

Imagine:  
Discernment, Ministry, and Dreaming the Dream of God

Grace Episcopal Church  
Proper 21  
18th Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Brian C Justice

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Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29  
Psalm 19.7-14  
James 5.13-20  
Mark 9.38-50

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O Holy God of Love,  
Open our minds. Open our hearts.  
Take our hearts  
And set them on fire.  
Amen.

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Imagine.

Imagine a house  
on a bright morning in the fall.

The windows are wide open.

The autumn breeze blows  
through the house.

The heat and humidity of summer are gone,  
the relief and refreshment of fall are ... well ... here.

Imagine that the house is the Church.

And the house – the Church – is filled with people,  
you and I,  
the people of God,

the Church.

And like the windows of the house,  
the minds and hearts  
of the people are wide open.

The Spirit of God, like the autumn breeze, blows through ...

And the Spirit calls us forward ... *everyone of us* ...

To go ... to love ... to serve ... to dream the dream of God in our lives ...

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And this is the vision that we are offered in our texts from Numbers and Mark.

In the reading from Numbers, two ordinary men – Eldad and Medad – are not “registered” (and so are not official leaders of the people) but prophesied anyway in the camp among the people of Israel. They dared to speak the Word of God.

Joshua, as assistant to Moses, an official leader, strongly objects and demands that Moses make them stop.

But Moses says, “Would that *all the Lord’s people* were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”

... *all the people* ...

In the reading from Mark, John approaches Jesus to report that he and the other disciples “saw a man casting out demons” in the name of Jesus. Because the man was not 1 of the 12, John indicates they tried to stop the man from his work. Like Moses, Jesus surprises his disciples – “the official leadership” – and says, “do not stop him ... *whoever is not against us is for us.*”

Moses and Jesus shock the official leaders – and perhaps shock us – with the message that everyone is called by God ...

everyone has work to do ...

everyone has a part to play ...

Servant-ministry ...

the work of radical hospitality and relentless compassion and righteous inclusion  
... these belong not just to prophets and popes, not just to rabbis and rectors.

No ... you and I are also called.

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So what do we do? How do we start?

Hearing our call ... claiming our ministry ... dreaming the dream ...  
It begins with discernment.

Today, here at Grace, we are beginning our fall program in discernment.

What is discernment?

The word “discernment” comes from the Latin verb meaning “to separate apart.”

So we are trying to distinguish the voice of God from all the other voices that we hear ...  
trying to “separate apart” God’s voice. Literally trying to hear the voice of God!

Of course, many times God’s voice is heard in the voices of others ...  
your family, your friends, your partner, your employer, your employee ...  
in the casual acquaintance ... in the stranger ... in the enemy ...

Sometimes ... God’s voice may not be in those voices.

Many times we hear the divine voice  
in nature, in books, in art, in icons, in music.

Discernment is a practice, a discipline, an effort with a structure to it.  
It’s what the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh calls “the practice of deep listening.”

Discernment is not just for monks and mystics; and definitely not just for people who are  
wondering if they should join the clergy!

No ... discerning the voice of God is for everybody. Why?

Because God calls all of us to servant-ministry.  
Because God calls all of us to dream the dream of God.  
And we need to do the work to hear the voice ...

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I invite you to open the Book of Common Prayer to the Catechism, page 855:

Q. What is the mission of the Church?

A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

“To unity.” Not to “same-ness.” We are not all the same. We’re not supposed to be the same. We don’t want to be the same. But we are supposed to be together. In unity. In community.

Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?

A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.

Justice. Peace. Love. This ... this is the dream of God. Imagine!

Imagine unity ... community ... in justice, peace, love.

This is the dream of God and this is the mission of the Church!

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?

A. The church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

## **The Ministry**

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

What is the First Order of Ministry?

Lay persons! The People of the Church!

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

Christ is Love ... so “bear witness to love wherever you may be.”

The boundlessness of that call ...  
“wherever” you may be ... SO ...  
when you are at the dinner table, love ...  
when you are in traffic in Short Pump, love ...  
when you are at the grocery store, love ...  
when you are at work with really annoying people, love ...  
when you are in a difficult conversation, love ...  
when you are here, love ...  
wherever you are ... ??? ... (love)

Q. What is the ministry of a bishop?

A. The ministry of a bishop is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as apostle, chief priest, and pastor of a diocese; to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the whole Church; to proclaim the Word of God; to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up of the Church; and to ordain others to continue Christ's ministry.

Bishop. From the Greek “episcopoi” meaning “oversee.  
So, much of the Bishop’s work is oversight and leadership.

Q. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?

A. The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

Priest. From the Greek “presbuteros” meaning senior or elder.  
So, much of the Priest’s work is leadership and care for others.

Q. What is the ministry of a deacon?

A. The ministry of a deacon is to represent Christ and his Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist bishops and priests in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Deacon. From the Greek “diakonos” meaning servant.  
So, a servant to those in need and a servant in the liturgy ...  
(why I set the table and clear the table during communion)

Q. What is the duty of all Christians?

A. The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.

We are all ministers.

We are all called to serve.

We are all called to dream the dream of God in this life.

Our task then is to listen for the voice of God – to discern – so that we can claim our ministry of justice, peace, and love ... whatever that ministry might look like in our lives.

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As we begin the practice of discernment together, let us pray the well-known, well-loved prayer of (everyone's favorite Christian monk of the 20th century) Thomas Merton.  
(from *Thoughts in Solitude*, II.2):

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think that I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this  
you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always,  
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

AMEN.