Reflection

Rev. Jenny M. Rankin

February 27, 2022

First Parish in Lincoln

Good morning church!!

It’s so good to see you today, here and on Zoom.

So good to be with you as we begin to come out of this latest stretch of “not being able to be together”

As I’ve said before, it’s been a bit hard for me to pick my head up from winter and Omicron and turn my face towards the future.

Because to be honest it’s not going to be easy to leave this congregation!

I’ve been happy in this (interim) ministry with you, and it’s gone on a longer than we expected, hasn’t it?

It’s not going to be easy to say goodbye.

And yet I also want to be true to a calling I hear inside of me that invites me to go on and do other things

 I want to speak this morning about discernment—

the process, of trying to listen, internally,

for what some call “the still small voice,”

others might say is the Spirit or the divine.

We have different spiritual vocabularies and use different words for this.

For you, it could be listening to your deepest self,

For me it might be trying to listen to what the Quakers call a “leading,” a whisper of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever words we use, it is the listening we do to try to call ourselves back towards being our true and authentic self

The listening we do to try and get back on track, back on the path:

As the Psalmist says.

 “Set my feet on thy path, O God, teach me to walk in thy ways.”

It’s the deep internal listening we do in the service of becoming more the person we were created to be on this earth

 (The person God is calling us to be)

Even if our vision of that grows blurry, at times.

I’ve been speaking with ministerial candidates –that’s part of the process as I’ve told you. They talk to me, Manish, Roger to learn a bit more about what its like to be a minister in this community.

Sometimes I’ll get an email that goes like this:

“Hello, my name is such and such, I’m **in discernment with** the First Parish in Lincoln and I’d love to set up a time to talk.”

I love that phrase—

 “I’m in discernment with”

I love it because I think “discernment” is appropriate…it’s a good word for the process a person, a minister, goes through, trying to figure out whether they have a spiritual call to a certain religious community.

A good word for the process a community goes through (you, represented here by your search committee) when you’re trying to figure out if you feel a similar spiritual calling towards this particular person.

Enough to invite them to **abide with you** here, as your minister, hopefully for a long time.

 “I’m in discernment **with**….”

Note the word “with”

Discernment isn’t something you do alone.

It’ a two-way street.

The candidate is discerning, but so is the search committee. Sometimes, the minister might be excited, but the committee just isn’t feeling it. And sometimes, it’s the other way around.

So **mutual discernment** is the ticket here. That’s what it takes.

I also like “discernment” because I think it’s a gentle word.

It’s not something you can rush. Or control.

It’s gradual, a kind of unfolding.

Maybe that’s one reason I’ve always appreciated how the Quakers speak of discernment

They use the word “leadings.” Or “the Way opening.”

We try to follow the “leadings” that come to us—leadings, they would say, from the Holy Spirit (again you may use other words)

“leadings” show up as a gentle nudge, a thought, a desire that comes to you

“leadings” might show up in our lives as a Leadings from the Holy Spirit

And they’re often pretty quiet. They don’t shout.

We have to get pretty quiet inside if we’re going to hear them.

Quaker writer and Haverford professor, Thomas Kelly, put it this way:

“. . . .when we say yes or no to calls,

On the basis of **inner guidance**

 and whispered promptings of encouragement from the **Center of our life,**

Or on the basis of **a lack of any inward ‘rising’** of that Life

 to encourage us in the call….

(We know this is) the will of God as we discern it.

Then we have begun to live in guidance.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We have begun to live “in guidance”—that is something to which I aspire.

This discernment process is tricky. It’s subtle.

It’s not always easy to hear a call and when you hear one, it isn’t always easy to follow.

Over and over in the Bible we see people who get a call from God and say “I don’t think I can do this”

Moses who tells God he can’t speak well enough, Jonah who runs literally in the opposite direction.

Getting a call is one thing. Following it is another.

Because it asks things of us. It means change.

Letting go of the ways things have been.

Letting go of people.

 It means letting go of what is known and venturing into what is not yet known.

God says to Abraham right at the beginning of Genesis “go to the country that I **will** show you”

Not the place I’ve **already shown you—**

**But a new reality that’s coming, we’re going to get there, but we’re not there yet. “Go (anyway),” says God.**

In the spiritual life, we are asked, again and again, to move forward

Without knowing anything about what that next, new place will be.

Wow, that’s a **big ask**. A very big ask. That is what calling is.

That’s what discernment is all about.

 It requires us to step so far out of our comfort zone it’s not even funny.

It requires us to trust a holy nudge that is so small sometimes it is barely audible, barely a whisper, barely a “rising” inside of us

And yet a stirring we know that can lead us towards life. Towards new life.

A tiny whisper that can be a gateway

To a new world, a new shape for my life, a new shape for your life.

The Holy One does not call us into stasis.

Into things being the same,

Into staying stuck.

The Sacred One is always beckoning us towards a new place

A new “us”

The Holy One calls us always forward into new possibilities

Away from fear, constriction and doubt;

Towards vitality, expansion and hope.

Discernment. Listening. This is the sacred work your search committee has been doing for months now. Working on your behalf.

 I’m so grateful to them, as I know you are, for their integrity, honesty and hard work.

The search committee is listening hard to candidates and trying to discern

 “What is going on here, could we abide with one another, could we do ministry together, could we build and shepherd and hold and love a community together?”

It’s a scary, elusive, hard-to-trust process but one that leads, in the end, to the new life that God promises for each of us.

Thanks be to God.

1. Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion,* p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)