

When You Have No Idea What You're Doing

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[0 : 00] Good morning, friends. It's good to see all of you here in person, and welcome to our folks who are joining online today as well.! So my name is Daniel. I'm one of the elders here at the Table Church, as well as part of the preaching team.

And I'm really excited today to continue our series called, What Lies Beneath? Moving from the clouded to the clear as disciples of Jesus.

But before we start, I just want to take a moment to pray and continue the worship that our team has been leading us in today. So join me in prayer. Creator God, you spoke and out of nothing life came up.

You guided seeds to become trees. You guided the people of Israel to go from captivity to liberation.

As we come to you today in our own wildernesses, in our own places, I feel like we are nothing but seeds. We ask that you would continue to call us into life.

[1 : 17] Your name, amen. So we are in the sixth week of a series where we have been using this metaphor of an iceberg.

So an iceberg has about 10% or so that's visible above the water, 90% that's below it. We've been talking about how that is often the case with us as well, where we only let people see a small fraction of who we really are.

Sometimes we only let ourselves see a small piece of who we really are as well. There is 90% of us that we keep hidden, that we don't want to share with other people, that we might not even know is there.

So we've been exploring what does it mean to go deeper, to go below the surface. We've talked about how when we go into that deeper, that hidden part of ourselves, that that is where God meets us.

We've talked about how this isn't about moving from one type of busyness to another type of busyness, but learning to let go, learning to release, learning to embrace our depth and our limitations as humans.

[2 : 28] We've talked about how busyness can be a tool of oppression, a way that we stay disconnected to ourselves and to those around us, moving from thing to thing so quickly that we don't stop to care for ourselves or for others.

And last week, Shade talked with us about how it's out of the silence, the stillness, we begin to have a sense of calling.

That as we begin to understand the depths of our inner world, we also begin to understand the ways that we can have a role in the outer world. And so today we're going to explore a similar and connected concept, discernment.

So it's a little bit ironic that I'm the one up here talking about discernment, about knowing where you're going in life, because 90% of the time, I have no idea what I'm doing.

I have no idea where I'm going. On a very practical level, I'm pretty directionally challenged. And that has led to anything and everything from driving down the wrong one-way street in Seattle to getting lost late at night in a large city in Bangladesh with no cell phone, no language skills, no clue where I am, and somehow trying to find my way back home.

[3 : 46] I have a hat at home that says, do you really think this is a good idea? And I have it in a very visible place to remind myself that I need to stop and ask myself, is this a good idea?

The cat is not ready quite yet. We will get to the cat soon. Words you never thought you would hear from a sermon. So I've often approached my life through a combination of gut instinct, impulses, and prayer, in ways that have been hard to explain sometimes to myself and to other people.

For example, I moved to D.C. in 2015 from California. I moved here because I read a book by Henry Nowen, a Catholic priest, where he talked about a church community here in D.C. That community sounded interesting. So without knowing anyone in D.C., knowing anything really about that church and community, I signed up for a one-year program through there and moved over here to the city.

I had very little knowledge about D.C. beyond movies and TV shows. I'd spent most of my life living in Oregon or Montana, Washington, and had literally no friends on the East Coast.

[5 : 03] I was like, yeah, why not? Or the time after high school, when a month before I was supposed to go to university, with all of my tuition paid for, I decided to move to Montana instead with no money and spend two years part of an organization called YWAM, Youth with a Mission.

I like to blame my parents for that decision-making approach. It's not my fault. I don't take responsibility for it. When I was three years old, they felt a sense of calling to move to Kenya. And they had never really thought seriously about living or working internationally. But after hearing a medical doctor, David Thompson, speak about his work in Central and Eastern Africa, they felt a sense of calling to move my three-year-old self, my five-year-old sister, over to Kenya.

And that's a decision that shaped their lives and my life in positive ways. A decision that still shapes their lives as they return to Kenya on a regular basis to deepen the relationships they've built there. Now it's time for the cat. This is my cat. So I've wanted a cat for a long time.

[6 : 21] I grew up with cats and have never had the chance as an adult, as my own person, to have one. And I've had a clear idea of what I wanted.

I wanted a calm, chill, older black cat that would just be happy to live at home. I've had a very full life. My life is very packed. I'm really busy.

And an older cat that's just happy to have a second chance at life fit perfectly into what I was looking for. But then, last fall, I had a dream that I adopted a white cat instead.

And so I decided that I wanted to get a white cat. As you're beginning to see, this is how I make some of my decisions in life. In January of this year, I moved into a new apartment where I finally had the chance to think more seriously about adoption.

But my first weekend in my apartment, which was the weekend that we had this really large snowstorm, my neighbor and my best friend texted me saying, someone in the neighborhood had found a kitten wandering in the streets.

[7 : 27] And they took it in right before the snow hit. We checked and found out that there wasn't a microchip. We didn't see anyone claim it on any of the usual lost pet Facebook groups.

And the next thing I knew, instead of a chill senior cat that was just happy to exist, I had an unhinged, energetic kitten that was happiest when she was sinking her teeth into my ankles.

Now that story is partially just an excuse to show you a very adorable photo of my cat. So, thank you, thank you.

But it is also about the challenges of discernment. So, growing up, I feel like I've generally seen two approaches to discernment. I'll call one the God-told-me-so approach, and the other, the Micah 6-8 approach.

The first approach, the God-told-me-so approach, was one that I heard fairly often in the evangelical church that I grew up in. I heard it even more when, as an 18-year-old, I started attending charismatic churches.

[8 : 31] Prayer and discernment were vital to everything. From what kind of job you worked, to who you felt like you were supposed to marry. Sometimes the message only got to one person on that marriage discernment part, where one person felt they were called to marry someone else, and the other person didn't get the message.

In this approach, the dream I had about adopting a white cat, and the serendipitous appearance of this cat on the first weekend I could have adopted, would have been a sign that God was calling me to adopt this cat.

In this approach, people discern God's voice through dreams, through visions, through an inner sense, through other people. But more importantly, the method is the belief that God is actively speaking, actively guiding people.

And although there have definitely been times where that has felt kind of like a justification for something that people wanted to do anyways, more often than not, I've seen God speak through dreams, visions, inner senses.

And so I can't discount that more mysterious approach to discernment. The other approach is what I call the Micah 6.8 approach. So Micah 6.8 says, God has shown you what is good.

[9 : 53] What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. This approach to discernment is a bit more matter-of-fact.

It says, God has already shown you what is good. God has already given you the guidance that you are looking for and pointed you in the right direction. That direction is justice. That direction is love. That direction is humility. Now, in this approach, I don't really need a dream to decide if I should adopt my cat or not. Instead, I could simply assess the fact that there's a cat on my doorsteps, that the just thing to do is take care of it during a snowstorm.

But from there, it's kind of up to me. Now, Micah 6.8 approach is one that I've taken more frequently in the last few years. After spending a lot of time following that God-told-me-so approach, I pivoted more towards the Micah 6.8 approach.

Honestly, I've pretty much stopped asking God what my calling should be, what I'm supposed to do, and instead simply tried to pay attention to the world, to find ways to practice justice, to show mercy, and to be humble.

[11 : 08] But I found myself in a conundrum there, because I like the mystery of the first approach. The belief that God is actively pointing me in the right direction. And I like the groundedness of the second approach, the belief that God has already pointed me in the right direction.

And in this moment in my life, I found myself feeling like I have more questions than answers. I've wondered, should I stay here in D.C. or go back to Oregon where my family is?

Should I keep working at the job I've been at for six years or pursue a different career? Should I focus my time and energy on social justice issues that are closer to home, like immigration, or continue advocating for people in Palestine who are facing an ongoing genocide?

I can imagine that some of us here might feel similar questions of purpose, wondering what you're called to do, of location and place of wondering where you're supposed to be.

And I hope that today we can talk through some practical ways that you can explore discernment.

So we've been using Exodus, and particularly the life of Moses, as our roadmap for moving from the clouded to the clear.

[12 : 25] And we're going to go back to that story today. So after Moses' exile from Egypt, after his time in the desert, his years of silence and solitude, Moses goes back to his people, he's part of liberating them, and they head out into the wilderness.

And so today's scripture will be Exodus 13, 17 through 22, which is also up here on the screen. Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, but that was shorter.

For God said, if they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt. So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.

After leaving Sukkoth, they camped at Ephem at the edge of the desert, and by day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so they could travel by day or night.

[13 : 43] Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. This community was on a journey. They were living in an in-between place.

They were no longer in Egypt, no longer in captivity, but they weren't yet in the land that God had promised them. They were leaving behind everything they knew, leaving behind the only life that many of them had ever experienced.

There might have been a feeling of, what's next? A question of, how do we know where to go? How do we even know that we're going the right way?

And the answer came in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire, a grounded mystery that was always present. So some of our sermons here at the table are a bit more theological, where we talk a lot about beliefs and right ways of thinking.

Some of them are a bit more about behaviors and practice, about right ways of acting in the world. And this one will be a bit more of the latter, where I'll talk a bit about some of the pillars in my life

that have helped me have good ideas, have helped me in my own journey of discernment.

[15:02] So we're going to start with Henry Nouwen. Henry Nouwen is a Catholic priest, has a book called *Discernment*, which is a compilation of unreleased writings from him that explore this idea of discernment.

So you have a quote from Nouwen on the screen where he defines what discernment is to him. He says, Discernment is a spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life that is acquired through disciplined spiritual practice.

Discernment is faithful living and listening to God's love and direction so that we can fulfill our individual, calling, and shared mission. One of the editors of the book also notes in the introduction that, for Henry Nouwen, spiritual discernment is hearing a deeper sound beneath the noise of ordinary life and seeing through appearances to the interconnectedness of all things to gain a vision of how things hang together in our lives and in the world.

So discernment is an ongoing, daily practice. practice. It's a consistent way of listening to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

I also really like how Robin Kelly, who wrote an incredible book called *Freedom Dreams*, the *Black Radical Imagination*, describes this. So Kelly's book is about social movements, particularly Black movements, but he talks about others as well, and how they discern what they are called to do in moments of crisis, what their guides were in situations of oppression.

[16:47] He starts off by saying that love and imagination may be the most revolutionary impulses available to us. We have yet, we have failed to understand their political importance and respect them as powerful social forces.

He goes on to say that without new visions, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us.

Discernment is a creative practice of love, a way of imagining the world in a different way than what we see in front of us. It's a practice that changes and transforms us just as much as it shows us where to go.

So one way that we can develop this discipline of discernment is through reflective practices. So earlier this year during Lent, we had a sermon series called *Sacred Self-Care*.

We talked about practices like *Lectio Divina*, where you read text in a meditative way, listening prayers. And I'm not going to rehash those. They're on our website and a YouTube channel if you want to dig deeper there.

[18:07] But I just want to share about two reflective practices that have helped me build up my own discernment. The first is a list of questions that I ask myself, sometimes on my own, but I find it's more productive to ask these in community.

These questions come from Miriam Kaba, an author, organizer, who has written several books about how to find your way in times of crisis. She shared that when she's confronted by injustice, she asks these four questions.

First, what resources exist so that I can better educate myself? Second, who's already doing work around this injustice?

Third, do I have the capacity to offer concrete support and help to them? Fourth, how can I be constructive? And then another organizer who I deeply respect, Sherry Foytland, who is an indigenous woman from Louisiana, has added a fifth question of who am I accountable to?

There is a flood of bad news happening all around us. Whether it is globally or locally, everywhere we look, there is an injustice. And it can be easy to feel paralyzed by indecision or to move towards apathy and wonder, what is it that we can do?

[19:34] What is my place in confronting injustice? And these questions can be a guide to help us identify what you, as a uniquely gifted person, can do in those situations of injustice to discern what your response can be.

It helps to orient you in what other people have already done. It helps to orient you in who you are accountable to in your community, who can help keep you on track.

Another practice is one that I am a little bit surprised to be talking about, but it is grief practices. I don't like feeling sad.

I'm not a big fan of grief. But I think that developing a practice around your grief and your sorrow is a vital tool for developing discernment.

So as I mentioned before, I've been in a phase of life where my own sense of discernment has felt really murky. I felt pulled in different directions and really struggled to prioritize where my time and energy goes.

[20 : 40] I've overcommitted to some things, undercommitted to other things, dropped the ball entirely on some other things, and really just felt like I don't know where I'm going and what I'm doing.

Every other week, I meet with two friends who I've been organizing alongside for almost a decade now. We talk about life. We talk about how we're doing. And I started talking about how I felt really stretched thin, how I felt like I just don't know what to do next.

I'm not sure where to put my time and my energy. I really wanted advice. I wanted them to go through a decision-making matrix with me and help me decide where the pros and the cons, the cost-benefit analysis, I was ready for all of that.

And when I was done talking, my friend simply said, I didn't really hear much of what you were saying. Which is great to hear. I said, I didn't really hear much of what you were saying because the only thing I could think of was how much grief I felt from you.

And I realized that in my hectic pace of trying to unpack what I was supposed to do, I had totally missed that I was carrying a lot of grief around those decisions. A lot of sadness and sorrow was present.

[21 : 58] And so we began to explore the emotions underneath my indecisiveness. I realized that I didn't need a decision-making matrix or a cost-benefit analysis or pros and cons at that moment.

I needed to dig deeper into why I felt so much grief. I needed to pay attention to that feeling and to listen to God's voice in it. Throughout Exodus, as we've talked about, moving from the clouded to the clear, we've seen time and time again that God's message to the people of Israel was, I have seen your suffering.

I know your suffering. I want to hold that pain with you. When we begin to discern our inner world better, when we understand what's going on inside, that helps us understand what's going on outside as well.

And so whether it's through seeing a therapist, through art, through song and dance, or other forms of expression, developing a grief practice, a way that you hold your sadness and sorrow, a way that you let other people see it, a way that you let God see it, that will be an invaluable habit in building up a daily practice of discernment.

Another practice that I find myself going back to is something called the seventh generation principle. So if you can go to the next slide. So there are similar versions of this that can be found in indigenous communities around the world, but we're going to take a look today at something from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which is the indigenous people who are in the northeast area of the U.S.

[23 : 45] So this text comes from their website where they talk about their values as indigenous peoples. It says, among the nations of the Haudenosaunee is a core value called the seventh generation.

The seventh generation value takes into consideration those who are not yet born, but who will inherit the world. In their decision-making, chiefs consider how present-day decisions will impact their descendants.

Nations are taught to respect the world in which they live as they are borrowing it from future generations. One of the things that I find missing in the God-told-me-so approach or even the Micah 6-8 approach is that it's very much about me.

What am I called to do? What am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to live? Who am I supposed to marry? What kind of purpose am I supposed to have? And this principle can help to reorient discernment to be much broader than just myself.

It moves us towards interdependence. Thinking back to Moses and the people of Israel and their exodus, Moses could not fulfill his mission on his own.

[25 : 03] He needed Aaron who spoke for him. He needed Miriam who led worship. He needed the people to follow him. He needed a lot of help. It was not just about him.

Now for the Haudenosaunee, as indigenous people who have seen centuries and centuries of loss, this value reflects a desire to preserve land, to keep languages alive, to pass cultural customs down.

And I find myself thinking a lot about that value when I think about this land, about Washington, D.C. when I think about the Piscataway people, the indigenous peoples of this land who are still here, who are still fighting for their community.

I think about D.C.'s nickname of Chocolate City, given because of its historically black population. I think about the El Salvadorian community in D.C., the second largest El Salvadorian community in the U.S.

What are the ways that I can be faithful to those legacies, to those seventh generations? Building a discipline of discernment can look like taking the time to listen to the people who were here first, whoever here is for you.

[26 : 21] It can look like going to go-go concerts. It can look like finding a favorite street vendor or pupusaria. Our ability to discern becomes stronger when we pay attention to the people and the place that we are in.

When we live our lives knowing that we are borrowing the world from the future generations. The other tool that I often turn to comes from an organizer named Deepa Iyer, and it's something called an ecosystem map.

If we go to the next slide, basically, Deepa Iyer has created a resource for growing social movements by mapping out some of the most common roles that she sees as being needed to grow movements for equity, liberation, justice, and solidarity.

Every part is different, and every part is essential. We can go to the next slide. We have weavers, we have people who see the connections, who draw connections together.

We have experimenters, people who are going to do something new, who are going to take a risk, the frontline responders who have a heart and the bravery to move into crisis. We have visionaries, the people who are bold, who imagine things that we haven't even hoped about yet.

[27 : 46] We have builders, the ones who develop, organize, and implement practices. We have caregivers, who nurture and nourish for those around them.

We have healers, who are skilled enough to recognize and name and tend to the generational and current trauma that so many of us have. Disruptors, who shake up the status quo.

Storytellers, who keep our stories alive. And guides, who offer counsel and wisdom. One of the things that I really appreciate about Ira's work is that she talks a lot about discernment as we have discovering where you fit into these descriptions, where others fit as well.

So I've taken more personality tests than any one human should. It's probably unhealthy to be honest. I've done the Myers-Briggs test, Enneagram, Attachment Style, StrengthsFinder, DISC, and so, so, so many more.

And the fun thing with Deepa Iyer is that her work doesn't really have a multi-question assessment. Instead, it mostly focuses on opportunities for reflection and action.

[29 : 02] That you figure out who you are by doing things with other people. You learn what fits and what doesn't fit through action. She has a workbook on her website about this, but she also has a children's book, which I'd really recommend to folks who are thinking about discernment, wondering where you're supposed to go.

The beauty of this is that your place in the ecosystem might change. The role that you're playing today may not be where you play tomorrow. Your role here at the table might not be the role that you play in other places.

Instead of finding a role, accepting that as your programming, discernment calls us to pay attention to our ecosystem, to the place around us, to notice where we might fit in, where others might as well.

Our last practice for building discernment comes again from Henry Nouwen. You can go to the next slide here. This quote also comes through Nouwen's book, Discernment.

It's about nature. Nouwen says, How do the sun and stars, plants and animals, natural rhythms, speak of God's glory, wonder, and ways?

[30 : 20] I must admit, it has been easier for me to read words on a page than to listen for God's revelation in the natural world and events. It can be said that God's first language is nature, even if God is revealed through our ancient and endearing spiritual texts.

You can read God's way and will and the seasonal patterns and cycles of creation. Life and death, planting and harvest, waiting for and basking in new life and resurrection.

All of nature conceals great secrets that cannot be revealed if we do not listen carefully and patiently to God's hidden language. Nature desires for us to discern the great story of God's love to which it points.

The plants and animals with whom we live teach us about birth, growth, maturation, and death. About the need for gentle care. And especially about the importance of patience and hope. Even more profoundly, the properties of water, oil, bread, and wine all point beyond themselves to the great story of our recreation. Food and drink, mountains and rivers, oceans, and skies all become transparent when nature discloses itself to those with eyes to see and ears to hear what the great spirit of God is saying to us.

[31 : 49] So that could absolutely be its own full sermon series. Just like building a practice of discernment means paying attention to yourself, to those around you, it also means paying attention to God's first creations.

And although I grew up having a deep appreciation, even respect, for the natural world, I wouldn't say that I've had a strong relationship with nature.

St. Francis, in one of his hymns that he wrote, describes the sun, the moon, wind, water, and fire as siblings. The author of Genesis describes the earth as a co-creator next to God.

describes the land as a sacred place that cares for and gives to humanity just as humanity gives and cares for her. It's not surprising that this kind of relational language is harder for me to grasp. The dominant worldview and culture around me has actively prevented that kind of connection. Just like building any relationship, developing a relationship with nature where God's first creations can guide and speak.

[33 : 03] It takes consistent time and presence. If you're looking for a good resource there, I highly recommend checking out the devotional *Rooted* by Randy Woodley, which has a hundred days of short questions and practices.

discernment is a grounded mystery. It's practical sometimes, it's mysterious other times, but more than anything else, it's about paying attention to the world in front of us, to the people around us, to our own emotions, our own inner world.

world. It's a way of meeting God where we're at, of letting God meet us where we are, of finding the divine and the ordinary.

As we move into a time of communion, I want to encourage us to reflect on how even that very act of communion, of taking bread and drink, of eating and drinking something that we do every day, is a sacred act, a way of meeting Christ himself.

And that as we go throughout today, as we eat and drink, as we do our chores, as we wash dishes, as we go to the pool, if you're one of the families going to the pool, that God is there with you.

[34 : 31] The Spirit meets you where you are.