Holy Indifference
WRCOB
September 14, 2025

Indifference. What do you think of when you hear that word? If you're like me, the word has pretty negative connotations. Synonyms for the word indifferent include uncaring, uninterested, apathetic and unsympathetic. When I think of the word indifference, I think of a teenager, hands on hips, rolling their eyes and saying "Whatever!" It's certainly not a word that I think of pairing with Holy.

Thank goodness, St. Ignatius had more insight than I did here. Ignatius of Loyola, for those of less familiar with Catholic saints, was born in 1491, one of 13 children of a family of minor nobility in northern Spain. As a young man Ignatius was captivated by the ideals of courtly love and knighthood and he dreamed of doing great deeds.

But, in 1521, Ignatius was gravely wounded in a battle with the French. While recuperating, Ignatius experienced a conversion. Reading about the life of Jesus and the lives of saints stirred a

desire in Ignatius to do great things. Ignatius realized that these feelings were clues to God's direction for him.

Over the years, Ignatius became expert in the art of **spiritual direction**. He collected his insights, prayers, and suggestions in his book *Spiritual Exercises*, one of the most influential books on the spiritual life ever written. With a small group of friends, Ignatius Loyola founded the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits. Ignatius conceived the Jesuits as "contemplatives in action." He knew his stuff, so his ideas and words are worth our attention this morning. (PAUSE)

So what did Ignatius mean by the prayer of Holy Indifference? When we pray for Holy Indifference, we pray for God's will – nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else. You see, Ignatian spirituality emphasizes interior freedom. To choose rightly, to follow God's will, we should strive to be free of personal preferences, superfluous attachments, and preformed opinions and agendas. Ignatius counseled people to practice radical detachment. He said, "We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short

one." Our one goal is the freedom to make a wholehearted choice to follow God. It means we become indifferent to anything but God's will. (PAUSE)

We see examples of people in Scripture who practiced holy indifference, long before Ignatius titled it that. In Luke 1, when the angel visited Mary with the annunciation – what was her response? "Let it be to me according to your word."

In the garden of Gethsemane on the night that Jesus was arrested, what was his prayer? "Not my will, but yours be done."

We see Holy Indifference in our passage from Philippians today, too. Paul begins by thanking God for and praying for the partnership he has with Philippians. He is confident that God, who began a good work in them will carry it on to completion.

And this is my prayer for you, Paul says, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (PAUSE)

What is best of the Christians at Phillipi? The same thing that is best for us, the will of God for our lives. Paul prays that the Philippians, and now all of us who read his words, will be able to discern God's will. You see, discernment opens us up to listen to and recognize the voice and patterns of God's direction in our lives. Paul prays for this discernment, because he knows how difficult this spiritual discipline can be.

Why is Holy Indifference so difficult? Mostly simply put, it's because we're human. Ignatius notes, sin is the unwillingness to trust that what God wants is our deepest happiness. Until we are absolutely convinced of this, he adds, we will do everything we can to keep our hands on the controls of our lives, because we think we know better than God what we need for our fulfillment. (PAUSE) Ouch, I'm stepping on my own toes this morning! And this is as true for congregations as it is for individuals. We think we know better than God what our plan or our vision should be.

My friends, this is why the visioning process we are engaged in, and the resulting search for a new pastor, must be first and foremost a spiritual exercise. Must we work and search and

plan? Of course! But the process must be bathed in the prayer of Holy Indifference. We must commit ourselves to God's will – nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else.

Adele Calhoun writes, to know God's will, we must be assured of God's love. Discernment depends on a deep trust in God's good intentions toward us. Distrusting God's intentions and fearing that God's will could be life-thwarting rather than life giving can sabotage our ability to listen and wait for direction.[i]

One of my mentors, Dr. Bill Wilson asserts that putting ourselves in a place to live the prayer of Holy Indifference requires three spiritual shifts in our lives.

The first is a shift From Knowing to Not-Knowing

- Interior act of suspending –
  - Slow down our thinking
  - Examine our assumptions
  - Drop preconceived certainties about how things should unfold
  - Relinquish our need for control

- **Not-knowing is not the same thing as ignorance

In the second shift, we move from Advocating to Attending. In this shift, we learn that

- How we pay attention and what we focus on determines how decision making unfolds.
- Advocacy is a set of actions targeted to support a particular outcome – this assumes certainty about direction and clarity about outcomes
- Attending is the capacity for deep seeing and listening

The third shift is from Striving to Surrender.

- Striving likes to power through barriers, and get things resolved, and it is usually based in ego.
- Surrender – NOT giving up or abandoning hope
- Surrender means
    - accepting the past for what it is,
    - embracing the present reality, and
    - yielding to the mystery of the future and the mystery of God in that future,
    - yielding to what wants to emerge.

As we begin to practice these spiritual shifts and attend to the prayer of Holy Indifference, there are two great questions to ask – in fact we asked them last week already

1. Is there anything we need to set aside so that we can be open to what God wants?
2. What needs to die in us in order for God's will to come forth in our lives?

To answer these questions, and others that will emerge along the way, we will need the Spirit of Truth to open our eyes to our attachments to things that influence our decision making: personal agendas, what makes us comfortable, holding on to tradition, the desire for productivity, the list can go on and on.

Let me clear, the Spirit of Truth will bring positive things as well. When our hearts are open to receiving whatever God says, we are in a place where we can wait and listen for a nudge from God. We rest in the confidence that we don't have to figure it all out on our own. We become alert to the presence of the Spirit revealed in the fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self-control.[ii]

So let's talk about some practical steps on how to live into Holy Indifference and to continue to develop discernment. Adele Calhoun suggests using the following steps. They apply well to our personal lives as well in the life of our church.

1. Come into God's presence focusing on God's love and guidance. Begin with the assumption that God is working for our good and wants to help us.
2. Pray to recognize and relinquish anything that takes priority over God's will. This mirrors Jesus' prayer – Not my will, but yours O God.
3. Lay your choice before God and examine it thoroughly. How does our desire our choice line up with loving God and loving others? How does it help us live into greater faithfulness?
4. Use your brain! Write down the pros and cons, examine whether this choice will be life-giving and loving for those it affects.

5. Attend to your feelings. What excites you and gives you hope about this decision. Picture yourself living into this decision for the foreseeable future. How does it feel?
6. Listen to God as you read Scripture – pay attention to where the word speaks to you.
7. Seek the counsel of those gifted in discernment.
8. Offer your choice to God – pray for wisdom and the freedom of the Spirit to blow through you. WAIT. Ask God to bring your heart and head and spirit into agreement.[iii]

There are additional reflection questions and spiritual exercises that can help us all in the process, and please see me if you'd like to know more. As we prepare to close today, please hear me say this. Some of us – maybe many of us, were taught that God has one perfect blueprint for our lives, and that if we miss it at any point along the way, we've messed up the whole thing. Let me release your mind of that notion – first because none of us as individuals has that much power. Is that as much of a relief to you as it is to me? Second, just look at Scripture – rather than a rule book full of do's and don'ts, it is the story of God's faithfulness to humanity

even when they mess up and fall short, time and time again. This of course, doesn't give us permission to sin at will, but may it serve as a reminder of God's love and care for us always.

With that in mind, may we pray with Holy Indifference for God's will – nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else. Amen.

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[i] Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, p.110.
[ii] Ibid., 110-111.
[iii] Ibid., p. 111-112.