When I met with Pastor Greg he was inquiring about how to engage his leadership team in a new season of discernment about the future of their local church. Ministry Executive Mike came to see us about how best to lead a strategic planning process with his nonprofit board and ministry staff. Christian businesswoman Sherry came for one-on-one spiritual direction about how to prayerfully anticipate her next phase of professional growth and acumen.

All of these leaders are at a crossroads seeking guidance for the individual leader, the team, or his or her ministry. The issue is usually about how to make a significant decision which will positively impact their lives. They are looking for a process which will lead to a solution. They generally want help discovering the quickest route from confusion to clarity.

However, there is something more important than the directions we suggest, and that's diagnosing what's going on underneath the hood. The GPS won't get you anywhere if your engine's not working right. As they lean into whatever form of discernment that's in front of them, there is one more important element to consider: the heart. Yes, the heart of the discernment process is the heart of the person(s) involved in spiritual discernment. This important reality is often overlooked or assumed by many leaders today.

Spiritual discernment begins with a growing attentiveness to God's loving invitation to come close, draw near, and receive His grace-filled embrace. This is discernment of His presence, power, and peace. Out of this awareness we discover God's divine intention for us to follow fervently after His will. This is discernment of His purpose and priorities for our individual lives and our shared expression of His love for the world around us. Not necessarily linear, but certainly a “both/and” discovery process—spiritual discernment includes both invitation and intention.

In Luke 24, when Jesus came alongside the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they didn't immediately recognize His presence (vs. 16). He asked them a few simple questions and they responded as if He were the only one on planet earth Who was unaware of what had just taken place (vs. 19-24). But as He walked with them, shared with them from the Word, and joined them at the table, they recognized His presence. “Weren't our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (vs. 32).

After this encounter, they got up, returned to Jerusalem, found the eleven, and proclaimed the truth of Jesus’ resurrected presence (vs. 33-35). Their experience of His presence, power and peace was the starting point of discernment for the disciples. It’s the same starting point for us today.

The burning heart is attentive to the presence of God. A burning heart is passionate about developing a vital relationship with the Lord, and desirous of deepening intimacy with Christ every single day. A burning heart is listening for the still small voice of the Spirit and knows that God has more important things to say to us than we do to Him. A burning heart is a discerning heart.

Today, however, instead of burning hearts, we often encounter burned out hearts. Most of our lives are supersaturated with words, activities, relationships and responsibilities. We have believed for a long time “I'd rather burn out than rust out” so we rationalize our busy, productive lives. As a result, we neglect our hearts and live in a world of assumption or negligence about its true condition.

If our heart isn’t burned out, it could be broken. Bruised. Betrayed. Besieged. No matter, if our heart isn’t aflame with the love of Christ it’s most likely a hardened heart, worn thin, easily cynical or arrogant. There are a lot of these hearts in the Christian community today. Most likely they’re sitting across the board table from you. Or, quite possibly, these words reflect the state of your own heart.

Where your heart is, there will be your discernment also. This is a truism I’ve seen over and over again. In all of the groups we’ve serviced as facilitators of a custom-designed discernment process, we’ve seen hearts that are all over the map, from burned out to burning, and everything in between. No matter who joins you at the discernment table, they bring with...
If we are to engage in meaningful spiritual discernment with others, and listen well for His will for our shared ministry life, we first need to tend to the state of our own hearts. What’s your choice—a burning or burned-out heart? What you choose for yourself will impact those around you as well.

“While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you’” (Luke 24:36). May the presence, power, and peace of Christ be our reality too as we enter our prayer closet for personal discernment. From that perspective, the process of engaging in spiritual discernment with others will flow toward a clearer understanding of God’s purposes and priorities.

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