

## **“Knowing How to Discern Between Right and Wrong”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of  
St. Andrew's United Church  
for Sunday, June 19, 2016  
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, or Father's Day  
Scripture Readings: Psalm 16 (Voices United #738)  
Luke 9:51-62  
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

I needed to read these scriptures today. They speak about confidence in life, assurance of the value of the faith, and an ability to face whatever comes one's way.

But let me be quick to clarify – I didn't want to read these scriptures for today. They seemed too simple in their world view, and too critical of people of other faiths, other traditions, other viewpoints. The last thing we need this week is another viewpoint, especially grounded in and supported by the Bible, that places value on being single-minded in our beliefs, and judgmental of those who differ from us.

So how does one reconcile those two realities? A world shocked by shootings in Orlando of a rising pop star and dozens of people enjoying a night out, not to ignore a child killed by an alligator in the same community. Forest fires raging in this hot, dry spring that seem to be everywhere. Talk of new missiles by North Koreans being tested, and new fighting in the Middle East.

Our neighbours to the south debate putting up walls and eliminating whole groups of people from entering the country on one hand because they think and act and believe differently from the majority, and another party suggests it is an imposition to make people have a car license – why can't we just buy a car and drive it?

Canadian Geographic has a cover story about Climate Change and the solutions to that issue. There is hope, the magazine suggests, even in the face of all of the changes in our world, not the least of which is the rapid melting of the solar icecap.

We have come a little way from 1971, when the maximum daily fine for companies polluting the environment was \$1,000. It was not a law to demand accountability as one commentator of the time suggested, but a license to pollute.

So given all of these factors, what do I do with these passages? I can't ignore their intent and world view, to offer hope in the midst of discouragement. I also cannot blindly accept what they state. And I am not about to suggest: “Let's get rid of Bible readings and have sessions to reflect on the world from our own insight and perspective alone.”

So where do I turn?

As usual, back to the biblical passages themselves.

Psalm 16 is filled with glowing phrases. “All the saints in the land” are “all my delight.” “I keep the Lord always before me.” And so “my heart is glad and my soul rejoices – even my body dwells secure.”

Okay that is going a bit too far. Do we really feel such confidence in life today? Are we always filled with joy and gladness, and feel our bodies dwell secure?

What is more, the Psalm has some sidebar comments, such as “those who choose another God multiply their sorrows.” What is that all about?

And Luke’s gospel passage also has challenges. When Jesus got a less than enthusiastic reception in Samaria, the disciples asked if they should bring fire upon the community, but Jesus rebuked them.

Is fire and judgment the default place where we begin in our relations with others, so much so that even Jesus’ disciples assumed that one should judge harshly when things go awry?

I have pondered this dilemma, and I have come to the conclusion that our views on political, religious and spiritual matters are related to our outlook on life in general.

It is my observed conviction that strong people like to be surrounded by strong people. Only weak people seek to have weak people around them, because they do not have the confidence and inner strength to face challenge and disappointment.

Strong people are those who seek other strong people to lift them up and also challenge them.

When this Psalm was written, the Psalmist was having a rough time. He may sound positive and strong, with his statements about keeping the Lord always before him, and affirms that his heart swells, and his soul rejoices. But do they?

That’s what he hopes, and maybe even is what he has experienced in the past, but when he feels down he gets his strength (if you can call it that) from putting others down, judging them in their beliefs, attitudes, ideas, and lifestyle. It is an approach we all can be guilty of accepting.

Judging others usually is done from a position of personal weakness, not strength.

And when we feel discouraged and down something else happens to us – we start living our lives on the basis of seeking what is most urgent, not what is most important.

Important things demand planning, foresight, concern for what may happen. The urgent just pops up. It is the difference between watching one’s diet and exercise program as a way to maintain health, and only do those things when the doctor orders it. It is the difference between planning for financial health, and scrambling to pay the bills as they arrive in the mail, with little idea as to from where the money will come. It is the difference between praying when we feel desperate, and praying when we desire a closer connection to God and others, no matter what is going on in our lives or the world around us.

If we live our lives always worrying about what is most urgent, we miss opportunities to live in a calmer and saner way that comes about when we focus on what is important; then, when crises happen, or changes are forced upon us, we know we have at least set our lives on a clear path, what the hymn reminds us of being a “sure foundation.”

The Psalmist, I would suggest, was not so much judging those with different viewpoints and religious understandings as he was saying: “I want to believe, but I am feeling particularly vulnerable right now, God. Help my unbelief.”

It does no good to blame others for our own uncertainties, or our individual fears.

If nothing else, we have learned that lesson this week.