

**Acts 1:15–17, 21–26**

*Ps. 1*

*1 John 5:9–13*

*John 17:6–19*

# Discerning Through Prayer

**Goal for the Session**      *Seeing how important prayer was to the early followers of Jesus, adults will explore the role of prayer in discernment.*

## ■ P R E P A R I N G   F O R   T H E   S E S S I O N

### Focus on Acts 1:15–17, 21–26

#### **WHAT is important to know?**

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” A. Katherine Grieb

After the resurrection of Jesus, the succession puzzles continue. There seems to have been no expectation that any one disciple or family member should succeed Jesus as Messiah designate. No dynasty seems to have been either intended or suggested, whether by relation, descent, or appointment. Instead, we have Luke’s intriguing account in Acts 1:15–26, of the early church’s pressing concern to replace the apostate disciple Judas with another who would bring their number back up to twelve. Indeed, so urgent is this concern that, along with the ministry of prayer, it dominates the activity of the Jesus community waiting in Jerusalem during the ten days between the ascension of Jesus and Pentecost.

#### **WHERE is God in these words?**

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The challenge facing the church today is to be careful not to place issues of structure above the mission of the church. “Does that remind us of many elections that take place in our churches? Rather than asking ourselves who can make a better contribution to the mission in an ever-changing world, we seek someone who can continue what has been done previously. . . . The very fact that Matthias is never again mentioned should serve as a warning: do not try to force the Spirit to act according to our own purposes.”

#### **SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?**

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Jeffrey D. Peterson-Davis

This story of the selection of Matthias pushes us to ask questions about how we discern the will of God and the confidence we place in systems we employ. While casting lots seems primitive and out of step with reason, could we trust that God might reveal the divine will in such a simple and definitive way? To what extent do the methods we employ in discernment get tangled up in our own need to control circumstances and outcomes? How do we see the community of the early followers of Jesus engaging in discernment? How does prayer influence our decision making?

#### **NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?**

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We can be grateful for the witness of those who are so little known. The sermon can be a time to acknowledge and celebrate the ordinary people who have carried the extraordinary gospel from one generation to the next. Who is Justus in your faith journey? There is the Sunday school teacher who taught for over forty years, never eligible for a church board because women were not even allowed to vote. There is a man whose name you cannot remember who told you that Jesus held him through the weeks and months after his wife died. And there is every person sitting in the sanctuary. Thanks be to God!

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**  
*Acts 1:15–17, 21–26*

## Focus on Your Teaching

Making hard decisions is a part of life. Some are confronted with having to decide whether to take a job that would uproot the family or whether it is time to move a parent to assisted living. Some have truly agonizing choices to make: do I pay the utility bill or buy groceries? Sometimes we list pros and cons and have long discussions. Other times we opt to make a decision by default, by simply putting it off. Prayer may enter into our decisions, if only in the form of praying, “God help me!” Regardless of what we do, adults can be helped by this session’s focus of exploring the role of discernment.

*As I prepare to teach, guide me in discerning your will. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- Christ candle
- Bibles
- prepared slips of paper
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 23, 2021

### For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheets 1, 2
- option 2: copies of your church’s mission statement, Resource Sheet 1
- option 3: copies of Thomas Merton’s prayer for discernment

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, set up a Christ candle on a table. Prepare slips of paper with the names of the eleven disciples (see Matthew 10:1–4), Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and James, Jesus’ brother. For option 1 Responding, make copies of Resource Sheet 2. For option 2, invite your pastor or a member of the governing board to come and talk about your church’s mission statement and about the procedures for choosing leaders. For option 3, download the prayer at <http://discernmentresources.blogspot.com/2009/02/thomas-mertons-prayer-for-discernment.html>.

Greet participants with the traditional Easter greeting, “Christ is risen,” and encourage the response, “Christ is risen indeed.” Remind participants that this is the final Sunday before Pentecost.

Form pairs and ask them to describe to their partner how they go about making a difficult decision. In the large group, ask adults to name common steps people take. Tell adults that today’s session explores the role prayer might take as part of decision making.

Light the candle, identifying it as a reminder of the presence of the living Christ. Read Acts 1:7–8. Sit in silence, then pray the following:

*We await the power of your Spirit, O God. Make us open to what you would have us experience in Your Word today. Amen.*

### EXPLORING

Remind adults that the past few sessions have explored the life of the early church following Pentecost. This session’s Scripture returns to the beginning of Acts to events that took place just before Pentecost. Read aloud Acts 1:1–5 and have participants silently continue reading verses 6–14. Distribute the prepared slips of paper. Note that although Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Joanna are not named, it is reasonable to suppose they

were among the “certain women” since Luke reports their presence at the empty tomb. Ask participants to answer the following as they think their assigned character might have answered:

- ✧ What did you think about Jesus’ response to your group’s question about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:7–8)? Is it what you expected him to say?
- ✧ When Jesus ascended, what were you thinking? What was your reaction to the two men who spoke to you?
- ✧ What did you pray about during the time together in the upstairs room? What were your thoughts during this time?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Acts 1:15–17, 21–26). Invite adults to silently read the “What?” excerpt. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 1:15–17, 21–26. Recall that in the previous session, participants discussed those excluded from full participation in the life of the church. Have the group review verses 12–14. Ask:

- ✧ Who among the group engaged in constant prayer were likely excluded at the outset from consideration to be the twelfth disciple? Why?
- ✧ What criteria were used to determine the candidates?

Give the information in the sidebar about the significance of the number twelve.

Point out that there were apparently two candidates for this position who met both criteria set out by Peter: Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas, also known as Justus. Discuss what each candidate might have been thinking and feeling as he awaited the casting of the lots, and then when the choice had been made. Ask:

- ✧ Why do you think Justus is never again mentioned?
- ✧ Perhaps more surprising, Matthias is never mentioned again either. Why do you think this happened? Do you think it is possible that Matthias was the wrong choice?

To transition to Responding, ask adults to read the “Where” excerpt. Give them the context of the excerpt from the sidebar. Invite someone to read aloud Acts 1:8. Point out that the mission with which Jesus was leaving his disciples was expanded far beyond their experience or expectations. Ask:

- ✧ How does the way our church chooses leaders leave room for the Spirit’s movement?

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. **Practice Examen** By learning the Ignatian practice of examen, adults will explore a prayer discernment practice. Invite participants to read the “So What?” excerpt and reflect on the excerpt’s questions. Discuss together the last question, and invite adults to tell how prayer shapes the way they make decisions. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (The Ignatian Practice of Examen), and invite adults to engage in the process of examen together to familiarize themselves with it. Encourage adults to try using examen as a tool for individual prayerful discernment.

Why twelve? The perceived need to have twelve disciples was apparently related to the symbolism of twelve—the new Israel brought in by the resurrection of Jesus must replicate the twelve tribes of the old Israel.

Noel Leo Erskine, in raising the issue of structure and mission in the “Where?” essay, suggests that the problem is that the apostles sought to choose someone like themselves, and this is often not the way the Spirit moves.

**EASY  
PREP**

- 2. Match Mission to Discernment** Through examining the congregation's mission statement, adults can discern the movement of the Spirit and bring the process of discerning leaders more into congruence with it. Ask volunteers to read aloud the "So What?" excerpt. Distribute copies of your church's mission statement. Have your invited guest explain how the church envisions its mission statement to be lived out in the life of the community. What initiatives and projects are in process or proposed? Discuss together what kinds of leaders would best enable your congregation to participate in God's mission. For example, if the church is seeking to broaden its diversity, is the congregation seeking more diverse leadership?

Ask your guest to describe your church's process of discerning possible leaders. Ask:

- ✧ How might participants deepen their involvement in the process?
- ✧ What kind of intentional prayer could be employed?

Record the group's ideas, and ask your guest to convey their thinking to those responsible for choosing leaders.

- 3. Pray Thomas Merton's Prayer for Discernment** By using Thomas Merton's prayer for discernment as a model, adults can explore the role of prayer. Acquaint the group with Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who, at a difficult time in his life, penned a widely used prayer for discernment. Invite adults to pray silently as you read the prayer aloud. Then invite them to focus on a road whose route ahead cannot be seen—Merton's metaphor for facing his decision. Have them visualize the road curving around a field or sloping downward into woods, or simply disappearing at the horizon. Read the prayer aloud again slowly, encouraging the group to pray it silently for themselves. Distribute copies of the prayer, inviting participants to take it home and use it as a model for their own prayers for discernment. They can learn more about Merton at the Web site of the Thomas Merton Center (<http://merton.org/>).

## CLOSING

Invite volunteers to name aloud issues about which they are seeking discernment. Encourage them to use discernment prayers in the coming week. Pray the following:

*Come, Holy Spirit. Guide us as we seek to discern your will for our lives  
in all our decisions, large and small. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 23, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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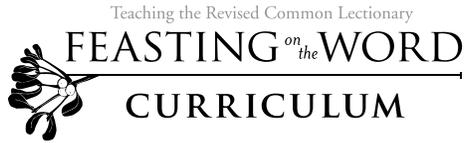
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May 16, 2021

Discerning Through  
Prayer



Adult  
Resource Sheet 2

## The Ignatian Practice of Examen



Examen, or the Examination of Conscience, is a spiritual practice of discernment that has its beginnings in *The Spiritual Exercises*, by St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Ignatius recommended that everyone should be taught this way of discerning God's will for one's life.

### The Process of Examen

- Light a candle. Sit comfortably and breathe deeply, breathing out the distractions of the day and breathing in God's peace and love.
- Ask God to bring into your heart that for which you are most grateful. Give thanks to God for that moment.
- Ask God to bring into your heart the moment for which you are least grateful. Sit with the moment without trying to fix it or pretend it didn't happen. Give thanks to God for God's sustaining love.
- Give thanks to God for the experience of examining the day.

### The Questions of Examen

1. When did I give and receive the most love today? The least love?
2. When did I feel the most alive? The least alive?
3. When did I have the greatest sense of belonging to God? The least sense of belonging?
4. What was today's high point? The low point?

### Using Examen to Make a Decision

1. Jot down as many aspects and ramifications of the decision as you can think of. Get as clear a sense as possible of the ramifications of deciding for or against.
2. Determine a period of time to first consider the decision you are least inclined to make. Ask yourself and God this question: What is life-giving about this choice? What is life draining?
3. After a period of time, do the same for the decision you are more inclined to make.
4. Make a tentative decision and live with it for a time.
5. Act in the way that the Spirit seems to be moving you.