



Indifference

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As a impudent teenager, I could end any conversation with my parents with one word: “whatever.” Each syllable was distinctly emphasized and often accompanied by an eye roll. It signaled my indifference, my standoffish retort that I couldn’t be bothered by any advice or mandate they spoke. Used too often, my mother started responding, “Don’t you ‘whatever’ me!”

As an adult, I’ve been trying to recreate a sense of indifference...with a twist. More specifically I’m trying to cultivate a sense of holy indifference. When I spoke the word “whatever” as a young person, I wanted to pretend that I didn’t care. Now, I use “whatever” to reflect an openness to what God might have in the works. It’s not that I don’t care what happens; I do. Holy indifference allows me to align what I care about with what God intends and desires. Trusting in God’s goodness, I can safely say “whatever” (without the eye roll) and let go of my own limited plans.

I say that I’m trying to cultivate holy indifference because it’s hard to do. It’s easier to decide, plan, and act according to our own intentions than to truly seek God’s will. In our group decision-making, we can become invested in the outcome. If challenged, we persuade, lobby, cajole, and maybe even argue our position. After a debate of pro’s and con’s and budget impacts, we make a collective decision and feel like we’ve done God’s work. Maybe.

In her popular book *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, Susan Beaumont distinguishes decision-making from discernment. “Decision-making is grounded in logical thinking and rational discourse. Decision-making assumes that we have the capacity to understand and solve our own problems and that this works best by maximizing available resources and maintaining order.... Discernment is different. In group discernment, participants adopt a stance of indifference to anything but the will of the divine as discovered by the group, setting aside matters of ego, politics, opinion, or personal interest.” (pp. 71-72). I recommend her book to all of us who are trying to hone skills in discernment.

Beaumont offers practical steps for the work of discernment, that is, the work of listening for the Spirit’s promptings. She warns that it will take time when the problems to be addressed are significant. The process must set aside time for people to acknowledge their assumptions and shed their personal interests. It requires us to slow down to listen to all voices of the group and then pause in prayer to listen to God’s voice. We can’t rush to action when we need to seek consensus and then test the decision. Despite the length of the process, discernment is our best means for aligning God’s will with our actions.

Whether used collectively or individually, holy indifference makes room for imagination and possibility. Holy indifference allows us to dream about ministries that can thrive outside of our buildings and without gathering in person. Holy indifference allows a group to break through an impasse. Holy indifference made it possible for a young, unmarried girl to accept the unlikely prophecy of a divine virgin birth. Mary’s words reflect her joyful surrender to indifference, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38 NRSV). Today’s more modern translation is shorter, but no less of a holy surrender: “Whatever.”