



Becoming...

A five-week pastoral reflection series

Pastoral Reflection #4

Learning to Notice Together

Discernment begins with learning to notice—asking better questions, telling more truthful stories, learning to see through the eyes of Jesus. But there is something else we need to remember: **no one notices everything.**

That may seem obvious, but it matters more than we sometimes realize. Every person enters a congregation or community from a different place. A pastor sees some things. A council member sees others. A lifelong member notices things a newcomer never would. A child may know immediately whether a place feels welcoming. A neighbor may see something about our congregation that those of us inside it have stopped noticing altogether.

That is one reason discernment cannot be a solo activity.

One of the gifts—and challenges—of serving as bishop is being reminded of this again and again. When I visit a congregation, I bring some experience with me. I may notice patterns or possibilities because I have walked with other congregations through similar seasons. But I never see the whole picture.

And if I arrive thinking I already know what is happening, I probably am not paying enough attention.

The same is true for all of us.

We see through the lens of our own experience. We notice what we have learned to notice. That is not a failure. It is simply part of being human. The gift comes when we are willing to listen to what someone else sees.

The early church had to learn this too. In Acts 15, the church faced a difficult disagreement about whether Gentile believers needed to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus. The leaders did not resolve it because one person had the perfect answer. They gathered. They listened to stories. They wrestled with Scripture. They prayed. They argued. They paid attention to what God seemed to be doing among people whose experiences were different from their own.

Eventually they were able to say, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”

I have always loved that phrase.

It does not claim absolute certainty. Neither does it suggest that anything goes. It describes a community that has listened carefully enough to take a faithful next step together.

I wonder what would happen if more of our church council meetings worked that way.

What if, before asking, “What are we going to do?” we spent some time asking, “What are we noticing?”

What are we seeing in our congregation? What are we hearing from our neighbors? Where are people growing? Where is there energy? Where is there grief? Where might God be opening something we have not yet recognized?

Those questions slow us down. Sometimes that is exactly what we need.

Different people will answer them differently. A musician may notice whether worship invites people to participate. A teacher may notice whether faith is being formed. A deacon may notice a neighbor whose needs others have missed. A teenager may notice whether young people have a real voice. A treasurer may notice a pattern that tells us something important about our priorities.

None of those perspectives tells the whole story. Together, however, they allow us to see more.

Perhaps that is one reason Paul uses the image of the Body of Christ. Eyes cannot do the work of ears. Hands cannot do the work of feet. We need one another—not simply because there is work to divide among us, but because **we need one another’s eyes**.

I have seen this happen in congregations. Someone makes a small observation. Another person says, “I noticed that too.” Someone else tells a story. Slowly a pattern begins to emerge.

What first seemed disconnected begins to look like something worth paying attention to.

Those are some of my favorite moments in ministry. Not because everything suddenly becomes clear. Usually it doesn’t. But the conversation changes. People stop trying quite so hard to solve the problem and begin wondering together about what God may be doing.

That has changed the way I think about leadership. Leaders certainly have responsibility. We make decisions. We offer direction. Sometimes we have to name difficult realities clearly. But leadership is not the same as having all the answers.

Sometimes the most faithful thing a leader can do is create enough room for people to listen to one another well. Sometimes it is asking the question that helps someone else notice something everyone has missed.

I can’t see everything. Neither can you. But together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we often see more clearly than any one of us could alone. And maybe that is part of what it means to become the Body of Christ—not simply believing together, but learning to see together.

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