

September 1, 2019  
Colossians 3:12-17  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## ***Discernment***

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

The epistles – the letters in the New Testament – are full of advice about the Christian life. Today’s passage is one that has stood the test of time. It is as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago. It reminds us of the crucial role of community on our spiritual journeys. As it says, we need to *teach one another with all wisdom.*

### SERMON

*The place God calls you to  
is the place where your deep gladness  
and the world’s deep hunger meet.*

With these words, Frederick Buechner, 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian minister and author, invites us on the path of discernment.

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is the place where your deep gladness  
and the world’s deep hunger meet.*

Tomorrow - Labor Day – was designated to remind us of the importance of work and of those who do the work to keep our common life going. It is an appropriate time to stop and reflect on the work we each do – whether paid or volunteer.

This past week the sharing question at the Deacon’s meeting - we have a sharing question at each meeting to help us get to know each other better – was

*When you were little,  
what did you want to be  
when you grew up?*

One person told us how he wanted to be an architect, but after five years of architecture school, he knew it wasn’t the right thing. That’s Discernment.

Recently someone told about a seminary student who did their first field education placement in a local church and afterwards knew that being a pastor was not right for them. That’s Discernment.

Discernment is as much about saying no as it is saying yes. We often learn what is not right by direct experience, as in each of these stories. We also learn what is right for us when others notice our gifts and invite us to use them.

I began to learn in elementary school that teaching was central to my life’s work because my teachers would sometimes ask me to help tutor other students in the room. Thinking back, you can probably remember someone who encouraged you to consider doing paid or volunteer work for which they believed you had the gifts. That’s discernment.

We are fortunate to live in a time when the cultural expectation is no longer that you must stay in the same job over a lifetime. Sometimes we find that what we are doing has no connection to our deep gladness,

and so we move in another direction. Sometimes we cannot leave our work – for economic or other reasons. Then it becomes crucial to find other ways – maybe in volunteer work – to express our joy in connection to the world’s needs.

In discernment we search our own hearts to become more clear about our deep gladness. We also listen to others for where they see our gifts meeting the world’s needs. When someone asks me to take on a role or task, I have found it informative over the years to ask that person why they are asking me. It helps to clarify if this is something I should seriously consider.

In the church we do intentional discernment with people who are sensing a call to ordained ministry. That is the very important work we are about this year with our three Members in Discernment – Jessie Crabtree, Danielle Keller and Francesco Marshall.

We used to call this a process of being “in care;” now we say that people are “members in discernment.” Recently, someone asked me why the change in terminology. I suspect the change is partly due to the fact that candidates and their congregations often used to think that if the candidate could check off all the tasks of being “in care” it would automatically lead to ordination. But that is not the case. It is not only the candidate who is discerning; it is also the church who is discerning if the gifts of this person meet the needs of the church for pastoral leadership. Sometimes the church says no. By referring to the process as discernment, it is a reminder to all of us that the spiritual work of

discernment is as important as seminary class work.

The work of discernment means we need to learn to listen to our lives. Years ago in a prayer group in Phoenix we used one of Frederick Buechner’s books titled, *Listening to Your Life*, a collection of excerpts from many of his books.

The first reading has stayed with me over the years.

*Listen to Your Life,  
See it for the fathomless mystery it is.  
In the boredom and pain of it, no  
less than in the excitement and gladness:  
touch, taste, smell your way  
to the holy and hidden heart of it,  
because in the last analysis  
all moments are key moments,  
and life itself is grace”*

*(Now and Then, 87).*