



Summer Preaching Series: Questions of Faith
How Does God Guide Us?



A Sermon By
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July 30, 2017
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2017-07-30-AAA.mp3>.

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The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
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One of my friends recently began a new position as a guidance counselor at a middle school. I stopped by her school one day to see her office, meet her colleagues, and check out her new workplace. On her desk, she had one of those cartoon-a-day calendars that provide a different cartoon for all 365 days of the year. When she finds a cartoon she particularly likes, she saves it and hangs it on the front of her desk. I noticed that one laminated cartoon hung in a place of prominence at the center of the desk with especially colorful magnets holding it in place. It stood out from the others and caught my attention.

The cartoon featured a woman sitting behind a desk in an office, the door of which was propped open and featured a sign with bold letters proclaiming, "COUNSELOR." The woman's mouth was opened and one of her fingers raised, giving her the appearance of someone doling out sage advice. On the opposite side of the desk from the woman, sat a young boy smiling up at the all-knowing counselor. The caption at the bottom of the cartoon in quotes read, "In general, do the right thing."

I told my friend I liked the cartoon. She smiled and agreed that it was good advice. In general, do the right thing. It is sound advice indeed – for a guidance counselor, for students, for you, for me. Do the right thing. It's so easy, so direct, so simple. Doing the right thing is the very thing that most of us seek to do, that most of us want to do. But of course the rub of the cartoon is that the right thing isn't always easy to determine or do. What if the right thing for me isn't the right thing for someone else? Doing the right thing can actually feel a lot more complicated than straightforward sometimes.

As Christians, we're not alone in determining how to recognize and do the right thing. We have a guide. God is our guide. In Psalm 32:8 the psalmist declares that God, "...will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you." This is comforting knowledge to rest in. But it also presents a question. How? How does God do this?

God guides us in any number of ways. I would like to focus our time this morning on 4 primary ways. These are not in any particular order of importance, nor does God necessarily guide us in all 4 ways at the same time. But these are ways that I have noticed God guiding me at various points in my life.

One way that God guides us is through scripture. Scripture is referred to as the "Living Word of God." In scripture we hear our story and we hear God's story, that beautiful story of entwined interconnectedness. In scripture we hear of God's never failing love for us, despite our flaws and foibles. We hear about Jesus and about the abundant life that he offers to everyone. In scripture, we hear Jesus' invitation to join his mission to bring about right relationship between ourselves and God, ourselves and our neighbors, and ourselves and creation. Scripture shapes our understanding of who God is and who God is calling us to be. In reading, studying, and discussing scripture, we are guided by God's story and God's love.

A second way God guides us is through prayer. Prayer is one way that we communicate with God and God with us. Prayer can take many forms. It can be verbal or silent, collective or individual. It can be read, embodied, sung, drawn, danced, felt, shouted! One person may meditate. Another may use prayer beads. Another may read a prayer book. Another may go to the ocean and watch the sunset. Whatever form it takes, prayer is a way of being in conscious loving union with God. Prayer is resting in God's love and grace. When we open ourselves to such love and grace, when we are in a state of loving union with our Creator, then we are also in a more receptive stance to know God's will and to do it.

In addition to guiding us through prayer and scripture, a third way God guides us is through reason. God has gifted humanity with memory, reason, and skill. As human beings, we have a wonderful capacity for reason. We think. We use our common sense. When we utilize our sense of reason, that God gifted us with, we are tapping into a third way in which God guides us.

And a fourth way God guides us is through community. Nine times out of ten, if you asked someone where they go for guidance, their answer would be that they go to a loved one – either friends or family. Of course they do! That’s no surprise. We are social beings. We need one another. Relationships are holy. They are sacred. God reveals God’s self to us through other people all the time. The book of Ecclesiastes (4:9) states, “two are better than one.” God works through relationships and through community, especially Christian community. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them” (Mt. 18:20). God often guides us through the people closest to us – the people we trust and value – our communities of support.

You’ll notice that neither through scripture, prayer, reason, nor community does God guide us by providing a clear-cut and decisive direction for us to follow. After all, God isn’t like a GPS spouting out directions and adjusting our route if we take a wrong turn. God just doesn’t work like that. God isn’t Google. God isn’t Siri. And God isn’t a dictator. In his book *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, theologian Richard Rohr notes, “The people who know God well—mystics, hermits, prayerful people, those who risk everything to find God—always meet a lover, not a dictator.” God doesn’t guide us as a dictator, but as a lover in personal, meaningful, and mysterious ways. These ways often require time, patience, and a discerning heart.

I don’t know about you, but I often find that discernment is time consuming and patience can be hard to come by. In our day of instant gratification, with a world of knowledge at our fingertips, having to wait for something can feel uncomfortable. And yet, there is something to be gained by waiting. Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin writes, “Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that is it made by passing through some stages of instability.” It may well be that in those places of instability, when we are forced to take more time than we would like to discern God’s will, that we actually most feel God’s guiding presence.

And sometimes, even though we’ve taken the time to discern, we’ve sought God’s guidance and we think we’re doing the right thing. Even then, we may get it wrong. Doing the right thing, as the cartoon advises, can be hard to determine. We make mistakes. But no matter what mistakes we make, God will never write us off. As our Romans reading proclaims this morning, “...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The God that loves us that much, is surely present with us, offering love and grace when we mess up and rejoicing with us when we get it right. May that God guide you in ways known and unknown. Amen.