

A Communion Meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 2, 2008, Lent 4, dedicated to the blessed memory of Louise Smith who died Monday, February 18, 2008, and always to the glory of God!

“How Do I Know that the Life I Live and the Decisions I Make are According to God’s Will?”

**Part IV of VII in the Lenten sermon series
“Questions My Father Asked Me”**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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My father, Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. was born and raised in Ohio. He was born in Port Washington, Ohio, in Tuscarawas County, the oldest of four children. His father was a pastor in one of our denomination’s four predecessor bodies - the old German Evangelical and Reformed Church (E&R). When dad was a small child, the family moved to Marion, Ohio where he grew up in a parsonage next to the Salem E&R. It was the heart of the depression. His dad was poorly paid, but Grandpa had a job, they had a home (10 feet from the church) and they had each other. Through gardening and canning much produce, grandma was able to make ends meet. Dad tells the story of his father, a child who grew on a farm in southern Indiana growing a huge garden down by the railroad tracks. Sometimes, the “hobos” traveling along the rails would forage through the garden and take food that the family had grown. My grandfather would say to dad, “Son, they must need it more than we do. We need to count our blessings.”

Dad graduated from Harding High School and immediately headed into the Army where he served our nation in Europe during

WWII. When he returned following the war, he went to Heidelberg College in Tiffin, Ohio, on the GI bill. There he received a BA and was blessed to meet my mother, Carol Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens.

Late in their senior year, Mom and Dad took a long walk and ended up in a local cemetery. Their children's version of the story goes that she sat him down on a tombstone and asked what his intentions were. After 58 years together, you might say that from theirs was a marriage in which "death did us start." They were married at Calvary Church in Lima, Ohio, in 1950 after dad spent one year earning a Master's of Journalism at the University of Missouri. Dad was a writer and an editor for *Youth Magazine*, a Christian magazine for youth and young adults. He did this for 32 years. He then worked for the Penn Southeast Conference as a commissioned minister the remaining days of his 40-plus-year working life. He was never ordained. He was and is a natural theologian.

Yesterday, as I was looking at the question, ***"How Do I Know That the Life I Live and the Decisions I Make are According to God's Will?"*** I decided to turn the tables on dad and ask him what he would say about this question. I became the interviewer (as a child I was most often the interviewee . . . it's fun to turn the tables on a reporter).

After opening with small talk, I asked: *"How do you know what the will of God is?"* He was clearly ready, like he'd been waiting all his life to answer this question . . . perhaps. He said:

I believe God is Love. Everything begins and ends in the love of God. I see God's will reflected in people I admire who live loving and Godly lives. So, I see God's will reflected in his beings on

earth - their personality, humanity and witness of love. God's love is reflected in our personal relationship.

Since God is Love, if people are doing God's will, they are loving one another. I ask, "Is the action a person reflecting God's love?" I look for what grows out of a pattern of things lived out in the lives of others. This shapes my understanding. I also believe God's greatest reflection to us of his love comes in Jesus Christ. So, God's will is reflected in how Jesus lives out God's love. In living a life of faith, I find that people are often full of doubt. But, I don't think we should fear God's will. Even as people struggle to know right and wrong - especially around the toughest questions they face when making decisions - they need to shape their lives around the love of God.

As we talked, I added that I believe God's will is reflected in Love AND Justice. Love without justice can be syrupy-sweet. Justice without love can be harsh and cruel. But, God combines love and justice to balance our unlove and our lack of justice. In my estimation, God's will reflects Love and Justice in balance.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel informs us in his book, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*: "The Bible asserts that man has given himself neither his existence nor his wisdom, but both are derived from the will of God. It teaches us also," Heschel continues, "that certain insights come to us not by the slow process of evolution but by God's direct **sudden grant.**" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY, NY, 1983, p. 207).

Knowing God's will for our lives takes daily practice and discipline. I believe knowing God's will begins in prayer and discernment. It begins with listening to God. The first and most important step is to ask God, "Lord, what is your will for my life? ...God, what would you have me do in a given situation?" Then, be still and listen. Amid the clutter and noise of our daily lives it is

hard to be still and harder yet to listen to God. Some would say that God's will is revealed in the Holy Spirit alive in our lives. I believe this is true. I also believe God's will is revealed in the scriptures, in the story that God tells through God's Word, and as my dad said, God's will is reflected in the lives of those we look to and admire - but not always. People, no matter how good we perceive them to be, will let us down at times - maybe many times. Therefore, our prayer and presence with God really matters on issues of our daily lives and the challenges we face.

I like what Dr. Bill Gaultiere has written on knowing God's will. A clinical psychologist and executive director of New Hope, Dr. Gaultiere compares the process of knowing God's will for a life decision like that of climbing a mountain. You begin with a vision of the mountain and a dream of climbing to the top. You might be afraid you'll get lost on the way up or concerned about not making it, but mostly you are excited.

You gather the map, the compass, camping gear and supplies. You get to the base of the mountain and begin your ascent. There are switchbacks and well-hidden trails as well as those that are clear and wide open. Sometimes you come to a fork in the trail and you have to figure out which one to take. You reach a peak only to discover there is another peak ahead and then another. As you go up you realize this mountain is so much more than you initially anticipated. It's hard work. But, it is also fulfilling. Then when you reach the top, you wonder, "which mountain would I like to climb next?"

Discerning God's will for your life is like this. You begin with a dream or a question. You gather your tools - prayer, notepads, pencils and research information on line. As you move forward, you encounter difficult pathways. But, when you reach your answer - perhaps not the one you thought of by yourself! - God is in this

moment prodding you with another goal, another step in your life journey.

As we turn our hearts and minds to God's table of grace, I offer you seven questions which Dr. Gaultiere says he uses in the process of discernment of God's will for his life. I find these questions helpful:

1. *What do I want?* This is often hard to answer. We face conflicting desires. Since God has created each of us as beautiful, we only need to turn to question over to God. How is God's light reflected in my life? What is a pathway which will be good for me and make me happy?

2. *What am I equipped to do?* Each of us has certain gifts and skills. What are our strengths and how can we use them for our success in life?

3. *What direction do I get from the Bible? What could I do to bring honor and glory to God?* When we follow God's word and seek God's way, we will find that the direction often opens before us.

4. *What counsel do I get from the Godly people I respect?* This returns to my father's answer about following the examples of those whom we love and respect. But, rather than just follow them from a distance, meet with them. Pray with them. Seek out their advice.

5. *What opportunities have come my way?* Sometimes God directs us through opening or closing doors that seem to come out of nowhere. When you are seeking God, what seems like chance may in fact be Providence. Did you ever consider that the serendipity of situations is actually God acting? I like to say, there are no coincidences, only God-incidents.

6. *What is good for others?* Considering the welfare of other people, family, friends and others in need should factor into your

discernment process. I have made decisions in my life which were not in my best self-interest. I have closed doors to the future that were opened to me, but I didn't feel they were really open to Susan, Luke, Daniel or Sarah. It is important on this one to ask the others if they think it is good for them. They will surprise you with their answers.

7. *Finally, what is God saying to me?* Isaiah 30:21 says, “*Your ear will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it.’*” God is still speaking to us. We just need to listen. Listen to God in prayer. Write down your feelings, your impressions, your sense of direction that comes out of that time. Wait on God. You will be better off for having done so. (Drawn from the Web site: NewHopeNow.org, Dr. Bill Gaultiere, “How Do I Know God’s Will?”).

Next week, I look at the question, **Who is God?** Perhaps I would be wise to call my dad for his answer first. It is the master teacher whose wisdom you will receive. The student stands ready to help communicate the message. Amen.