate, he marries his fiancée Natasha, who leaves for Israel. Then the KGB arrests him, charges him with treason and threatens him with death. While Anatoli rots in jail, the Russians offer a deal. If Anatoli will denounce the Soviet Zionist movement, he will serve a short sentence, be released, and in Israel he can say anything he wants.

After long thought and prayer, Anatoli refuses the deal, feeling it will destroy his credibility and demoralize his fellow dissidents. So he isn’t in his wife’s arms again for twelve long years. Was this the right decision?

How do we make good and God-honoring decisions? Does God help us when we ask? And if God does help us, how do we discern the answer? I’ve never seen a burning bush; nor have I ever heard God’s audible voice.

In a general sense, we make God-honoring decisions when we pray, “Thy Kingdom Come.” God’s Kingdom is where the way and will of God is done, when we welcome a stranger, when we feed the hungry, when we honor our marriage vows, when we read to our daughter. God’s Kingdom is present when we teach ESL, or study diligently to diagnosis our patient’s illness, when we work hard on a lesson plan to capture our student’s interest, when help a client find justice, and when we do that which is right and just. God’s Kingdom is present when we listen to a friend, pray for a neighbor, or bring light to a place of darkness.

Jesus talks more about the Kingdom of God than any other topic, but He speaks about it cryptically, in parables. The Kingdom is like a seed growing; it is like leaven that transforms the whole loaf; it is a banquet hall filled with outcasts from the streets; it is where the harvest separates the wheat from the chaff. So let the seed of faith grow within you; be the positive influence that shapes your family or workplace; welcome the downtrodden, and choose good not evil. Obey Paul’s words to the Colossians,

As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, practice compassion,

kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And above all, be loving, the virtue that binds all things together in unity.

Obedying these words advances God's Kingdom and does God's will! But Sister Elizabeth Liebert, a personal friend and the past dean of San Francisco Theological Seminary, offers very wise counsel for helping us make godly decisions in her book The Way of Discernment. She makes us aware of the long contemplative tradition practiced by believers through the centuries, a tradition that is available to each of us.

Elizabeth begins with three assumptions. First, God loves us and seeks our best. Second, God made us, knows us best and wants to guide us so we can fulfill our God-given calling. And third, we must discern with detachment, laying aside our biases, being open to whatever God wishes to say. So how do we discern God's will?

First, we use our common sense. We pray for clarity of thought. We love the Lord our God, with all our hearts, minds, soul and strength." When my dad was in his mid-40s, he thinks that God might be calling him into the ministry. So he has lunch with his pastor, Dr. Elam Davies. Dad shares his dilemma. But he has three young children; he has tenure at Lehigh; money is very tight; my mom, with her depression ethic hates the idea, and dad is already serving Christ as an elder. Elam was always very dramatic. So after dad shares his thoughts, Elam pauses and then says in his Welsh brogue, "*Never have I seen the doors more tightly barred!*" For Elam the cons far outweighed the pros. Dad agreed.

How do we discern God's will? We use our common sense, and our memories. When has God directed us in the past? When have we felt most alive, most productive, most used of the Holy Spirit? What brings us our greatest joy? Or conversely what decisions were hurtful and wrong? If we married an alcoholic, what attracted us to that person? Or do we avoid making decisions? Do we procrastinate? If so, why? And when we've procrastinated, what was the result?

Memories anchor us and teach us. Our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate Passover in obedience to the Lord's command, "*Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, when the angel of death passed over your houses.*" We celebrate communion in obedience to Jesus' words, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" So as we prepare to make a decision, we sit silently asking the Lord to bring to mind those thoughts, insights and experiences that can be instructive.

How do we discern God's will? We use our common sense; we talk to trusted friends; we review our memories. Then Elizabeth suggests that we use our Imaginations to envision our decision's result. Imagination is a wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit – an architect pictures a structure not yet built; a teacher dreams up an innovative way to capture the attention of her students; when Alexandra

Scott is four and suffering from neuroblastoma, she decides to open a lemonade stand to raise money for childhood cancers. Sadly Alex dies at the age of eight, but her foundation has raised over \$100 million. She imagined a way to potentially transform thousands of lives, at the age of four!

So if we're deciding whether to take a job in a distant city: again we sit silently before our Lord. We imagine what the future looks like if we stay. We think of our friends and family, of our potential here. Will moving unnerve our children, or make them more resilient? We picture what things will look like in a year, in three years, in ten years. We ask the Lord to help us see what lies ahead.

How do we discern God's will? We also follow our "gut feelings?" Our bodies can alert us to danger before we realize it. We've all gotten knots in our stomachs or felt a wave of relief sweep over us when we make a certain decision. God fashions our bodies in exquisite care, *"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You are familiar with all of my ways."*

I met Mary Ann after her father brought her to church in Freeport. I was training for the Boston marathon, and she thought I looked rather scrawny. But I called and arranged a visit. The rule of thumb for a new member call is to stay no more than 30 minutes. We talked for 2-1/2 hours, amazed at all the things we had in common. Since pastors don't hit on prospective members, I simply prayed that we'd get to know each other. She began attending a Bible Study I was teaching and we talked more and more and more. Finally I decided to ask her out.

So one Saturday morning I call, and I'm so nervous that after the phone rings twice, I hang up. Thank goodness that's before caller ID. Ten minutes later, I call again, ask her out, and she accepts. After two dates, we both go home for Christmas and tell our best friends, "She/he's the one." Then breaking every canon of premarital advice, we're engaged in nine weeks. I could offer rational reasons for my decision, but I had an instinctual, "gut feeling" that this was right.

Discernment doesn't mean that decisions work out perfectly. Being finite and sinful, we may not fully understand what God is telling us. But return to Elizabeth's three convictions: First, God loves us and seeks our best. Second, God made us, knows us best and wants us to fulfill our God-given calling. And third, we enter discernment with detachment, laying aside our assumptions, seeking to be open to whatever God wishes to say to us.

But how will we know what God's will is? We may feel a sense of peace when the decision is made. We may get confirmation from the thought, from a verse of Scripture, from a friend. We may make our list of pros and cons, and as we examine the list, the answer is clear. Or we just trust that God will work out the details. Like I've said: I've never seen a burning bush or heard an audible voice. And it's almost always only in retrospect, that I see God's hand at work.

But as we make decisions consistent with what God's word teaches; as we think clearly, talk to trusted friends, and ask the Lord to bring to mind memories that can be instructive; as we ask Him to help us imagine what the future will be like according to what we decide and follow our gut feelings, we put our lives in God's hands. And we obey what we sense to be God's leading. In this way, what we are really praying is, "*Our Father, who art in heaven . . . Thy kingdom come and thy will be done, on earth as in heaven.*" Amen.