

## I. Advanced Organizer

A. One of my favorite stories about Jesus shows an uncanny quality he seemed to possess to see things others didn't see and call them as he saw them.

1. It happened in an intimate conversation he was having, hanging out with his closest friends. These guys have been hanging with Jesus for a while now, they've heard his sermons, they've witnessed the miracles. Jesus likely knows that they have a pulse on what people around them are thinking about what they've been up to, and he knows they've had a chance to form an opinion of their own. So he asks them to share it.
2. Matthew tells the story this way:

**13 When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"** (Hey guys, what's the buzz? What are people saying about me? What's the word on Twitter? How is this trending?)

**14 They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"**

**16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven! 18 And I tell you that you are Peter (literally the word for "Rock"), and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven." 20 Then he instructed his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.**

a) So that's a great moment, particularly if you're Simon Peter. Jesus just gave you a new name and it's "rock". And he made pretty clear that you are gonna have an important leadership role to play in this thing he's established. You're stoked. But my favorite part of the story is actually what comes next.

3. **21 From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him: "God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you!" 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's."**

a) Ouch. talk about a whiplash experience. One moment Simon Peter is being praised for being uniquely in tune with the Divine, the next moment, Jesus is calling him Satan. What gives?

4. On display we see Jesus' capacity to see beneath the surface, to hear something no one else can hear, and to call it out, to name the truth clearly. The first thing he sees is positive: Peter's declaration of Jesus' identity as God's anointed is speaking truth, it's in alignment with the Spirit of God, and it's spoken with a sincere heart. So Jesus praises that. But once Peter, likely with a puffed up sense of his own abilities from the ego boost he's just received, thinks now he has something more to offer Jesus in terms of wisdom, there's a turn. Perhaps Peter thinks he's tapping into that same spirit that's revealed the truth of Jesus' identity to him. He thinks it's his job to encourage Jesus. "Don't get so down, Jesus. We're gonna win this. It's gonna be awesome. You're not gonna suffer; you're gonna be victorious. These horrible things aren't gonna happen to you. We won't let them."

5. But in the same way that Jesus could see so clearly the importance of Peter's confession, he also could see beyond the words of encouragement that Peter was offering. He could read the self-interested motives behind those words and he had enough deep knowledge of the heart of the Divine that he could tell that Peter's words were not in alignment with God's way. They were actually calling him away from what God had for him, and in that way, they were the words of an adversary (or a *satan*).
  6. What if Jesus hadn't had that clarity of insight? What if he'd gone along with Peter's encouragement; "Yeah, you know, maybe you're right. Maybe I'm just being hard on myself. Forget this whole suffering deal." It would have been a different story. Probably one we wouldn't be telling two thousand years later. But what made Jesus unique was his capacity to tap into a deeper level of reality. To look beyond present emotions or momentary circumstances and orient himself in a greater truth, which seemed to bring clarity to the present circumstances, allowing him to see in the moment what words his friend spoke to him were from the Divine and which words were something else.
  7. He had the capacity for **discernment**.
- B. I think it's easy for us to hear these stories, and get numb to them; to get used to the idea that Jesus simply had this super ability to tell one thing from another.
1. What's more interesting to think about is what it might have felt like for the fully human Jesus to actually be going through the process of discerning which voices that he heard were God's and which were not. Sure, he had access to what scripture calls the Holy Spirit, but I imagine he had to wrestle to understand what the Spirit was saying. It wasn't effortless.
  2. I find this idea encouraging because it gives me hope that I, too, have capacity to tap into a deeper reality, and with that reality, gain insight into present circumstances of my life. I find it encouraging that Jesus told his followers that he intended to send them the Spirit so that they could do this work of coming to know the mind of God, in the same way he had. **"When the Spirit of truth comes"** he told them, **"the Spirit will guide you into all the truth"**. I find that encouraging, because I think right now, I need discernment.
- C. **What do I mean by discernment?**
1. I love how the writer and spiritual teacher Henri Nouwen describes it. In a season of reflection in a monastery he discovered a painting that deepened his own understanding of what discernment is. The painting is actually a depiction of the writer Henry David Thoreau, who played the flute, by the painter Hazard Durfee. Nouwen came upon this painting paired with a quote from Thoreau.
    - a) *"Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."*
    - b) This led Nouwen to this recognition:
      - (1) *"As I studied the quiet, concentrated face of Durfee's musician, I realized that discernment is like hearing a different drummer...When I reflected on The Flute Player, I knew myself as restless and searching. I felt I was stumbling over my own compulsions and illusions way too often. During my time at [a monastery], I began to understand that when we listen to the Spirit, we hear a deeper sound, a different beat. The great movement of the spiritual life is from a deaf, nonhearing life to a life of listening. From a life in which we experience ourselves as separated, isolated, and lonely to a life in which we hear the guiding and healing voice of God, who is with us and will never leave us alone. The many activities in which we are involved, the many*

*concerns that occupy our time, the many sounds that surround us make it hard for us to hear the “still, small voice” through which God’s presence and will are made known.”*

2. There have been seasons of life where the voice of God has felt easy to listen to and follow. Times when each time I prayed I sensed a word of encouragement or direction. Sometimes it was if prayers were answered before I could finish praying them. Truthfully I think most of these moments occurred in the earliest part of my faith journey; my years in college and young adulthood in which faith was young and needed a lot of encouragement.
  - a) But not all of my life of faith has been lived in those seasons. Often the deeper sound, the different beat has been harder to hear. At times I’ve been able to march forward, nonetheless, with a sense that I know the rhythm, I understand the steps, even if I can’t always hear the different drummer’s beat.
  - b) But I’m gonna be honest here, I’m in a season now that’s particularly challenging. I think one of the hardest seasons I’ve walked through. Many of you know at this point that I’ve been stretched in a new way walking through the journey of cancer treatment with my sister. And over the holidays, one of my closest friends was diagnosed as well. These diagnoses of two women I love and respect deeply, one on top of the other, are strangely synergistic, leaving me feeling in some moments uniquely connected to something sacred and profound in entering into the suffering of loved ones, while at other times, I’m overwhelmed by what feels like too much for my spirit to manage. It’s profoundly disorienting. In this season it feels like there is **so much noise**, that at times I find myself wondering if I’ve lost track of the drumbeat altogether. I feel out of rhythm. My steps are all in response to the voices and the horns and the alarm bells that are blaring and ringing and shouting for my attention along with the mundane cacophony of family needs and activities, iPhone notifications and moment to moment breaking news updates. In the roar of all of it, I find myself wondering if there’s any different drumbeat to listen to at all.

D. I tell you all of this by way of introduction really to what we're considering together over our next few Sundays, as we begin this new year together. I'd like to spend these next three Sundays together considering Discernment. Selfishly, in some ways we're considering this because I personally feel like it's what I need in this season, but I have a feeling I'm not alone. Many of us may have our own versions, wondering, particularly in times where we find so much shouting for our attention, how do we tap into the deeper reality that Jesus did, so that we can separate fact from fiction, truth from deceit, the voice of the Divine from the voice of an enemy? That's what we'll be exploring together in this series I'm calling, "Hearing Through Noise." And with what's left of our time this morning I want to start by considering what I think has to be the foundation place, and so is the title of today's teaching, **"Turn Down the Volume."**

- II. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote, ***"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."*** (Romans 12:2)
  - A. There's that word: **discern**. Paul says we can discern the will of God. The word he's using in Greek is one of the two in the New Testament we see often translated to discern. It's δοκιμάζειν (*dokimazein*), which had the connotation of testing something, scrutinizing it, proving something definitive about it's nature.
  - B. The other word that's closely connected and we also see translated "discern" is *diakrisis*. This word has more the connotation of distinguishing one thing from another, dividing one thing

from another to make an objective judgement about it. We see the author of Hebrews use this word to describe a goal for the follower of Jesus.

1. ***“For everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced in the message of righteousness, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, whose perceptions are trained by practice to discern both good and evil.”*** (Hebrews 5:13-14)

C. So there again is that idea that we can discern the intention of the Divine, the will of God, do as Jesus did. But how does that happen? How do we not conform to the world, as Paul said, but have our mind renewed? How do we graduate from drinking milk to eating solid food? Perhaps as a place to start it might be helpful to look to Jesus by way of example. How did he dial into discernment when he needed it?

1. In the beginning of Jesus’ ministry one of the first decisions he was faced with was who amongst the many people he was meeting who were going to him wanting some of what he had to give, who were the few he should focus the most time on? Who should he call into his inner circle? There were at least dozens of people to choose from. He had to discriminate. So what did he do? Luke describes it this way:

***a) 12 Now it was during this time that Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent all night in prayer to God. 13 When morning came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: 14 Simon (whom he named Peter), and his brother Andrew; and James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, 15 Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, 16 Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:12-16 NET)***

2. Do you see it? It’s so easy to gloss by verse 12 and focus on verse 13. But 12, when you attend to it, is astonishing. Jesus didn’t just pull out of his head who the twelve were. He spent a whole night alone on a mountain in prayer. He withdrew from the crowds. He walked away from the city with its distractions. He turned from the religious folks who were pressuring him and the people he was starting to call friends and spent a night with his thoughts and the divine. For discernment to take place, he needed to make space. To hear through the noise, he needed to turn down the volume.

3. Henry Nouwen, the spiritual teacher and writer who defined discernment earlier for us shares insight he gained in the season he withdrew to the monastery and learned more about attending to a different drumbeat.

*a) I stepped away from my teaching to slow down for a time in intentional community. It was hard for me to see God at work in my life when I was running from class to class and traveling from place to place. I had so many classes to prepare, lectures to give, articles to finish, people to meet that I had come quite close to believing myself indispensable. Still I was frightened of being alone and having an unscheduled day, even as I longed for solitude and rest. I was full of paradoxes. When we are spiritually deaf, we are not aware that anything important is happening in our lives. We keep running away from the present moment, and we try to create experiences that make our lives worthwhile. So we fill up our time to avoid the emptiness we otherwise would feel. When we are truly listening, we come to know that God is speaking to us, pointing the way, showing the direction. We simply need to learn to keep our ears open.*

4. Many think of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (who we’re honoring this weekend) as a firebrand preacher and prayer who stirred people’s spirits and prompted real action because of his booming voice and the power of his intense, energetic words. And that’s true. But what many don’t know is that Dr. King also took whole days to himself to be quiet and to pray, what he called his “Days of Silence”.

5. Philosophers and mystics of many traditions have long asserted that in order to discern our own hearts, and certainly the heart of the Divine, we need to turn down the volume. Mahatma Gandhi, Emily Dickenson, St. Teresa of Avila - all of them found meaning in stillness. The 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, *"Distraction is the only thing that consoles us for our miseries, and yet it is itself the greatest of our miseries."*
  6. We need to make some space to pull out of the noise. We may not need to spend months or years in a Trappist monastery, like Henry Nouwen, or spend a night alone on the mountainside like Jesus often did, but we do need to find places to withdraw. To slow down. To stop running from the present moment and consider what our moments have given us.
- D. This week I listened to two interesting interviews on the NPR podcast of On Being, a show hosted by Krista Tippett that explores themes of meaning making and often spirituality. And both of these interviews were with people who would not consider themselves religious, but are clearly both deeply spiritual. The first was a writer named Pico Iyer who has spent his career as a travel writer as well as an essayist and author who speaks about meaning and he has built much of his adult life around what he calls "the urgency of slowing down."
1. Iyer grew up traveling the globe at an early age, even flying by himself as a young child overseas to attend boarding school. After getting his education he continued to travel the world, seeing lots of amazing things. By his mid 30s, on one airline alone he'd racked up more than a million miles. But he was beginning to sense that though there was a lot of movement in his life, there was not much stillness. Around that time, his house was completely destroyed in a fire and he lost every possession he had. In the wake of that, a friend of his recommended he visit a Benedictine hermitage that was powerful for experiencing calm and clarity, and not having a home or anything else to tie him down, he decided to go there for a few days. Here's how he described his experience to Krista Tippett (play clip):
    - a) *Somehow, almost immediately, it was as if a huge heaviness fell away from me, and the lens cap came off my eyes. Suddenly, I was seeing everything with great immediacy, and it was almost as if little Pico had disappeared, and the whole world had come in to me instead. I remember a blue jay suddenly alighted on the fence outside my window, and I watched it, rapt, as if it was the most miraculous thing that had happened. Then bells began ringing above, and it felt like they were ringing inside me. Then when darkness fell, I just walked along the monastery road under the stars, watching the taillights of cars disappear around the headlands to the south. And really, almost instantaneously, I felt I've stepped into a richer, deeper life, a real life that I had half-forgotten had existed.*  
*One thing I noticed was, when I was driving up, like many of us, I was conducting all kinds of conversations or arguments in my head. I was feeling guilty about leaving my mother behind, and I was worried that my bosses wouldn't be able to find me for three days. As soon as I arrived in that place, I realized that none of that mattered and that, really, by being here, I would have so much more to offer my mother and my friends and my bosses.*
  2. This experience changed Pico fundamentally. He began to build into his life devoted practices of stillness. He returns to the hermitage every year for 24 years. He calls it his secret home, a place where his heart finds sanctuary, so that wherever he is in the world, whatever he's experiencing, there's a part of him that know that space and that can return to it, that is grounded knowing it is there for him. Pico Iyer found a way to turn down the volume.

- E. The second On Being interview I listened to this week was with a spiritual sage many of us have been pondering and honoring over the last few days, because she passed on Thursday, the profound Poet Mary Oliver.
1. Much of Oliver's work is about the sacredness she finds in the natural world, and the way she allows herself to be absorbed by what she sees. One of her most famous poems is "The Summer Day". One section I find particularly relevant for this conversation:
    - a) *"I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day."*
  2. "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention." How many of us can say that? Can we pay attention really? Can we notice the details? Attend to the world around us? The people we spend time with? Attend as Mary Oliver would have us do, with feeling? With empathy? Can we attend to our feelings, our realizations? Can we attend to God?
  3. Elsewhere Mary Oliver said this: "Attention is the beginning of devotion."
- F. Perhaps this is the starting place for cultivating discernment: making a practice of finding a quiet space to pay attention. To attend to our feelings, to notice our questions, to pay attention to our doubts and our insecurities, and to invite the Spirit to bring insight and clarity and wisdom as we pay attention.
- III. I know this isn't a novel suggestion, to slow down, to practice quiet contemplation. It may feel like a cliché one. But I do think it is a suggestion that many of us, particularly those like myself who are extroverted, need to be reminded of and encouraged to commit to again. And perhaps to use this time in a new way.
- A. The last couple of weeks I have come to moments of quiet and found it hard to know what words to pray, what insights to ask for. I've tried to close my eyes and listen for God to speak, but my heart is too unsettled to hear. And so these last few times of quiet that I've taken, in part inspired by folks like Pico Iyer and Mary Oliver, I've decided to use my prayer time simply to sift through what's in my heart and memory. It's not the time for judgement. It's simply the time to put things on the table. I may turn down the lights and light a candle. I sit without needing anything particular to happen. I invite the Divine to be present with me but I accept that I may or may not sense any awareness of the Spirit. And I sit and consider, "what am I afraid of right now? What am I worried about? What am I hopeful about? What is confusing? What is boring me? What do I grieve? What am I comforted by?" With each of these questions I'm not trying to reach conclusions or make meaning, I'm just trying to notice what's there. To pay attention. And, as I do, I have begun to also sense that something beyond is with me, paying attention too.
  - B. This is my invitation to you this week. How and where can you set aside some time for quiet contemplation? Let's say a goal of 10 minutes a day. Can you get up 10 minutes earlier each morning? Is there space on your lunch break for you to sit somewhere quiet or perhaps take a walk through a garden? I'm gonna give you that challenge of taking at least 10 minutes to pay attention each day. To turn off the devices and any other distractions and be quiet.
  - C. And here's what I invite you to do.
    1. **Begin by imagining the Divine in whatever form is helpful for you to feel safe and connected in God's presence.** Do you see the warm eyes and bristly whiskers of a Jewish rabbi named Jesus? Do you perceive a soft, dark skinned mother with long flowing hair? Is God a gentle Father with a soft smile and strong arms to fall into? Or do you

connect with the Divine as breath, as wind, as Spirit that takes no particular form but flows through your very being

2. Whatever connects with you, invite that manifestation of divinity to be present with you and notice alongside you what is going on in your mind and heart. Invite them to bear witness to what you attend to.
  3. And then **see what questions and thoughts come to mind**. What is drawn to your attention. What feelings arise? What questions feel important? Don't judge the thoughts or questions that come to mind, simply notice and acknowledge them.
  4. Grab some paper or a journal and take a few notes. You don't have to write down everything that comes to mind. But maybe from each of these ten minutes of contemplation you could note 1 to 3 things you notice. 1 to 3 feelings you identify, concerns that are weighing you down, things you are looking forward to or just things you notice about your surroundings.
  5. And then invite the Divine to be present with you in whatever those things are. To see them with you. To feel them with you. To hold them with you. That's the practice I invite you to try this week, and we're gonna start by trying it together in a moment today.
- IV. As a good Jewish boy, Jesus grew up praying the Ancient Psalms. Perhaps it was in them, in their commitment to paying attention to the terrain of life and the terrain of the heart that Jesus learned his own practice of seeking solitude for discernment. Perhaps he was stirred by the words of the psalmist that have called to many through the ages who have found themselves feeling the urgency of slowing down. "Be still, and know that I am God." Amen.  
(video to lead us into our own time for 5 minutes)

#### **Questions for Reflection and Conversation:**

1. Do you have a regular practice of solitude and contemplation? Have you had one in the past? Do you find it challenging? Boring? Helpful? If you've not had one, why might that be?
2. What keeps you from hearing the drumbeat of the "different drummer"?
3. Describe any insights you gained from our experience of contemplation here.