

**November 5, 2010**

**“Echoes of the Heart”**

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

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**Can we know God’s will for our lives?** In a recent book entitled, *Good News for Anxious Christians*, Phillip Cary, who teaches at Eastern University, talks about the struggle many of his students have to somehow *find* God’s will for their lives.

Speaking out of what appears to be a conservative religious context, he attributes this, in part, to the *new evangelical theology* that has emerged in recent years which emphasizes the importance of finding God’s will for one’s life. This struggle, Professor Cary notes, is a *terrific source of anxiety* for many of his students.

Apparently, these students have a sense that God’s will is somehow *out there* waiting to be found and it’s *on them* to find it.

The notion of God’s will is an important biblical and theological concept. We make reference to it in our casual conversation all the time.

*What will be, will be*, we say. Or, *it wasn’t meant to be*, implying that whatever happens in life is somehow in consort with God’s purposes.

**The importance of discernment.** The idea of God’s will is important, not because it’s something we can actually know, but for us to seek to discern—or learn about and gain insight into—in what is called a *process of discernment*.

In recent years, *discernment* has become a buzz word of sorts in the progressive wing of the Christian Church. To be *discerning* means to show judgment and insight, an ability to make distinctions. But again, it is a process. It is not like we ever actually arrive.

Moreover, think about it! If learning God’s will for our lives were actually possible, imagine the burden and the anxiety of trying to find it.

On the road to marriage, for example, we’d be asking ourselves all the time, *Is this the one, the one man or woman God has selected for me to marry and spend the rest of my life with?* And how can we be sure? Is there a *right* person and a *wrong* person, a *right* time in our lives to get married and a *wrong* time?

Indeed, isn’t it the case that there are probably many *right* mates for us in life, many possible *beloveds* with whom we could run off and *live happily ever after?*

In his book, Phillip Cary suggests that trying to in some way *know* God’s will is really an effort to short-circuit the learning process. What we should be about is acquiring the gift of wisdom, which takes time and effort and making mistakes along the way.

**The pursuit of wisdom as a way of life.** As a biblical and cultural virtue, wisdom is an attribute that goes largely unnoticed in community life. It has a rich tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Bible. Indeed, for Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, the goal of life is the acquisition of wisdom.

Still, like *discernment*, it's a process that never ends; and it takes time.

Wisdom is the gift of making important distinctions—about everything, but particularly about good and bad, or *good* and *evil*. It's not a method or a formula that can be easily applied by simply following the rules.

It is what Phillip Cary calls a *habit of the heart*, acquired through long periods of experience which—again—includes making mistakes along the way.

To think that we can actually find God's will in any literal sense and then—suddenly—know exactly what *to do* or *not do* in any situation is an attempt to short-circuit the process of acquiring wisdom. It doesn't work like that.

The gift of wisdom asks something of us. We have to work at it. We have to think and love and care and forgive and keep sorting things out along the way. Again, it's a process of *discernment*, a process of learning to make good decisions.

Can we know God's will for our lives? No, not in any final sense! But if we work at wisdom and commit ourselves to the life-long process of being wise and discerning, we can grow and evolve as human beings. It is a never-ending process; but a process that both serves us and honors God along the way.