

“Discerning God’s Will”

The following is a short folk tale credited to the Bura people of Northeastern Nigeria: “One day wisdom, food and wealth started on a journey. As they went along they came to a man sitting under a tree. The man said, ‘Where are you going?’ They said, ‘We are hunting a place to live.’ The man said, ‘As for me, I want wealth to live with me.’ Wealth said, ‘You are a dumb man. If you had chosen wisdom, all three of us could have lived with you. But you have chosen me. This cannot be, because if I lived with you without wisdom, you could not have me long.’

They started off again and they met another man. The man said, ‘Where are you going, young men?’ They said, ‘We are hunting a place to live.’ The man said, ‘I believe that I would like to have food live with me.’ Food said, ‘You are not clever. If you had chosen a certain one of us, all of us would live with you. But look, you have chosen me. Do you think that you could keep me? No, you could not keep me. Let us go on.’

Farther on they came to a man who was working. He said, ‘Where are you going today?’ They said, ‘We want a place to live.’ The man said, ‘I would like for wisdom to live with me.’ Food said, ‘If you have chosen wisdom, then I will live with you, too. I know that you will be able to take good care of me.’ Wealth said, ‘If you have chosen wisdom, then I will live with you, too. I know that you will be able to take good care of me.’” **“All three lived with him because he made a good choice.”** (“Wealth, Food and Wisdom” is a short folk tale credited to the Bura people of Northeastern Nigeria.)

Indeed, wisdom helps one make better choices! When you or I act out of wisdom – act wisely, then we eat foods, which are better for us. When you or I are wise in the use of our wealth – our financial and material resources, then we will use wealth in ways, which result in our having more of the things we really need, for a longer period of time, while we also aid those who are in need. However, having wisdom does not automatically create wealth and food out of nothing!

Wisdom is not an item or object, which is universally recognized. The perspective through which one thinks of some action or decision as being wise is the key. From whose or what’s perspective is an activity or thought considered to be wise? For example, when a politician is elected to a government position, it is the wise decision from the perspective of the majority of the voters. **If you or I want to pursue wisdom in our lives, from what perspective will you or I be looking for it?**

The author of the Letter to the Ephesians provided us, in our Lectionary Epistle Reading, with an important definition of the type of wisdom you or I should pursue. Paul wrote in **verse 17**, **“Don’t be fools, then, but try to find out what the Lord wants you to do.”** Some may wonder who that Lord is.

Does “Lord” refer to God the Creator and Divine Parent or to God’s Son, Jesus Christ? From the context of the Reading, the meaning of the word “Lord” is clear, especially as we read again **verse 20**, **“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, always give thanks for everything to God the Father.”** Since that verse indicated we pray “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” to thank God the Father, Who is the Creator and Divine Parent, the reference to “Lord” points to the higher entity in the relationship – God. At the time of the writing of today’s Scripture, the **Jews said the word “LORD” when they read aloud a Hebrew Text, which stated the specific name for God – “Yahweh”**. The practice of many translators of the Hebrew Scriptures into English has been to capitalize all the letters of the word, “LORD” when the Hebrew word is “Yahweh”. However, translators of the Christian Scriptures have not follow that same practice when the original author of the New Testament Scripture used the Greek word, “Lord”, thus, sometimes there is confusion about whether the Reading’s writer meant God the Creator and Divine Parent or the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, the wisdom we are called to follow is what is wise from God’s Perspective or as Paul wrote in verse 17, “what the Lord wants”. In the historic Christian Community, discerning God’s Perspective – God’s Will has been done by using one of several approaches. First, some will look to the Bible – as the Word of God to find applicable verses related to the specific subject upon which one is seeking God’s Will. Some Christian

groups or denominations have defined the verses of the Bible, which are to be considered applicable for Christians. For example, some say we should not use the Old Testament verses, except for those, which are specifically quoted as God's Word in the New Testament. Even doing that requires some judgment calls – resulting in conflict within the Christian Community about the Will of God.

There is another approach to discerning the Will of God, which, personally, I use. This process is based on following the example of the teachings and actions of our Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, when we follow Jesus' example, there are still times when one must make a judgment call to discern God's Will. For example, the four New Testament Gospels do not always agree on exactly what Jesus said or did in specific situations, so to discern God's Will may require you or me to prayerfully determine which Reading is likely to be the most accurate in describing what Jesus said and/or did on a specific occasion. I suspect it does not surprise many for me to share how in such conflicts between the Gospels, I tend to perceive – discern, the Gospel of John most accurately discloses the words and activities of Jesus.

There is an additional aspect to discerning the Will of God, which today's Scripture reveals. Paul reported it in **verse 18**, ***“Do not get drunk with wine, which will only ruin you; instead, be filled with the Spirit.”*** The Apostle was suggesting that when we find it difficult to discern God's Will, we ought not turn to strong drink or another intoxicating agent in our frustration or confusion. Instead, we need to be open – “filled with the Spirit” – God's Holy Spirit!

Recognizing there are some basic guidelines or instructions about the life God Wills for each of us, what are they? Taking the message, which I find in the Gospel of John, I would consider the crucial revelation from Jesus on the night just before his being betrayed, arrested, falsely tried, crucified, dead, and buried. **In chapter 13, verses 34 and 35**, Jesus said, ***“And now I give you a new commandment: agape love one another. As I have agape loved you, so you must agape love one another. If you have agape love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”*** If you and I live the self-giving and sacrificial loving life – agape love one another and all who believe in Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, then we are discerning and living God's Will!

The three Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament have their own specific statements attributed to Jesus, which might be described as subsets of Jesus' commandment found in that quote from the Gospel of John. **For example in Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, and Luke 10:27**, Jesus said, ***“Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”*** Let's not forget when Jesus was asked who is one's neighbor, he is reported in **Luke 10:29-37** to tell the story of the Good Samaritan and indicated even the Samaritans, who were hated by the Jewish Society, are our neighbors. **In Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27 and 35**, Jesus even went on to say, ***“Love your enemies.”***

The Apostle Paul expressed the urgency with which we need to manifest God's Will – live “agape love” toward everyone when he wrote in verse 16, ***“Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days.”*** Evidently, it is very easy to forget this thrust of Jesus' commandment and example to “agape love” for some avowed Christians, who, when they are forced to face and deal with their prejudices, claim they are doing God's Will by living out their prejudice – rejecting, instead of loving others. Jesus exposed the falseness of the Pharisees' claim they discerned God's Will, which allowed them to reject “sinners” when he told the crowd, which had followed him to the synagogue in Capernaum from his feeding of over 5,000 men plus women and children, in **John 6:37**, ***“Everyone whom my Father gives me will come to me. I will never turn away anyone who comes to me, because I have come down from heaven to do not my own will but the Will of Him Who sent me.”***

There are plenty of opportunities to either claim God's Will allows us to be self-centered and prejudicial toward others or, instead, to joyously demonstrate God's Will by living “agape love” toward one another and to anyone seeking Jesus Christ! **Let's follow Jesus' commandment and example by “agape loving” everyone and welcoming everyone with his Radical and Extravagant Hospitality!** Amen.