

## **How does one listen to discern a vocation or professional path?**

Jesus' parables are short, simple stories he shared to teach and illuminate how we as Christians can go through the day in our work environment seeking to walk with Christ and let the Holy Spirit guide our work decisions amidst the pressures and challenges faced in the work environment.

How important is listening in our life journey, and how does one listen to discern a vocation or professional path?



The 2023 BELIEVES season, focused on “Living Our Faith According to Jesus’s Parables,” continued on Tuesday, February 14<sup>th</sup> from 7:30-8:30 AM with a focus on the [Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builder \(Luke 6:47-49\)](#), and the importance and manner in which we listen to discern a vocation or professional path.

All in attendance were treated to a panel discussion with personal insights and reflections on the parable-inspired topic from Carolyn Woo, former President and CEO of Catholic Relief Services; Bishop John-Nhan Tran of the Archdiocese of Atlanta; and Rev. John T. Howren, Rector and Pastor at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus parish.

Howren, who was ordained in 1996, served for several years in the past at the Cathedral of Christ the King in Buckhead, and now is the pastor at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in downtown Atlanta opened the discussion by providing a behind the scenes look at his discernment and preparation for the discussion on the parable.

“When I was discerning about the parable, I found the verses before it to be very interesting,” he said inferring their importance in laying the foundation for the discussion on discernment and the parable. “Discernment is seeking out God’s will and finding the way to be obedient to God. The Latin word ‘obedire’ is the origin of the word obey and means to listen to or enter into.”

Howren went on to remark that discerning leads us to pay attention to be aware of what’s within and around us. Through intentionality to the silence of God’s heart, relationship is always there, he explained.

“The question in verse 46 centers on what is it that Jesus had said,” Howren added. “All the verses in the chapter before verse 46 are all of Jesus’ teachings in a nutshell.”

As he shifted to then speak to the parable in verses 47-49 itself, Howren stated that to grow in our spiritual life, we need to always be reflecting – how we’re aware of our consciences and how we let His teachings sink down in our hearts.

“This is what sets us up for success in our discernment going forward,” he said.

Tran, who is originally from Vietnam, has been pastor at Mary Queen of Peace parish in New Orleans since 2014, and was recently ordained as a bishop for the Archdiocese of Atlanta in the last few weeks, spoke next by saying, “The bottom line is to love God and to love others. To listen to the Lord is to put it into practice.”

Tran indicated that in our dealings with one another we listen but don't do anything, and that results in the listening meaning nothing.

"Listening is to be the person God wants us to be," he said. "Jesus doesn't water down the scripture. He asks us to do things that are difficult. The good things we do are meaningless if not in this context."

The question that Tran said he always asks himself when discerning from God how to engage in situations with others is – *How do I help the person to continue to grow in love and for the greater good of humanity?*

From this, listening should lead to actions, he told everyone.

How does this happen every day?

"We listen to our own heart, and God's heart," Tran mentioned. "There are several things we do every day – pray, bring it to God, and be in consultation with others."

Then circling back to the question he mentioned he asks when discerning from God how to engage in situations with others, he remarked, "Whatever will lead me to greater good – greater love of God and others – this will be what's correct."

Woo, who was born and raised in Hong Kong, immigrated to the United States to attend Purdue University, later went on to serve as the Associate Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at Purdue before then serving as the Dean of the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business from 1997 to 2011, and then led Catholic Relief Services around the world for a number of years, followed Tran with some opening thoughts tied first to the recent devastation in Turkey.

"I can't read this parable without reflecting on what's happened in Turkey recently. Decisions made resulting in some of the devastation seen were not for the greater good."

She explained that greed manifests from routine decisions where we put a signature on something or cut corners, inferring that decisions on buildings that have been destroyed from the recent earthquakes were impacted by such decisions.

"We're listening all the time," she added, "but is it God's voice we're listening to?"

For her personally, she shared with everyone that she thinks she heard God's voice even as a kid.

"My family left communist China when I was a child. By the time I was age 10, I knew all the worries that they had. So first how I heard God was for love of family – before I knew my first catechism. It wasn't for religion or a spiritual experience, it was out of God's love."

The second time she heard God's voice that she spoke of was when she was discerning her decision to ultimately transition from her role at Purdue to go to Notre Dame.

"I didn't want to go to Notre Dame," Woo stated. "Then the gospel one day was on the servant who buried the talent. Hearing this gospel helped me to realize that what Notre Dame needed was to show that the way of the gospel is also the way for business."

Years later, she discerned God's voice and leading as she was seeking counsel on whether to leave Notre Dame to lead Catholic Relief Services.

"I went to my spiritual director and shared how I could show my analysis on the decision to be made," she recalled. "My spiritual director told me, 'God will speak to you through your fears and joys.' I had nightmares after this, but at the same time I knew being a refugee that the joy at the same time was that 'I'm going home.'"

To conclude her opening remarks, Woo returned to her earlier statement that we're listening all the time.

“Listening to God requires a discipline that’s unique, and you have to have the desire for this. What life is about is not to be more perfect. He calls us to be more loving – though sometimes we can’t.”

Adding to Woo’s reflections on discernment, Tran commented, “In our discernment, more than likely we won’t have a clear picture. We have to live in a mystery, in a trust of what God’s promised us. I pick as my motto that God will provide.”

Howren then chimed in again, stating that at some point in our discernment, we do have to make a choice and trust we’re making a right move.

“I often have recalled a metaphor of being stuck in a big rubber band,” he said. “Every time I would fall back into this, I’d get snapped back into this discernment wondering, ‘Where am I? Where do I need to be?’ It takes a lot of honesty with self, trusting God will provide, learning more and more to trust God.”

Howren continued, “Christian charity and love is about a choice. It’s not just waiting for the right thing; it’s about doing the right thing.”

Following this remark by Howren, the conversation opened up when all present – panelists and attendees – were asked what vocational discernments or situations they were presently trying to discern through.

One parishioner from CTK told everyone that she is eligible to retire in two weeks, in response to the question.

“It’s scary,” she said, “it’s overwhelming. Any suggestions?”

Woo responded first reflecting on her own transition from a professional career into retirement.

“It (work) is not just an ego thing,” stated Woo. “It provides us a structure. The financial part of working through the transition to retirement is the easiest to deal with. You can be rational about knowing what you have.”

The other thing Woo pointed out though is the need to be OK with “it’s enough.”

“More is not always better,” Woo mentioned. “The other part that’s non-financial is really hard.”

Another non-financial aspect involved in this, in Woo’s opinion, deals with one’s title.

“Are you comfortable saying ‘None’ when asked what your title is when filling out forms once you’re retired? This gets at ‘I don’t need this’ and the question – *To what do I belong?*”

Woo closed her thoughts on the response to the posed question by also reflecting on how we don’t think about the opportunity cost of work.

“We don’t think about our whole life,” said Woo. “The whole time we’re focused on getting things done. Now what is the focus of our time?”

What is the opportunity cost of not taking that time?

“All is essential to bring in prayer,” Woo affirmed. “How would I spend this time is actually scary to think about.”

Tran then spoke to share some thoughts on the question.

“Take some time. Enjoy it. Do those things you always wanted to do, and continue to be of help to others. Life has meaning because of the ability to die to self.”

Reflecting on his own career for some further remarks, Tran added, “Before I was appointed to be bishop, I thought about my retirement. I thought maybe 65, and negotiate to 62. Then I got appointed bishop and was told, ‘You have 19 years.’”

Woo remarked once more to close the session, “I think this is an area that the church can do more to re-engage on and have more organized efforts around this phase of life.”