One of the blessings and sometimes a curse of our contemporary times is the wealth of choices often presented us. You are undoubtedly familiar with the old-fashioned Oreo cookie – sweet filling in between two chocolate wafers. Today Oreo cookies come in a multitude of flavors: fruit punch, lemon, candy corn, birthday cake, mint, golden, winter, cinnamon bun, red velvet, peeps, jelly donut, waffles and syrup, coconut, and the list goes on and on. Now we have choices of size: original, mini, thin, double stuff, even candy bars. How do we choose?

Life also presents more substantive choices. What career would be most fulfilling? Is it time to change jobs? How should I spend the early years of retirement? When is the time right to downsize or move into a communal residence? These decisions are weighty and are not taken lightly. They require thoughtful consideration and can be overwhelming.

In the face of the complexities of our nation, our world, and our church, we wonder how we should respond. How and when am I called to speak up and declare my values? How and when am I called to take action as a witness to my faith? What steps are congruent with God’s desired pathway forward?

This morning we hear King Solomon’s request for wisdom from God. He is relatively young when he ascends to the throne of his father, King David, amidst a bitter power struggle. He faces the challenge of unifying tribes from the north and south of Israel under one united government. In a dream, God invites Solomon to ask for anything he wishes. Solomon asks, “Please give your servant a discerning mind in order to govern your people and to distinguish good from evil.” It is a thoughtful request. God consents and offers Solomon a wise and discerning mind.

When confronted with decisions, like Solomon, we also long for an understanding mind to guide us in God’s ways. This morning we’ll consider what it means to have a discerning mind and how we cultivate it.

The Hebrew word used for discerning mind could also be translated “listening heart.” Ponder that image for a moment – a listening heart. The Rule of St. Benedict invites its practitioners to “listen carefully...with the ear of your heart.” For the ancient Hebrews, the heart was the center of everything physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. They understood that God uses our bodies,
feelings, minds, and spirits to show us the right path, not just for major decisions, but all the time.

A significant aspect of discerning God’s will is listening to God. Two percent of our U.S. population has training in listening. We think faster than we can speak, so when another person is talking, we are often formulating our response or getting ready to tell our own story. It takes intentionality to pay attention to another and to stay focused on what they are saying. It is easy to become distracted by things happening around us or tasks calling for our attention. I’ve tended to think of myself as a good listener, but frequently I’ve been found wanting. I need to limit distractions so I can be more present in the moment and truly hear what someone else is saying. Listening is a skill to cultivate as we seek to hear God’s voice among the other voices clamoring for our attention.

Listening for God is trickier than listening to other humans, for God rarely sends direct communication such as a text message or a letter in the mail. I listen for God in a time of silence. Focusing on my breathing and a single word or phrase, I try to still my mind, heart, and body so that I can pay attention to God. Sometimes I sense God’s guidance as a gentle nudge to take a specific step. As I contemplate a possible direction, I might experience a sense of peace or a sense of dis-ease. I pay attention to those feelings and to my intuition.

Other ways that help us listen for God’s guidance are consulting scripture, seeking the counsel of trusted spiritual friends, reading ancient and contemporary Christian authors. A prick of conscience as well as a longing of the heart may be messages from God. God communicates with us in various ways. We need to learn to pay attention to the metaphorical breadcrumbs God leaves to lead us on the path of God’s choosing.

Paul Tillich said, “The first duty of love is to listen.” Our desire to love what God loves, to do as God wills, begins with listening to God.

The purpose of our listening is so that we might be aligned with God. Thomas Blair suggests that wisdom is more than knowledge. It’s about alignment. Biblical wisdom seeks to bring the soul into alignment with God’s ways, because it is easy for us to fall out of alignment with God.

When our car’s steering system is out of alignment, if we don’t keep turning the wheel a bit against the pull, then eventually we will head off the road right into a tree. If we are not conscious of the misalignment of our steering system, our car will veer dangerously off course.

If we truly want to be aligned with God’s way and will, we need to relinquish our tight grasp on our own will and way. We humans like to be in the
driver’s seat. We like to be independent and do things our own way. We have our opinions and we know what is right. To discern God’s desire for our lives, we need to set aside our own desires to listen. It is important to empty our minds of preconceptions and prejudgments to give our attention to God.

Once we have a sense of direction, it is wise to test initial decisions. St. Ignatius of Loyola suggests some exercises of the imagination. First, imagine yourself on your deathbed sometime in the future, and ask, “What decision would I like to have made, way back then?” Second, imagine yourself standing before God at the end of your life. Before the eyes of God, what would I like to have decided? Third, imagine a loved one or colleague coming to you with the same situation. How would you guide this person? These exercises of the imagination can be enlightening and can confirm a choice or send.

The goal of discernment is to make decisions in alignment with the ways of God. We want our actions to be expressions of our love for God and God’s presence in our lives.

In addition to a listening heart and alignment with God, a third avenue to explore in decision making is the motivations for our actions and thoughts. One author says, “A healthy skepticism of our own motives is a sign of spiritual maturity. For instance, many Christians have vied for the privilege of presiding at eucharist. Would they be so likely to vie to wash dirty feet? We need to examine our motives for wanting to serve in a specific way. Christ’s false friends are those who consider themselves his friends but who go about seeking Jesus for their own satisfaction.”

If we’re leaning toward a decision because it will bring us fame and fortune, it could be of God or it could be for our own aggrandizement. If we’re jockeying for power and control, our motives could be godly or a bit selfish.

Quaker author Parker Palmer tells a story on himself. Once he was offered the opportunity to become the president of a small educational institution. He felt rather certain that this was the job for him. However, as is the custom in the Quaker community, he called together a few trusted friends to serve as his “clearness committee.” Rather than giving advice, they ask honest, open questions to help people discover their inner truth. At first the questions were easy. What is your vision for the institution? How would you change the curriculum? How would you handle decision making?

Finally, someone asked, “What would you like most about being president?” After pondering for a moment, Parker began listing things he would not like about the job: giving up writing and teaching, the politics, wearing a suit
and tie. Gently the person who had posed the question interrupted, “May I remind you that I asked what you would most like?”

After a bit more musing, Parker finally answered, “I guess what I’d like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it.” The friend said, “Parker, isn’t there an easier way for you to get your picture in the paper?”

Honest examination of our motives often helps us discern whether a choice is in alignment with God’s will or not.

After listening, testing our choices to see if they are aligned with God’s will, and examining our motives, how do we ultimately know if a choice is God’s will for us? God rarely addresses us directly. Although a list of pros and cons may offer some guidance, the sense of alignment with God’s way comes more often as a revelation than through logical reasoning. There is a sense of consolation that this is the next step I am called to take. The entire path forward may not be revealed, but may unfold. That’s why cultivating a long-term relationship with God is important. God continues to nudge, prod, hint, and pull as we walk with God day by day. Daily listening will enable us to see the way of God unfolding before us.

Research shows that adults typically make about 35,000 decisions a day. Followers of Christ want to keep our hearts inclined toward God so that our choices are aligned with God’s will and way. We can do so by cultivating listening hearts attuned to God’s presence, aligning our steps with God’s steps, and honestly examining our motives. A deepening relationship with God keeps us in sync with God’s will and God’s way. May God grant us listening hearts and discerning minds that we might live wisely.

Fount of Wisdom, we still our minds that we might be attune to the mind of Christ. You speak your wisdom through the words of the sacred text and your messengers of truth and justice. Your word comes as a whisper in the silence and as a tug to action. We are grateful that your Spirit continues to speak to us today, for we yearn for your truth and power among us.

We pause to listen to our own heart, its turmoil and longings....

We listen to the hearts of others, aching for compassion....

We listen to your holy heartbeat...

Your heart beats with love; pour your love upon us. Your heart beats with compassion; reach out to embrace those who are suffering. Your heart beats with joy; shower your joy upon us. Your heart beats with wisdom; plant your wise words in our hearts and on our lips.
Speak your word of peace into the war of words. Speak your life where there is fear of death. Speak your love in the face of indifference. Sound your truth where there is falsehood.

We pray for discerning minds for leaders of nations, communities, and the church of Jesus Christ. Turn the hearts of leaders and citizens toward your will for peace with justice for all. Grant us listening hearts, that we may discern what is honorable, pure, and pleasing to you.

Be present with all who suffer from personal loss and sorrow; with addictive behavior; from uncertainty and anxiety about the future. We pray for all who are coping with disasters, traumatized by devastation or violence. We pray for those who are displaced by natural forces or oppression or decree. Hold all who suffer in your loving heart. Receive their anxiety and refresh them with courage. Receive their exhaustion and renew them with energy. Receive their despair, replacing it with hope.

We unite our voices with Jesus as he taught us to pray...Our Father...

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