

Clear discernment of the right path to follow is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and the wise Christian asks the guidance of the Holy Spirit before beginning any significant action. We all need that guidance right now, in this time of public anxiety and personal challenge. There are many kinds of blindness, including the kind that allows us to think that our judgments and opinions are always right.

Suspending judgment is a challenge to many of us, and especially, it seems, to Christians, who follow a Teacher who reminded us that God alone is the judge. If you ask an unchurched person today what he or she knows about Christianity, your respondent is like to answer with:

- an account of the activities of a tiny Kansas church at the funerals of soldiers returned in their coffins from Iraq and Afghanistan,
- or a pastor in Florida who burned the Koran,
- of a friend who was harmed emotionally or physically by a pastor,
- or of a hometown church they know of that makes it clear that certain people are not welcome as members of its congregation.

Today, Christians are recognized by what they judge and what they shun, and the press and electronic media coverage of these actions only make that perception more enduring and more powerful.

However you may regard these actions, it is important to realize that, while they may occur in the context of what we know as the very diverse contemporary Christian church, they are **not** Christian, **if you take the behavior of Jesus Christ as a model of how a Christian should behave.**

From last week's encounter with the Gospel, we remember that Jesus recognized the woman at the well who had many husbands—judged by others not to be respectable, especially in that culture. Yet he chose this woman to share in both his humanity—the thirst for water from the well—and his Divinity—the knowledge that there is such a thing as Living Water, and that drinking it means that you will not thirst spiritually, because that Living Water is the recognition that the Divine and the Holy lives and has come among us.

Remember: Jesus also commissioned the woman to take the news of his ministry to the people of her town. Her apostleship is a message to those who hear it: do not expect the expected from the One who sent her.

That brings us to the Pool of Siloam, which means, "Sent." Hold that thought, as we realize that basing our lives as Christians on whom we will admit into the Love and Body of Jesus Christ—and whom we will not—goes against everything that Jesus showed us by the way he lived his life.

The blind man that Jesus healed was not someone he met at a synagogue, or at the great Temple, or at healing place, like the holy pool at Siloam, a place where he would heal a cripple, and where he would send the formerly blind man to cleanse himself after the bloody healing. He was someone he met on the road. His holy action of healing did not require one of the traditional holy sites to be effective. It was not

that he rejected the traditions of healing from his culture. It was more that he saw, "...we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day."

Jesus knew that much harder times were coming, for him and for those who followed and loved him. He knew that action for good could bring about reactions from people who considered themselves good, and who became angry, fearful, and threatened when they saw something that they did not understand. They judged Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. And those people would say to Jesus, "Surely, we are not blind, are we?" In fact, the formerly blind man became an apostle—one who is sent—to the people who questioned him about his healing, a witness to the Christ. "Here is an astonishing thing," he told the Pharisees. "You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will...If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Many who have read the New Testament letters by the Christians who lived in the time of Jesus think of the Apostle Paul, an Asian Jew of the Pharisee sect (practitioners of Judaism who insisted on a scrupulous living-out of Jewish law) as a strict follower of Jesus as well.

However, in the letter to the Romans, he talks about our shared spiritual ancestor, Abraham, who left his own country—probably modern-day Iraq—to come to a Promised Land. Abraham took this action by a tremendous act of faith in the one God—and yet there was, as yet, no Jewish community, no body of law, no rules about circumcision as the chief means of recognizing the Jewish males that composed that community, no elaborate rules of nourishment and kinship, no definition of the Jewish faith. Clearly, faith is something powerful, but not necessarily something that the expected and recognized rules will give us when we follow them.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus faces those who judge him for healing on the Sabbath, and points out that the prophet Elijah was sent to help a widow in Zarephath in Sidon, outside the boundaries of Israel, and that the prophet Elisha healed a Syrian leper, the general Naaman. These reminders so enraged the people in the synagogue that they drove him out of the synagogue to try to drive him over a nearby cliff.

In a closed society based on kinship groups that arose from 12 brothers, sons of one man, the idea that a foreigner could receive the grace of God was capital treason, at least to the people who heard Jesus that particular morning. He was talking about the unknown, and the unknown was terrifying.

We are living in a time of a previously unknown virus, which has aroused terror, or, at a minimum, anxiety. Much of the judgment we see among Christians today seems to be based on a need to **know**—the oldest of the temptations, if the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent says anything real about human nature. Our need to determine who is holy, who is saved, and who is acceptable to God, seems unquenchable.

Often, people do not sacrifice that need until the even more unquenchable thirst for the Living Water of the Living God overwhelms them, sometimes after a disaster, death, injury, illness—or a profound spiritual awakening in their own lives. On the way to the Cathedral on March 3, I heard an old-time, so-

called “Gospel” song on the radio, the repeated theme of which was “The mighty hand of the Lord is writing down names in the Book of Life,” the implication of which was, “Be good—Jesus is watching.”

Whether your name—or mine—is written in the Book of Life is an interesting question, the answer to which we will not know until we see God face to face.

If we cannot know that, then it is safe to say that it is absolutely none of our business who else’s name is there. It may help to remember what the Lord God told Samuel in today’s lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures: “The Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

However: it is often the case that only when the rapids and floods of personal tragedy, public disaster, or spiritual crisis have gone over us that we decide to leave the salvation of others in the hands of the Living God, and to concentrate on our own relationship with the Holy One. So, here’s a suggestion: let’s not wait for the rapids and floods before stopping judging whether others are acceptable to God. Let’s begin the journey to coming closer to God ourselves. Jesus said that the first commandment is to love God, and the second is like it: to love your neighbor as yourself.

That kind of love is rooted in compassion—the recognition of the pain of others, and the universal call of all religious traditions always to treat all others as we wish to be treated.

You are reading this today for a reason. It is not a coincidence. Philo of Alexandria, a rabbi who was a contemporary of Jesus, told his students, “Be very kind; everyone you see is fighting a great battle.” That knowledge, deepened by the health crisis the whole world is going through right now, (and not our imagined knowledge of who God likes, and who God doesn’t) can be a step in the journey to letting God be the judge. Then, we can allow ourselves to be the lovers, those who seek to live as children of the light, who seek to find out what is pleasing to the Lord, those who know that they do not know...and use the Light of Love to learn more, and to be more...like Jesus.

AMEN.