"Holy Listening", A Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, July 26, 2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY

"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"…. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you."(1 Kings 3:9-12)

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."(Matthew 13:52)

Our Anglican tradition is rooted in the practices and values of the Benedictine monastic tradition. Our Book of Common Prayer, the jewel in the crown of Anglicanism, distilled the essence of the rhythm of prayer, work and study that is the core of Benedictine monastic life with the intention that the local parish church would be for its members a community of prayer, a place of radical hospitality, and a "school for the Lord's service" just as the monastery was for the monks and nuns. As St. Mark's continues its journey of self-examination and search for new leadership, today's readings taken in tandem with the Benedictine tradition of which we are a part, offer wisdom to support us in the important work we are doing in this tender time of transition. Solomon's request that God grant him a wise and discerning mind, coupled with Paul's teachings on the movement of the Spirit in the hearts and minds of those who sincerely pray, and Jesus' variety of parables about the kingdom of heaven give us much to work with as we continue the process of discerning who we are as a parish and who God is calling us to be as we move forward.

We meet Solomon at a moment of profound vulnerability. He is newly crowned king, young, ("I am only a child"), inexperienced, aware of the weight of what has been entrusted to him. God comes to him in a dream and says, "Ask what I should give you." It is an extraordinary offer. Solomon could have asked for wealth, victory, security, long life, power or the vanquishing of his enemies. Instead, he asks for one thing: "Give your servant a wise and discerning mind…able to discern good and evil." Solomon knows that leadership—faithful leadership—requires discernment. Discernment is not simply decision-making. Discernment is a way of seeing, a way of listening, a way of sorting through competing goods and evils in a complicated world. Discernment requires prayer, attention and listening, both to God and to other people who are in community with us. Discernment requires attention so that we can perceive the Spirit of God interceding "with sighs too deep for words."

That is exactly the work St. Mark's is doing right now. You are discerning who you are, where God is calling you, and how to find a clergy leader to help you flourish. You are listening for God's future in a world that feels polarized, fractured, and anxious and in which churches like ours are struggling to maintain a foothold. Solomon's prayer is our prayer.

The Benedictine tradition gives us a beautiful, grounded way to understand discernment. The Rule of St. Benedict begins with a single word: *Listen*. "Listen carefully," Benedict writes, "with the ear of your heart." Discernment begins not with talking, but with listening—listening beneath our preferences, beneath our anxieties, beneath the noise of a polarized world. Listening to each other. Listening for God.

And Benedict insists that this listening is communal. In Chapter 3 of the Rule, he instructs the abbot to call the whole community together for counsel when important decisions must be made. And then he says something astonishing: "The Lord often reveals what is better to the younger." So wisdom is not concentrated at the top. Discernment requires listening to the voices we might overlook—the quiet ones, the new ones, the ones who see the community with fresh eyes as well as those who have been here for generations. That is Benedictine discernment: communal wisdom born of humble listening.

Modern Benedictine communities often summarize this with two simple questions:

- What is life-giving?
- What is life-draining?

Not "What do we want?" Not "What have we always done?" But "What gives life?" and "What drains life?"

These questions reveal God's direction more reliably than any strategic plan or carefully crafted job description. These questions must undergird the responses you all make to the survey that will come to you later this summer and the conversations you will have after that in small groups. This discernment is a community effort, not simply the work of the Search Committee. When you respond to the survey do so prayerfully. When you come to small group meetings, be ready to listen with the ear of your heart.

Another wisdom teacher from our Christian tradition is St. Ignatius of Loyola, 16th century founder of the Jesuit order. He offers us another lens for discernment. He teaches that discernment is noticing the inner movements of the Spirit in our own hearts and souls, with the desire to find what he calls consolation. Consolation is found in those feelings and intuitions that draw us toward God— experiences of peace, spaciousness, courage, hope, generosity. The opposite of consolation is desolation, which pulls us inward, inside ourselves and away from God. These would include fear, scarcity, defensiveness, anxiety.

Ignatius would ask this congregation: When you imagine your future, what expands your heart, what brings hope, what breeds generosity, what gives courage? And what constricts

your hearts – what causes fear, defensiveness, anxiety? You want to move towards that which opens the heart – consolation, and move away from that which constricts the heart – desolation. Discernment is paying attention to those movements—noticing what opens us toward God's future and what closes us in fear.

Ignatius also teaches that discernment requires freedom from disordered attachments—the things we cling to out of habit or fear. A parish in transition must ask:

- What expectations of clergy do we need to release?
- What old wounds still shape our imagination?
- What attachments keep us from seeing the treasure God has placed in our field?

Discernment is not just listening; it is letting go so that the new thing God is creating can be born in this community.

And then we come to Jesus' parables—this week a string of images about mustard seeds, yeast, hidden treasure, pearls, and nets full of fish. Jesus always taught in parables. He rarely answered questions directly, and infrequently issued definitive statements about what is right and what is wrong. Brother Jamie Nelson at the SSJE community in Boston wrote this week:

> *Jesus' frequent use of parables points to a complicated truth: that the beauty, goodness, and power of God will stay beyond our knowing in this lifetime. So why use parables? Parables create space for wondering and for wrestling with God. Parables invite further seeking - they don't set up tidy answers to regurgitate on command. Parables plant the seeds of the kingdom. (SSJE Daily Newsletter, July 23, 2026, Br. Jamie Nelson)*

Jesus does not give pithy, declarative statements. He gives stories and images that open us, unsettle us, stretch us, confuse us and invite us to see differently. Parables are discernment training. They can say different things to different people. They require that we wrestle with the images or the story lines, and frequently we will not agree with our neighbor on exactly what they mean. They offer food to chew on over a lifetime, not a one time answer to a one time dilemma. Jesus said that it is critical to "bring out of [our] treasure what is new and what is old." That's discernment – identifying the "treasures" hidden in our old ways of being and doing, as well as the treasure hidden in new ways of being and doing. As we embark on this season of listening, Jesus invites us to tell stories, and to let those stories reveal how God has worked in this community over the years and is working still.

We live in a moment when institutions feel fragile, trust is thin, and polarization shapes every conversation inside and outside the church. Churches everywhere are anxious about the future. But discernment is not about predicting the future. It is about perceiving God's presence in this moment. The images Jesus offers today prompt important questions for us. What is God growing here at St. Mark's right now—even if it looks as small as a mustard

seed? What treasure has God hidden in this field? What pearl in this community is worth giving everything for? What of the things in the net of St. Mark's life needs to be kept, and what needs to be released?

You are in a season of holy listening. A season of communal wisdom. A season of noticing the Spirit's movements. A season of wondering and wrestling with Jesus' parables. You are being invited to listen with the ear of your heart. To honor every voice. To ask what is life-giving. To release what is life-draining. To trust small beginnings. To find hidden treasure. To sort wisely. To seek God's future with courage.

When the process seems daunting, or the way forward seems unclear, take heart from Paul's words: *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*. Embrace the process of discernment as you walk together in that love. Amen.

This is Solomon's prayer. This is Benedict's wisdom. This is Ignatius' insight. This is Jesus' teaching. And it is your calling at this time in your congregational life.

May God give you wise and discerning minds, ears to hear the quiet voices, eyes to see hidden treasure, courage to release what drains life, and hearts open to the movements of the Spirit. May you listen with the ear of your heart. May you wonder and wrestle with Jesus' parables. May you seek God's future with joy. And may the seeds of the kingdom take root among you.

Amen.

The mustard seed teaches us to pay attention to the small. The yeast teaches us to trust hidden processes. The treasure hidden in the field teaches us to recognize value. The pearl teaches us to let go of lesser things for that which matters most. The net teaches us to sort wisely even when we are enjoying abundance. Parables do not tell us what to think. They teach us how to think, how to listen. They cultivate the very thing Solomon asks for: a wise and discerning mind.

Discernment refuses to let fear drive the decision about who God is preparing to lead this congregation into its next months and years. Discernment asks: