

Listen, Discern, and Let Go (September 27, 2026)

Exodus 17:1–7; Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16; Philippians 2:1–13; Matthew 21:23–32)

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There is a subject I used to teach that I sometimes believe would be valuable not just in a university setting but also in church. It's Logic. Logic trains us to think carefully, recognize arguments, identify contradictions, and reason through complex questions. However, there's one type of problem in logic that can cause even confident students to become suddenly silent: the dilemma. A dilemma occurs when you face what appears to be two possible answers—yet each answer might land you in trouble. For example, consider a husband returning home late, and his wife asks, "Did you stop at the store on your way home?" He responds, "Yes." She then asks, "Then why didn't you bring what I asked you to buy?" Alternatively, if he replies, "No," she asks, "Then why were you at the store for forty-five minutes?" Each answer leads to another question! Imagine a professor asks a student, "Did you understand the material?" If the student responds, "Yes," the professor might say, "Wonderful. Now explain it." If the student replies, "No," the professor could ask, "Then why didn't you ask for help?" Sometimes, the wisest response is not a clever answer but simply: "I don't know." This is exactly where the religious leaders find themselves in today's Gospel. They believed they were asking Jesus a question, but his reply put them in a dilemma. Suddenly, those who thought they had all the answers could only respond: "We don't know." The question they posed to Jesus was simple enough: "By what authority are you doing these things?" And, in fact, it was a valid question. Jesus had entered Jerusalem the day before, greeted by crowds shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Subsequently, he entered the temple and caused a commotion.

I often think of Jesus as a gentle figure, sitting among lambs or blessing children, sometimes pointing to his heart where a dove rests. However, this passage shows a different side of Jesus—an assertive and courageous one. In the temple, he overturns tables, scatters money changers, releases animals, and calls it a “den of robbers,” which isn’t the image typically found on a Christmas card. Yet, this is Jesus too. He is both gentle and confrontational; comforting and challenging. He welcomes people into the kingdom but also confronts those who are too comfortable with a religion that no longer listens to God. The next day, the chief priests and elders question him: “By what authority are you doing these things?” Jesus responds with a question about John’s baptism—whether it came from heaven or was of human origin—which leaves them trapped, afraid to answer either way, and they reply, “We don’t know.”

Notice something crucial. They don’t say, “We need more time to understand.” Or, “We’ve honestly wrestled with this question.” Instead, they imply, “We are unwilling to answer.” Their issue isn’t a lack of information; it’s a lack of openness. They’ve already decided. They’re not listening to discern what God might be saying; they’re only listening to defend themselves. And this leads us to our theme:

Listen.

Today’s Scriptures emphasize the importance of listening. The psalm opens with an invitation: “Give ear, O my people, to my teaching.” In Exodus, Moses listens to God amid a crisis—the Israelites are upset, thirsty, and questioning why Moses led them out of Egypt. Moses could have responded defensively, but instead, he turns to God, listens, and God provides water from the rock. The point isn’t that Moses had all the answers; it’s that he knew where to listen. This may be one of the most challenging spiritual disciplines, as we are bombarded by many voices: fear, anger, public opinion, our past, woundedness, and

self-protection. In contrast, God's voice is quiet. Often, the real spiritual challenge isn't God's silence, but our tendency to listen to everything else. The chief priests and elders heard Jesus but didn't truly listen; they heard John but didn't truly listen. They had ears but were not open. The next focus is:

Discern.

Listening and discernment are not identical. Listening involves being open to hear, while discernment asks, "What is God prompting me to recognize in what I hear?" Jesus' inquiry about John is fundamentally a question of discernment. Was John just another religious figure, or was God speaking through him? The leaders failed to discern because they had something to lose—such as their position, reputation, authority, certainty, or status within the religious establishment. Sometimes, the obstacle to hearing God's voice isn't an inability to hear, but assuming we already know what we want God to say. This is spiritually risky because true discernment can lead us in unexpected directions and challenge our assumptions. It might reveal our biases. It could push us to change. It might even force us to admit: "I was wrong." And this leads to the third movement: Let Go.

Let go.

Jesus recounts a story about two sons. A father tells the first son, "Go and work in the vineyard." The son replies, "No," but later changes his mind and goes. The father then asks the second son to go. The second replies, "Yes, sir," but does not actually go. Jesus then asks, "Which of the two did his father's will?" The answer is clear: the first son. The lesson is straightforward yet challenging: it's not just about what we say, but what we do. Jesus intensifies this point by telling the religious leaders that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom before them. Why? Not because they were morally better or because Jesus idealized their lives, but because some of them listened to John, believed, and were

willing to change. John came “in the way of righteousness,” and when these people heard him, they responded. The religious leaders, however, heard him but refused to change. The real issue is deeper than simply words versus actions. The issue is: Will we listen? Will we discern?

And when God reveals something to us, are we willing to let go? That is the challenge of the Gospel. The first son had to let go of his “no.” The religious leaders had to let go of their certainty. The tax collectors and prostitutes had to let go of the identities society had given them. And perhaps each of us has something we need to let go of. Sometimes it is an old resentment. Sometimes it is an old fear. Philippians gives us the larger Christian vision. Paul says: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” And then comes that beautiful movement of self-emptying. Christ does not cling to status. Christ does not cling to privilege. Christ does not cling to power. Christ empties himself and takes the form of a servant. That is what letting go looks like in Christian life. It does not mean becoming nothing. It means becoming free enough for God to work through us. Paul says: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you.” Notice the mystery. We work. But God is working in us. We discern. But God is already at work. We respond. But grace comes before our response. We let go. And discover that God’s hands were already holding us. This also helps us understand the difficult story from Exodus. The Israelites are thirsty and angry. Moses is caught between the people and God. The people complain. Moses cries out. And God provides water from a rock. Even in the wilderness, God is at work. The people do not yet understand what God is doing. But God’s presence is there. Perhaps that is one of the great lessons of faith: God is often at work before we understand what God is doing. So we listen. We discern. And we let go. Not because we have all the answers.

Sometimes faith begins with saying, “I don’t know.” It might be, “I don’t know what God is doing here,” or “I don’t know where this road will lead,” or “I don’t know why this

happened,” or “I don’t know what the next chapter will look like.” Unlike the chief priests and elders, our “I don’t know” can be an honest beginning rather than a defensive ending. It can be, “I don’t know—but I am willing to listen,” or “I don’t know—but I am willing to discern,” or “I don’t know—but I am willing to let go.” This creates a very different kind of “I don’t know,” one filled with faith. This attitude may be especially important for us as a congregation navigating a changing world. We can’t precisely predict what the future holds, which ministries will succeed, which challenges remain, or what God might be asking of us next. But perhaps we don’t need to know everything; perhaps our calling is simpler: listen for God’s voice, discern God’s direction, let go of what prevents us from following, and then act. The Gospel asks us not just for the right answers but to become people willing to hear, to change, and to serve. When the chief priests questioned Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things?”, His response was already evident in His presence. His authority wasn’t only in His words but in His righteousness, His service, His courage to confront injustice, His compassion for the rejected, and His obedience to God. Maybe the question for us today isn’t just “What is the right answer?” but rather, “What am I hearing? What is God asking me to discern? What do I need to let go of to say yes?” May God grant us ears to listen, hearts to discern, and courage to let go—so that, like Christ, we become servants of God’s love. Listen. Discern. Let go. Then go and do God’s will. Amen.