



## ***Session 2 – Laying a Foundation for Possibility Thinking and Communal Discernment***

### **Input Talk - Elizabeth McCabe – April 2, 2019**

Hello Sisters! It's so good to be here with you today. I'd like to begin with a story. This is a story from the Jewish tradition:

*In the beginning there was only the holy darkness. In Jewish Kabbalah teaching it is called the Ein Sof, or the source of life. And then, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand, thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light. And the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. And the light of the world was scattered into a thousand fragments of light, and they fell into all events, and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.*

We are all born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world.

Here's the good news: This is, and can only be, a collective task. Because it involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all—each one of us—repairers and healers of the world.

This concept is called *Tikkun Olan* in Hebrew – repairer of the world. And I mean the world that touches you, the people close by, the daily, those ordinary resting places for our heart.

Consider how Jesus, Teresa, John of the Cross, and so many who have followed in their footsteps were doing just that – seeking to uncover hidden wholeness and use personal, and subsequently communal, power to make a difference.

This story illustrates that everyone and everything has in it a seed of a greater wholeness, a dream of possibility.

Today's session is entitled: *Laying a Foundation for Possibility Thinking and Communal Discernment*. This notion of "Possibility Thinking" came out of the materials we used in Session 1. The idea was that in order to enter into times of change and move forward with confidence, we have to find places of spaciousness in our lives that open us to new possibilities, to creative inspiration, and freedom for imagination.

As we heard in those opening greetings from 5 of your communities, each is in their own place doing their own creative work. This is a time of change in which we need to pay attention, particularly listening deeply to each other non-judgmentally, and mining each sister for her wisdom and insight as you communally consider and discern decisions and actions.

Listening deeply to each other implies that we can each access our interior wisdom. We can articulate with confidence and can wholeheartedly share with a sense that we hold particular pieces of light. But if we do not bring our light to the table it cannot inform and influence and inspire the whole.

Thomas Merton said to a monk who asked him in a time of great change, "What do we do now?" And Merton's response was, "every monk must stand on his own two feet." The fullness of possibility thinking cannot be explored without individual engagement. So then the question is, **How do we do that?**

One way we grow in claiming, naming, and expressing our voice is through practices of **personal discernment**. Through personal discernment we grow in our own self-awareness. We grow in knowing what we are attached to, what we desire, and we do this by considering ourselves objectively and non-judgmentally – observing ourselves as a friend.

Fr. Brian McDermott made important distinctions between personal and spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment is asking not only 'what do I think or feel' but 'what is God seeking or desiring from me?'

Tim Challies' book, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, offers this definition:

*Discernment is a process of prayerful reflection which leads a person or community to an understanding of God's call at a given time or in particular circumstances of life. It involves listening to God in all the ways God communicates with us: in prayer, in the scriptures, through the Church and the world, in personal experience, and in other people.*

A take away may be that we draw closer to discerning God's desire to work in and through us, in part by knowing ourselves. In order to detach from our own ego or "false self" we must recognize her and in growing in personal awareness we open spaces for God's possibility thinking to dwell within us or move through us into the world.

There are two significant events in theology that have helped shed light on this sort of Christian discernment and decision-making.

First, recent developments in spiritual theology highlight the importance of discovering within ourselves answers to the questions: "Where is God leading me?" and "What does God ask of me now?"

Secondly, moral theology's recent stress on the person as a moral agent and on the need for personal acceptance and responsibility for "my" moral decisions lends support to a decision-making process that is personal, responsible, and maturing. And I think Fr. Saverio nods to this in his letter.

Psychology, likewise, has provided a context for decision-making that is authentically human and caring. Developmental psychology, particularly the works of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, as well as the recent psycho-theological perspective of James Fowler, delineates the need for human growth which is situated in the context of healthy emotional development.

Personal decisions are influenced by our stage of development, which reflects over the years a developing appreciation and understanding of God's call.

Ideally, then, everyday decision-making takes account of our own conscious realization of God's presence in our life and elicits within us a deepening awareness and care for others. Personal autonomy as we are speaking of it here is not to be conflated with individualism. I think of it more as being in possession of oneself. As we grow and move through stages of development we come to know that inherent in each of us as individuals is wisdom and that all things are interrelated. So a focus on self-awareness is not self-centered, but rather honoring what comes forward from you in service to your community.

In Fr. Saverio's letter he makes distinction between juridical autonomy and personal autonomy. He encourages you all to "complete this journey of education in autonomy and in responsible participation in the government of your communities."

Personal and spiritual discernment work in tandem. Fr. Brian McDermott shares that there are ways to enter personal spiritual discernment and these ways include deep interior listening, watching for evidence through our feelings and inclinations, confirmation of the genesis of those feelings and inclinations, and then taking provisional action always remaining open to new data.

The process of individual discernment requires taking time in making a decision, using both the head and heart, and assessing important values. Making decisions with the head means to first reflect on the situation and emphasize the rational aspect of the decision-making process. In order to make a decision that is ours it also requires the heart in which the individual makes decisions based on feelings as well as rationality.

Values in the discernment process are weighing options that decide what is most important. Every individual's value system is different which effects each individual discernment process. Combining values, using both the head and heart, and taking sufficient time when making a decision are the main steps for a successful discernment process.

Now group or communal discernment is a separate branch of discernment. In group discernment each individual must first undergo their own discernment process. The same principles of values, using the head and heart, as well as giving the decision-making process ample time, all of that still apply in communal discernment.

Laying a foundation for communal discernment therefore begins with personal discernment.

Now discernment is a skill. It is not an inherent ability like breathing or chewing, but a skill like reading or public speaking that can be practiced and improved. There is not a person on earth who has been born with a full measure of discernment or who has all of the discernment she will ever need. There is not a person who has attained a level of expertise that allows her to move on and to leave discernment behind. Like a master musician who practices her skills more as her acclaim grows, in the same way a discerning person will see with

ever-greater clarity her need to increase in discernment. She will want to sharpen and improve this skill throughout her life.

It is likely that God did not immediately bestow upon Solomon the full measure of his eventual wisdom and discernment. It is more likely that God gave Solomon ability but required that he continually sharpen this skill.

The Hebrew word most commonly translated as *discernment* is otherwise translated as *understanding*. Discernment is closely related to understanding and depends upon a right understanding of God and God's ways. In Proverbs, Solomon continually ties knowledge, wisdom and discernment, not as separate disciplines, but as related.

Discernment involves not only understanding, but the application of that understanding. Part of discernment is wisdom in action, wisdom applied.

Sr. Doris Klein shares a perspective that inspiration and possibility thinking can be accessed through creative arts. We use everything in our lives, from the mundane to the glorious, to open us. And you were invited to reflect on ways in which you personally access insight, whether through the creative arts like Sr. Doris, or in other ways.

So let's just take a moment now before we go into our small groups to consider what is in your own heart. What are you finding insightful or surprising from the materials in this Session?