

EXPLORATIONS



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How Do We Distinguish the Voice of God From All the Other Voices?

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Four years ago a group of us serving on the Commission on Ministry in the Episcopal Diocese of New York were trained by Listening Hearts to become diocesan spiritual discernment facilitators. Since then, we have trained many groups to serve as parish discernment committees for parishioners who are experiencing a call to ministry that may lead to ordination as a deacon or priest.

Of all the questions that have been asked during the trainings, the one that is raised most often is, how do we distinguish the voice of God from all the other voices?

In truth, we can't truly know and understand how God speaks to us unless we have actually experienced it. God speaks to us in the depths of our being in many different ways. To one person, God may speak through a visual image; to another, through the memory of a significant conversation; to another, through a passage from Scripture that comes to mind; to another, through a gentle and persistent nudge in a certain direction.

But how do we know these hints and nudges are truly from God?

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. 1 John 4:1

“When we are committed to hearing the voice of God, we have to listen in a very personal and intimate way to the Word of God as it comes to us through the scriptures,” says Henri Nouwen. “As we let the Word of God settle into the center of our being, it becomes the ongoing incarnation of God in our world. Throughout the regular practice of scriptural meditation, we develop an inner ear that allows us to recognize God’s Word as a word that speaks directly to our most intimate needs and aspirations. When we listen to a sentence, a story, or a parable, not simply to be instructed, informed or inspired but to be formed into a truly obedient person the Book becomes a spiritual director to us.”

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We further test the spirits through contemplative prayer in which we are fully present, so that we perceive with more than just our mind or intellect; we perceive with all that we are – our senses, our intuition, our openness to all ways of knowing in every corner of our being. “If your prayer goes deep, invading your unconscious,” writes Richard Rohr, “your whole view of the world will change from fear to connection.”

And then we test the spirits and distinguish the voice of God from all the other voices in a Christian community – a Listening Hearts Spiritual Discernment Group made of mature fellow Christians committed to discerning God’s active presence in their lives, being true to the messages God has been sending them, and responding with action.

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It is vital that individuals who sit with someone discerning a call to ministry in the church beware of how God has spoken to his people – and to themselves – in stories and passages in Scripture. This awareness, this knowing, is essential for distinguishing the voice of God. So, too, is preparing by opening the mind and softening the heart to engage in deep, contemplative prayer for a period of time in advance of the session. With this knowing and preparation, everyone in the group is able to become grounded in God, enveloped by the richness of silence, and open to wherever the Holy Spirit may lead.

As the questions posed to the focus person move from informational to reflective in nature, signs of the Spirit begin to emerge. Follow-up questions encourage the focus person to go deeper, and strands of received inspiration and wisdom begin to be woven into a clarifying tapestry. A wondrous, mysterious feeling that is energizing and yet full of peace envelops the group. Grounded in the God as revealed in Scripture and borne by the Holy Spirit moving within the group, spiritual consensus emerges. One soul encounters a community of souls. The Christ in one sees the Christ in others, and the voice of God can be heard by all.

“Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other?... So one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become “unity” conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.”

—A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

Susan Heath is a member of St. Michael’s Church in Manhattan. Retired as a director of national program development for PBS/WNET, she is an avid reader and loves singing in four-part harmony.

Spiritual Discernment: A Glossary for Extending Practice into Life

Jim Goodmann
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The work of discernment as practiced through Listening Hearts has always struck me as something more than just finding a way forward in a life quest, important as that is. What you discover in the back-and-forth of listening, generous sharing, and prayer together is that our life questions are a part of a living communion formed across our time of being together, one that joins a larger communion of lives and spiritual journeys of those who have come before us. Perhaps the best way of describing what happens in the course of a retreat is through words and phrases that you may hear in a Listening Hearts circle.

Listen – The word begins the Rule of St. Benedict; it is the way to understanding. A primary practice of Listening Hearts, listening is motivated first toward “understanding before being understood.” It is the trellis on which all discernment and prayerful presence hangs. We listen carefully to one another – but we also listen to the silence that enfolds our shared narratives and the open and honest questions directed to the focus person. Our hearts are attuned to the presence of the Holy Spirit, and alert listening is the pathway to that presence.

Open and honest questions – Open and honest questions are “self-awakening questions” (*Living in the Green*) a training program, so described because the one posing them honestly has no idea of what their answer could be. They are questions that may take the focus persons deeper into their own quest, opening unanticipated spaces for a deeper awareness of consciousness, and linking their quest to that of others, living and dead. They are questions, by the way, that a focus person is under no obligation to answer.

Unlikeness – In Listening Hearts practice, don’t listen just to have our worlds confirmed or our lives corroborated. We listen to other lives, because their rhythms and experiences and questions *really are* different from our own. “Follow Him through the Land of unlikeness” (W. H. Auden). With deep respect we turn our attention to another; we hold back from treading heavily on their lives. We respect their “shy soul,” as Parker Palmer describes it, and accompany their quest for light as friends and co-learners.

Practicing the Presence of God – Practicing God’s presence (Brother Lawrence) is less about having thoughts *about* God and more about being present to others in their journey. In the meetings of a discernment group, we are disposed for a particular person, for a particular length of time, in the belief that God the Holy Spirit does show up through the focus person and the discerners gathered, as well as through the mentor and observers. It is not the easiest presence to observe, since a lot of what normally preoccupies us needs to be laid aside for a considerable period of time. This taxes our inclination to judge what we hear, our “inveterate tendency to reflect on ourselves” (Thomas Keating). This we let go of in favor of a more concentrated and focused awareness of the story and the quest of another.

Fullness of Time – This phrase may refer to the emergence of a discernment question and the *kairos* (or touching of eternity and time) that surrounds the engagement of the question, it may refer to the nature and timing of resolution to questions that are raised in discernment. These are not necessarily fulfilled at the time of meeting. Discernment continues in the focus person’s life. A keener emergence of sound and sense and circumstance often provides either new depth to the quest or a new embodiment of cherished hopes. Sometimes a whole new framing occurs that recasts the original quest. T. S. Eliot states it quite eloquently, and frankly, in *Four Quartets, Little Gidding*, lines 29-34:

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Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

*If we prime our hearts and minds to open wide,
the Spirit may stream in to carry us to an entirely
new place where we see possibilities beyond
anything we could discover on our own.*

—Keeping in Tune With God, p. 26

*And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And altered in fulfillment.*

Our lives, like our stories and our dreams, are like an artist's canvas (Thomas Moore). Listening Hearts provides the time to look carefully at them and hold them to the light. They require an appreciative space and imagination and the company of a receptive love that enables questions to be held and lived well.

James M. Goodmann, serves on the staff of the Society for the Increase of Ministry at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City. He has been involved in the higher education and non-profit world for more than twenty-five years and is certified to train and mentor Listening Hearts discernment groups.