

The Reverend Susan Prinz
Meditation for DHC Membership Meeting
December 7, 2020

“He has shown you O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”. Micah 6:8

This scripture has been your guiding light through this most unexpected year of 2020, a year that started predictably enough, but soon morphed into something none of us could have ever anticipated. The issues of justice and mercy have been spotlighted in so many ways this year, and the need for both perhaps has never been more clear.

But what really stands out from this scripture is the injunction to “walk humbly with your God”. What does walking humbly with your God mean to you? How does that look as you make your way through these days of pandemic?

To walk humbly with your God is where we begin to honor this injunction from Micah, before we can begin to act justly and love mercy. To know justice, to practice mercy requires us first to pay attention to where God leads us. First we listen, then we act. First we contemplate, then we move. God created each of us uniquely with special gifts; we each have special gifts to offer to the Kingdom of God. But it’s not always clear to us what our gifts are or how we are meant to use them. And the demands and needs of the world are often so loud that we feel we must respond to all of them, leaving us feeling like failures too often.

Today is the Feast Day of St. Ambrose of Milan, one of the most important ecclesiastical figures of the 4th century. His understanding of theological issues guided the early church through many difficulties, and we have him to thank for the choral practice of antiphonal chanting of psalms.

Ambrose’s story is a powerful illustration of how God works in unexpected and surprising ways, if we are willing to walk humbly with God. His story is also quite humorous, and so very human. Ambrose grew up in an upper-class Roman family, the youngest of three children. He became a politician and rose to the position of governor of the region around Milan. In the 4th century, when Ambrose was governor, Christianity was still working out its identity, grappling with controversies around theology. The heresy of Ambrose’s day had to do with the Arianism, the understanding of the nature of Jesus. Was he human or was he divine? Arians believed Jesus was subordinate to God, but Catholics believed Jesus shared the divinity of God in equal measure. Today, when you say the second paragraph of the Nicene Creed, you refute the heresy of Arianism with the words, “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father”.

But it almost didn’t happen, this understanding of Jesus as being one with God. If Ambrose hadn’t been willing to “walk humbly with his God”, our understanding of our faith

might be very different today. This issue of Arianism was a hot button issue in Milan in 374 , with a deep conflict between Catholics and Arians as they came together to elect a new bishop. Ambrose was at the church that day as the governor, hoping to prevent the anticipated riot between these warring factions. As Ambrose took the podium to calm the crowds, his address was interrupted by the call, “Ambrose, bishop!”. The call spread throughout the crowd, till the whole of the church was filled with the cry “Ambrose, bishop!”.

But, although Ambrose identified as a Christian, he’d never been baptized. Ambrose had never been trained in theological matters. Ambrose was not ordained. And finally, Ambrose didn’t want to be bishop. In no way was he prepared to be the bishop. He fled to a colleague’s home and went into hiding for the next week. But the colleague revealed Ambrose’s location and events transpired that brought Ambrose out of hiding, and he did agree to serve as bishop. Within a week, Ambrose was baptized, ordained and duly consecrated as bishop. And he was a great bishop, a great theologian, with gifts and skills that helped form our faith tradition as we know it today.

I believe that Ambrose’s story illustrates what it looks like to “walk humbly with our God”. Yes, he didn’t seem to have the training or knowledge to become a bishop, yes, he ran and hid when first faced with this possibility. And no, he did not want to be a bishop initially, but he paid attention to the messages that revealed what appeared to be God’s will for him. Ambrose’s story illustrates what “walking humbly with our God” looks like. Eventually, Ambrose paid attention to the signs that came his way, or in the words we use in the ordination process, he actively discerned what God was asking of him. But discernment of God’s will is not just for clergy wanna-be’s, but part of every Christian’s life. Discernment, walking humbly with our God means remaining open to the unexpected invitations that God places before us continually. Like Ambrose, discernment can lead us to say yes, but equally, a healthy discernment process might lead us to say “no”, or “not yet”.

How do we know though, what discernment looks like? How do we know we are “walking humbly with our God” and not just following our own desires? I’d like to finish this meditation with a few thoughts on this, based on some of my own experiences and those of far greater spiritual minds than mine.

1. Unlike Ambrose, we might face a possibility that fills us with energy and enthusiasm. The word “enthusiasm” comes from the Greek, “en theos”, or with God. A sense of enthusiasm for an idea or project can reveal a holy invitation to use your gifts and passions in a particular direction.
2. But like Ambrose, sometimes opportunities come our way that seem overwhelming, impossible. When experiencing those moments, I often use what I call my “open door” approach. Prayers generally look like this: “God, if you want me to do this, open the next door that leads me toward your will”. If doors open, I step through them, and then pray again when faced with another closed door. As doors keep

opening, I keep moving. If they don't open, pray for direction, to see where God might be leading instead.

3. Sometimes we hear God's message internally, a sense of rightness or peace around a decision. As I discerned for the priesthood, after months of prayer, I heard from within, God's clear call to sacramental ministry. Immediately following this call, I felt a deep peace, an affirmation that I'd heard correctly. That sense of peace is a sign and gift from God to pay attention to.
4. And sometimes, like the crowd that lifted Ambrose into bishophood, invitations come from outside ourselves. Sometimes these invitations reveal that others see gifts in us that we may not, and in those cases, the above suggestions are helpful. In discernment times like these, pay attention to chance comments, compliments, observations from those who know you.
5. And finally, a caveat: as a woman speaking to women, we have a tendency to be Martha's, to do more and more, to say yes more than we should. We can so easily overwhelm ourselves, feeling like our value to God and the church comes more from what we do rather than who we are. In times like those, remember Mary, sister of Martha, who Jesus said chose the better way. Mary defied the customs of her day by sitting at Jesus' feet instead of helping Martha in the kitchen. Sometimes God calls us to say no, to defy the expectations of others so that we too can sit at Jesus' feet. In the words of one of my wise women parishioners, "No is a holy word".

Walking humbly with our God means sometimes saying yes, and sometimes saying no. God's love is not reliant on whether we say yes or no. God's love simply is, given freely and abundantly.

For many, if not all of us, these many months of pandemic have been so difficult. We are stressed, exhausted, and lonely. I believe we are doing the best we can in these days. A friend mentioned to me recently that she began 2020 with the hope that she could begin to see life more clearly. She never expected this pandemic would give her that opportunity. But perhaps one small light in these dark days is that we have an opportunity to discern just where God leads us. God didn't give us this pandemic, but God always works through the hard patches of life to draw us deeper into his loving care.

In closing, remember these signs of God's leading: enthusiasm, open doors, a sense of peace, the insights of others. May they serve as guideposts in your journeys of discernment. Amen.