

LOUISVILLE SEMINARY

Discernment | Marcus A. Hong

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DISCERNMENT

Deciding to come to seminary does not mark the end of vocational discernment. If anything, it entails an intensification of the discernment process -- a deepening that could last your entire life. As you consider seminary, it can be helpful to know exactly what kind of ministry you want to engage when you graduate. At the same time, many people come to seminary without a specific calling and other people change their minds in the midst of the process. No matter what, vocational discernment, listening for and responding to God's voice, cannot be reduced to the act of choosing a career.

If Moses had heeded the voices of self-doubt at the burning bush, he never would have had to listen to God again. If Mary had told the angel to find someone else to carry God's baby, she might have lived a peaceful life -- one in which her beloved son was not crucified as a criminal. If Peter, Andrew, James and John had not attended to the rabbi's voice, they might have continued mindlessly casting their nets until their hands were too age-crippled to haul them in; in doing so they would have been, as Dr. Martin Luther King put it, "sleeping through a revolution."

If you are tired of making decisions, seminary might not be for you. If you desire to shut your ears to any voice but your own, seminary might not be for you. If you long to live a quiet life, seminary might not be for you. If you want to keep doing what you have always done and already know how to do, seminary might not be for you.

Sometimes, when we think of making a decision, what comes to mind is closing doors, cutting off options, ending the listening process. "Decisive" people are those who take their singular path regardless of anyone who stands in their way. A "decisive" victory is one in which there is no doubt about the winner.

But the word "seminary" means "seedbed," the place where seeds are planted. This indicates that what happens there involves beginnings not endings, openings not closings. The choice to engage in a seminary education means rooting yourself in practices of listening and branching out in order to look for God. This requires engaging uncertainty because God's voice is not always easy to hear. In order to pay attention to God, the soil of your heart must be furrowed and aerated -- opened up to receive. Uncertainty and openness require vulnerability.

These words -- uncertainty, openness, vulnerability -- may not appear to characterize those that our broader society consider leaders, spiritual or otherwise. But they are precisely the characteristics that God seems to look for in those called to various forms of ministry. When Moses asked God for a name that could convince the people, God replied: "I am who I am," or, more exactly, "I will be who I will be." (Exodus 3) In other words, be prepared for uncertainty. When the angel made the announcement to Mary, he encouraged her to be open to the possibility of the impossible. (Luke 2) When Jesus made clear the cost of discipleship, he called his followers to vulnerability, saying, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8) As the author of Philippians put it:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2)

To say that the call to ministry involves openness, uncertainty, and vulnerability does not mean that ministers are not risk takers, or that they never make decisions. In fact they must take risks and they must make decisions. It does mean that they carry out their work in ways that include others, even those who are strange to them or estranged from them. It means that they embody humility, acknowledging mistakes and failures and gaps in knowledge. It means that they risk sharing difficult things and receiving hard feedback. It means that they are constantly involved in discerning where God’s voice can be heard.

In all of this, it is important to note that vocational discernment involves relationship -- relationship with God, with others, with ourselves, and with the whole universe. It is not about you and you alone. God called Moses to stand up to his adopted family on behalf of a people he barely knew (remember, Moses encountered the burning bush only because he had fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian and being chastised by fellow Hebrews). God called Mary to become a mother, a mother to a man whose life would be lived for others. God called Peter, Andrew, James and John to fish for people. So much of ministry is about empowering others. Ministers enable others to encounter God, even in the midst of war and disease. Ministers enable others to embrace peace and wholeness, even when struggling with mental illness. Ministers enable others to enact justice, even when time is precious and resources seem scarce.

It is not about your capabilities, either. Ministers live into their calling even as they themselves wander after God, stumble toward shalom, and strive for righteousness. Ministers are not defined by what they can do, but by what they are willing to do.

So it might be fair to say that the best preparation for the work of seminary may be the process of discernment itself -- not the decision you make, but how you make it. As you are discerning, are you willing to involve other people, those who might name in you what you would never have considered for yourself? Are you willing to listen to the call, even if it means paying attention to people and situations you’d much rather ignore? Are you willing to heed that still, small voice, even if it means making sacrifices, big and small? Are you willing to wait patiently in the uncertainty, even if it means admitting that you do not know? Are you willing to fail, knowing that you are loved in that very failure? Are you willing to ask questions without firm answers, to love those who might not love you back, to get your hands dirty doing the hard work of justice and peace, even if you never see that work succeed?

If so, seminary might be for you.