

Get Real: Dig Deeper
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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1 John 4:1-6, John 14:15-17

So, I've got a question for you... how do you determine whether what I am saying from this pulpit is to be believed and followed or not? This applies not just to me, but to anyone or anything you hear, or read, or watch. Think of all the ways we can access the information we need at any time.

We can take that question a little further... how do we know what God wants? Or even if God has an opinion, on any given day? How do we discern God's desire for us, in a world of competing claims? Does God ever speak directly, or send signs for us to decode? If we listen hard enough, can we get a direct answer to a direct question: *"Should I turn left or right? Go on a family vacation or a mission trip?"*

There are those who will testify that they've received clear answers – like finding wisdom on an actual billboard on the open road – and others who will insist that discerning God's will is like reading tea leaves... imprecise and fraught with bias. I suspect the truth is somewhere in between, but I do believe God speaks – in subtle and not so subtle ways, and I know folks who have refined the art of listening, of recognizing the movement of God in our lives.

I've often encountered people who seem to channel a word from God. Juan Quinones is the Executive Director of The Institute for Socio-Economic Development and Housing of Puerto Rico. He is an engineer by trade, and is leading the effort to rebuild or refurbish 250 houses that were severely damaged in the category 5 Hurricane Irma followed by Maria which made landfall in late September, 2017. The work is being funded mostly by the Ricky Martin Foundation, but, it was not our luck to meet the popular Puerto-Rican singer while we were there!

The first house he showed us was a work in progress. It had a small living room, kitchen, bathroom and two small bedrooms. Standing about 10 feet tall in the back and 8 ½ feet in the front, the 900 square foot home would feature 4 security glass windows on the front, and less secure

aluminum/plastic windows on the back. The roof would hold solar panels that were so user friendly they could be operated easily by a light switch. The concrete walls the Maestros were building reminded me of the cement block houses built by Simply Smiles in the Oaxaca City dump.

The second house we visited was about to be demolished that day, because it was too far gone to be fixed. The 85 year old woman who lived there was trying, through her grief and sorrow, to guide her family to pack their belongings so that the unthinkable could be done. We offered to help, but we understood that the moment was too sensitive when we were asked to leave.

The third home was a property that had been acquired through foreclosure. It had good bones but needed a lot of work to bring it back to code. We got busy and painted the exterior and two interior rooms while we there and spoke with Juan about how the recovery had been in the community.

He described how difficult it was just to establish a presence among the people of the small town of Loiza, and that the history of the place had a lot to do with the slowness of the rebuilding efforts. The small island community was established by escaped African American slaves. The hundreds of people now living in the village are related, sharing three common family names. They consider themselves to be a forgotten people, and do not trust outsiders.

After months of reaching out to those who live in Loiza, getting to know them and helping them complete FEMA paperwork, Juan was able to begin the work of rebuilding. He hires as much local talent as he can, teaching the men of the area a trade. He wants to change the narrative he has heard that those who live in Loiza are helpless victims. He wants them to find dignity and self-worth.

Of the 15 non-profits now working on the island, Juan believes his is the only group that knows and respects the culture. He has done this through deep listening, building trust through relationship. Juan and his non-profit will be in Loiza for the next 2-3 years, until the job is done and families are back on their feet with a solid roof over their heads.

And though Juan and I didn't speak directly about faith (other than he thinks I should move to Loiza and start a church), I believe that God is working through him and the work his group is doing in the community.

It may be easy to discern the 'handiwork' of God on a mission trip - in the frame of a brand new hurricane resistant home, or the passions of someone working so diligently to help others - but what about in our own, everyday lives?

What happens when we are the ones who have to make a difficult decision, navigate a thorny relationship or take that first step into uncharted territory?

Then, I suspect, it can be harder to hear God's voice.

For starters, we can run into a whole lot of static: the dog wants to go out (or come back in); the phone is ringing and that deadline is looming. There's dinner to cook, or homework to finish or bills to pay and who has time to think, much less listen for the voice of God?

There's also the static in our own heads: the voices of fear or doubt or other people's expectations that get all muddled up until it's hard to know which voice to trust.

It may also be hard to discern God's voice for the simple fact that we forget to ask. Our daily, operating assumption that we've got to figure out our own problems, achieve our own goals, and single-handedly muster all the resources we need to get by. We forget that we don't actually have to sort it all out ourselves; that we can rely on God; that God may even surprise us with gifts and guidance we never could have conjured on our own.

Even Jesus depended on the Spirit of God. It was the Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus in the Jordan River, on the day he was baptized, and that same Spirit that propelled Jesus into the wilderness. For 40 days, Jesus grappled with hunger and thirst and the devil's temptations. After all that, when Jesus returned to his own home town and walked into the synagogue, sunburned and foot-weary, he took up a scroll from the prophet Isaiah. The first line of holy scripture that he uttered, the words with which he launched his ministry were these: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...*"

Some of his friends and neighbors may have thought he had sunstroke. But what I hear are the strains of profound humility, the voice of one who knows what it means to be utterly dependent on God.

It was God's Spirit that lent focus and direction to Jesus' life and mission, God's Spirit, at work in him all the days of his life. Before there were boards or committees, clergy or deacons, budgets or annual meetings, there was the Holy Spirit, guiding the earliest Christians, as She continues to guide us now.

But how do we hear? Just saying, "*Let's ask the Holy Spirit,*" may sound a little too mystical-magical for some of us raised in rational New England.

But you just never know where the Holy Spirit might speak: Through the preacher? Maybe. Or through a nine-year old boy. Through a wise senior member or the visitor who just wandered in through the door. God speaks, in subtle and not so subtle ways, to us and through us. It is our job, the task of the whole community, to discern what God is saying.

So we listen. We dig deep. We search for the holy in silence and in scripture, in the bare bones of a shelter in Puerto Rico, or a roof in Mississippi, and in the insights of our neighbors. We do this together, because we are all members of the one Body of Christ.

Individually, we might catch a glimpse of God's purpose; might even experience our own epiphany – our own billboard-on-the-expressway moment, clear as day. But always we are called back to the Body, to ask questions and compare notes. "*What do YOU think? What's God saying? Is the Holy Spirit up to something here?*"

We will know the answer is 'Yes!' when along the way we are surprised by gifts and guidance that we could not have conjured up ourselves; when we find ourselves utterly dependent on God and yet somehow set free; when we are led in directions we could not have imagined on our own.

Because in the end, it's not about us, any one of us. It's about what God would do through us to bless God's whole world:

The Spirit of the Lord IS upon me, AND UPON YOU, because God has anointed us to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind...

Thanks be to God. Amen.