

DISCERNING CALL IN COMMUNITY

Listening



Hearts

Suzanne G. Farnham

Joseph P. Gill

R. Taylor McLean

Susan M. Ward

©Christian Vocation Project, Inc., 1991
Printed in the United States of America
by BSC Litho, Harrisburg, PA

Scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from the
New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the
Division of Christian Education of the National Council of
the Churches of Christ in the USA and used by permission.

Excerpt from *The Irrational Season* by Madeleine L'Engle.
Copyright 1977 by Crosswicks, Ltd. Reprinted by
permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Prayer adapted from *Thoughts in Solitude* by Thomas Merton.
Copyright 1956, 1958 by the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani.
Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Listening hearts : discerning call in community /
Suzanne G. Farnham . . . [et al.].
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8192-1563-5

1. Vocation. 2. Discernment of spirits. 3. Christian communities. 4.

Spiritual life—Anglican authors. I. Farnham, Suzanne G.

BV4740.L57 1991

253--dc20 91-2220

CIP



What Is "Call" for the Christian?

... let each of you lead the life ... to which God called you.
—1 Cor. 7:17

People call us to get our attention, to make contact with us, to draw us closer to them. So it is with God. A call may come as a gradual dawning of God's purpose for our lives. It can involve an accelerating sense of inner direction. It can emerge through a gnawing feeling that we need to do a specific thing. On occasion, it can burst forth as a sudden awareness of a path that God would have us take. Call may be emphatic and unmistakable, or it may be obscure and subtle. In whatever way call is experienced, through the centuries God has chosen to speak to us and bids us to listen. "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you" (Ps. 32:8).

God calls us on many levels: God calls creation, calls the Church, calls my congregation, and calls me, today, to reach me where I am now. God calls the entirety of my life. And, at a specific time or place, God may call me to do a particular work.¹

God calls each of us. There are a variety of calls, and no one call is inherently better or higher than any other. The call of a priest, monk, or nun, however sacred, is, in and of itself, not superior to the call of an architect designing a house, a mechanic repairing a car, or a nurse caring for the sick.² Rather, our faithfulness to God and the love that undergirds what we do determine its merit.³

We need to look beneath external facts to determine a call. For example, two women might be wrestling with what seems to be the same question: whether or not to volunteer at a breakfast program for homeless people. For one, the call might turn out to be to stay home and spend some much-needed time with her husband. For the other, the call might be to work at the breakfast program and let her family develop a sense of independence.

God speaks to us through the language of everyday events.⁴ Each new moment of life, each new

situation, the present condition of a person or community, of events, time, place, people, and circumstances—all hold clues to God's call.⁵ Thus, we often find our calls in the facts, circumstances, and concrete experiences of daily life.⁶

Sometimes call comes through what is imposed on us. Teresa of Avila, for instance, wrote several books because her confessors told her to. Today, with hindsight, we can recognize that through her obedience she was honoring God's call. Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer found in his imprisonment a call to minister to others who were imprisoned.

Any matter, large or small, may relate to our call. A call could encompass a decision about whether to take a new job, go back to school, volunteer at a shelter. A call could draw us to a personal relationship in a new or different way. A call could focus on whether to resist paying taxes as a form of protest or whether to sell all our belongings and move to Central America. A call may not be so much a call to "do" as to "be." An active man may become sick and unable to do what he has done before; yet while he may not be called to be sick, he may be called in sickness to reflect God's presence and love in a new way. So call should be understood in the widest, most

inclusive sense, to encompass what we do and who we are.

This is not to say that in every decision there is a call from God or that God is always giving us guidance regarding every question we face. Sometimes we need to act based upon our assessment of what is good—we need to make a decision. In such a situation, elevating the decision to a call from God will not make it one.⁷

On the other hand, because a matter seems unimportant does not foreclose a call from God. As with God's call to Moses, the desire to minister at a soup kitchen or as a school volunteer can burn brightly with the fire of God's call.

A call might lead us to pursue a certain occupation or career, as a person who feels called to help others in turmoil might become a pastoral counselor. Quite often a call becomes visible in a specific job, task, or endeavor. But a call can never be reduced to such activities. The same counselor may also be called to care for family, friends, and community as well as clients and thus must balance all of these in order to be faithful to the call. In a world that puts much

emphasis on success, a too-narrow concern with occupation or career can make us deaf to our calls.⁸

We may be called beyond ordinary occupations—to be prophets. A prophet does not have to be a Moses or a Jeremiah. The prophet Amos, for example, was a shepherd who left his flock to become a prophet in Israel, returning home a few years later when his time of prophesying came to an end. So, too, any one of us may be called to a prophetic role at a specific time and place for a specific issue.

Not only is every call unique, but the hearing of every call is unique also. One sign that God may be calling is a certain restlessness, a certain dissatisfaction with things as they are. Other signs of God's call may be a sense of longing, yearning, or wondering; a feeling of being at a crossroads; a sense that something is happening in one's life, that one is wrestling with an issue or decision; a sense of being in a time of transition; or a series of circumstances that draw one into a specific issue.

While role models are helpful, we are not called to copy other people.⁹ Rather, we are to become fully the people God created us to be, living our own lives in response to our own calls—as Jesus lived out his

life faithful to God's call for him.¹⁰ So it is that hearing one's call is akin to discovering one's self.¹¹

Even when a need exists and we are well qualified to meet it, we are not necessarily called to respond to it. Something may seem logical for us to do, but that does not mean that God calls us to do it. In ordinary circumstances, people analyze facts in order to come to a conclusion. While this is a useful exercise, it is not the same thing as discerning God's call.

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.¹²

Ultimately, it is not what the evidence suggests but the source of the call that gives it authority.

Similarly, simply because a task or undertaking is good to do does not mean that we are called to do it or that we should continue doing it. To be doing what is good can be the greatest obstacle to doing something even better.¹³ We may understand only with hindsight why we were called to do something different.

Call usually involves service or benefit to others. In fact, a sense of call may be suspect if it does not involve service.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the fruits of call are sometimes a long time in coming;¹⁵ indeed, we may never perceive them. Things we say or do can have a profound impact we may never know about. Sometimes the fruits of our life manifest themselves at a much later time, perhaps even after our death.¹⁶

The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of this in its account of Abraham and Sarah:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the Land he had been promised. . . . By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. (Heb. 11:8, 9, 11, 13)

Every true call is a call to obey God; indeed, the word *obedience* derives from the Latin *audire*, which means "to listen."¹⁷ Jesus came to include us in his

divine obedience,¹⁸ saying, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15), and "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me . . ." (John 14:21). If we love God, we want to live in harmony with God—we want to hear what God has to say, and we want to act on what we hear. St. Paul refers to this as "obedient from the heart" (Rom. 6:17).

While call requires response and obedience, we will not be given a road map. Our response to a call is not mechanical application. Rather, call requires that we take responsibility. We will not necessarily be called to come up with a correct answer, as in a crossword puzzle, but something freer and more creative. We are given building blocks to see what can be done with them, using for the task all of our intelligence, creativity, sensitivity, and love. Our critical faculties are required; we must use them the best way we can, constructively and with love.¹⁹

Awareness of a call may give rise to a feeling of inadequacy, as illustrated in the classical biblical calls of Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. Moses said no five times to God (Exod. 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13). Moses' excuses included not knowing God's name, not being

a person of consequence, not having credibility, and not being a good speaker. Jeremiah responded to God, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" (Jer. 1:6). Before Isaiah could say, "Here I am," in response to God's call, he expressed his profound sense of unworthiness with the cry, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5).

Yet God not only calls but empowers—although the power may come only as we respond. Conversely, if we don't respond to God's call, we may cut ourselves off from the Lord's strength and become increasingly blind and deaf to God's promptings. To ignore or resist a call may "fracture us further, widening the split between what we subscribe to inwardly and what we do outwardly."²⁰

Our calls are always evolving. If we are to respond, we need to listen, not only today but as today evolves into tomorrow. In times of transition, we need to listen with extra care. "If we go on listening, we feel God pulling us, drawing us into another current, a larger, deeper, stronger one than our usual little force."²¹

Morning by morning he wakens—
 wakens my ear
 to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear. . . .
 —Isa. 50:4-5

THREE



What Is Discernment?

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. —Ps. 32:8

Discernment comes from the Latin word *discernere*, which means “to separate,” “to distinguish,” “to determine,” “to sort out.” In classical spirituality, discernment means identifying what spirit is at work in a situation: the Spirit of God or some other spirit. Discernment is “sifting through” our interior and exterior experiences to determine their origin.¹

Discernment helps a person understand the source of a call, to whom it is directed, its content, and what response is appropriate. Discernment also involves learning if one is dodging a call, is deaf to a call, or is rejecting a call.

Discernment is a gift from God.² But it also includes an intentional attempt on our part to hear God's call in our life.³ It takes work; it is also a matter of grace. It involves our full humanity as well as communion with God.

Many voices call us: voices of culture, career, upbringing, worldview, peer pressure, ego, self-interest. These voices may be good in and of themselves yet may drown out the voice of God. How can we distinguish between God's call and other calls? How can we evaluate whether a call springs from a desire for security or comfort or success, rather than from God? How can we verify that a call comes from God?

No rules provide definitive answers to these questions.⁴ And some rules that do exist provide poor or incomplete guidance. The experiences of the early Quakers illustrate this. One test some Quaker sects used to confirm God's call was that a "true" call was always contrary to one's own will.⁵ The assumption that a "cross to the will"⁶ meant taking up the cross of Christ often produced absurd results. For example, some Friends walked naked in the streets because it was "contrary to [their] own will or inclination" and, therefore, "in obedience to the Lord."⁷ Another test

was reliance on a selected passage of Scripture. Frequently, however, this meant (and can still mean) merely choosing some biblical passages and ignoring others to confirm a precharted course.⁸

Discernment cannot be reduced to any rules of thumb. Rather, the ability to discern develops from living the life of the Spirit, a process of growth involving an ever-greater integration of desires, feelings, reactions, and choices with a continuing commitment to abide in Christ. Indeed, through integrating the actions and relationships of life into one's identity with Christ we come to feel whether various impulses move us toward or away from the Spirit.⁹ The ability to discern develops in a relationship with God, as one becomes rooted and grounded in the heart of God.¹⁰ Thus, people who abide in the Lord are more likely to be able to hear and distinguish calls.¹¹

As we move toward spiritual maturity, we move beyond the need for specific rules and answers into the darkness of God where we must act in faith rather than certainty. In discernment we move through and beyond our feelings, our thoughts, and our reasoning about what God wants of us, to be led by God's Spirit toward action. Discernment does not

imply fully comprehending God's will,¹² but rather it raises the question, What is the next step God wants me to take?¹³

Discernment may be understood as "apprehending" rather than "comprehending."¹⁴ Although discernment involves use of reason, the process is delicate and easily stifled by excessive analysis.¹⁵ Discernment of call involves intuition and insight, "... for that which has not been told them, they shall see, and that which they have not heard, they shall understand" (Isa. 52:15; RSV). As we respond in faith and action, we gain insight.

When we turn our hearts to God, we experience a reorientation of values deep within us. To paraphrase Jan Wood's address to the Friends' Consultation on Discernment, one of two things may happen.¹⁶ Either we become increasingly astute and wise as we live out our new orientation—we walk in the Spirit. Or, if we are not true to the new life that is rising within us—if we deny, repress, or live in contradiction to it—we invite internal havoc and trigger war within ourselves. Our lives may take on a frantic quality.

Because the evidence and experiences on which we act are usually conflicting and ambivalent, and because we are by nature vulnerable to our capacity for self-deception, discernment is often tentative and uncertain.¹⁷ We may not feel a great sense of having found the truth. Discernment can be like driving an automobile at night: the headlights cast only enough light for us to see the next small bit of road immediately in front of us.¹⁸ Ultimately, discernment requires our willingness to act in faith on our sense of what God wants us to do.¹⁹

We need to risk making mistakes. We can dare to make mistakes because we know that God has forgiven us when we are wrong. What is important is that we act on what we have discerned. In obedience to discernment, more discernment will come.²⁰ We need to be attentive and alert in order to hear and understand God's call and then act, knowing that God blesses even our mistakes.

... the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.
—Deut. 30:14 (RSV)