

April 27, 2008
Acts 17:22-31
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Practicing Discernment

When I was young and went to the grocery store there was only one kind of apple available – Macintosh., and only a few selections of types of fruit, for that matter. Now when I go to the store there are many kinds of apples, from all over the world, and I have to decide which ones to buy. A trip to the grocery store these days involves hundreds of little decisions. Those of us with a more exploratory nature probably try them all over time and others of us find one kind we like and stick with it.

Some decisions we make are just individual decisions – like groceries– although if you live with and shop for other people surely someone in your family will tell you that you bought the wrong kind when you get home.

However, other decisions are decisions we have to make together –family decisions with our partners and other family members, congregational decisions with other members of the congregation, and community decisions with other citizens in our town.

As many of you know, we are involved in communicating with the town, the college, the Maine Department of Transportation, and the developers of Maine Street Station in trying to figure out a viable solution to the traffic issues in this area where the traffic on Maine Street and Bath Road come together. We had a meeting on Friday morning with all these parties. It was a fruitful conversation. There is going to be more exploration and another meeting. We will keep you informed.

As a congregation, we are and will continue to be involved in significant decision-making in the next couple of years around traffic and facilities and staffing. There are, and will be, a multiplicity of opinions which can make decision-making a challenge. We could, as Susan discussed with the children, use rock-paper-scissors as a method to help us decide. We could put solutions in a hat and draw out an answer. We could roll the dice. We could open the Bible, with our eyes closed, and whatever it says there should tell us what to do. We could let the pastor decide. Nah!

As those who live in the congregational tradition, we live in a heritage that doesn't use any of those patterns of decision-making. At the roots of congregationalism is a belief that the people who are called together by the Spirit to form a congregation are *together* responsible for making decisions about their congregational life. It doesn't say that everyone will be involved in every decision, but that together they will decide how decisions are going to be made and who will make them.

Some of you may have seen the recent United Church of Christ ad in the *New York Times* and *The Portland Press Herald*. In describing the United Church of Christ it says,
With all Christians, we rest in God's amazing grace and hear God's voice in the words of Scripture. Yet, the UCC is unique to some because we do not require uniformity of belief. We are a church of open ideas, extravagant welcome and evangelical courage. Our passion for

democracy extends to both government and church, where decision-making rests within each congregation. We support liberty in our pulpits, just as we affirm the individual conscience of our 1.2-million members to agree, disagree and wrestle with life's biggest questions in a spirit of love.

In the early days of the Reformation movement this was a radical way of thinking. No longer was the Pope, or even the King as the head of the Church of England, the final authority. The people were responsible for discerning the leading of God's Spirit in their life together. They believed that *no individual – whether a bishop, priest, or lay leader – is fully equipped to discern and follow God's will.* (*Who is Robert? Andy Why Do We Follow His Rules, Anyway?* By Martin Copenhaver, Alban Institute)

In other words, everyone is needed. You never know who in the congregation might give voice to the Spirit's leading at any particular time. So, it is very important to practice the spiritual discipline of discernment. This practice involves listening carefully to that still small voice within each person. Each person is asked to listen carefully and prayerfully and then to share what has come to them. This means that people who were usually quiet and reserved need to speak up as well, because what they were sensing from the Spirit might be exactly what the community needs to hear.

In today's reading from Acts, Paul is about the process of discernment. He is on the watch for God's presence and for the connections between his own experience of the Holy and the experiences of those he is encountering. For Paul the common bond between people is not their race, their gender, their social standing, even their religious background. The common bond is

simply God "in whom we live and move and have our being."

However, it is easy to take our eyes off the prize – off the Holy. It is easy to become more focused on our individual needs and our desires and our plans – and to advocate for them. And when those needs, desires, and plans disagree and come up against one another, say in a church meeting, it isn't always easy or pretty.

Which is how Robert's Rules for parliamentary procedure came about. In 1876, Henry Robert came home from a church meeting feeling frustrated, discouraged and embarrassed. It was the first time he had chaired a church meeting and it had not been pretty. As a former officer in the Army he decided there should be some governing rules and procedures to guide behavior, so he developed Robert's Rules of Order, which we now tend to take as a given. Indeed these rules do help a meeting to run more smoothly. However, using these rules as the governing principle puts the emphasis on the rights of the individual (freedom of speech) and the power of the majority to "win" a discussion. One of the difficulties is that there are usually obvious winners and losers in this process. And sometimes there is no attempt to discern the leading of the Spirit "in whom we live and move and have our being."

And, sometimes the majority is wrong. I remember reading a story about a Quaker man who was opposed to slavery. I think it was the early 1800s. We tend to think that all Quakers were opposed to slavery, but that wasn't so. In his particular Meeting (group) he was the only one who spoke up in opposition to slavery. Others thought he was a bit crazy and out of touch with the reality of his world. But, because of their commitment to their community they stayed

