

Discerning God's Will Together – Part I

Getting Ready

June 11, 2017

Call to Worship:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned."⁴ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."
Exodus 3:1-5 (ESV)

Scripture Reading:

¹³ That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

¹⁹ And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. ²² Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

²⁵ And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

²⁸ So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, ²⁹ but they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them.

³⁰ When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. ³¹ And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"

³³ And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, ³⁴ saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.
Luke 24:13-35 (ESV)

This morning we are continuing our series, “Discerning God’s Will Together.” The past two Sundays have both been introductory sermons. Today we are looking at part I of the process of Discerning God’s Will Together and that is Getting Ready. The three part process is divided up as “Getting Ready, Get Set and Go!”

“Getting Ready,” is probably the most important part. It is the preparation for the discernment. The preparation often sets that stage for whether it is going to be a good discernment process or a bad one. You see, the process is just as important as the results. It is how we interact with one another and in God’s eyes, as well as the watching world’s eyes, how we interact with one another is just as important as any decision we might make.

In my message last week, *The Essentials of Discerning God’s Will Together*, I said the first essential is to accept and recognize that God is already at work in the world. He is at work in the big world, he is at work in our nation, in our community, in our church and in our individual lives. Our first task is to accept that God is at work and to recognize where He is at work and then to discern how He wants us to join in.

In her book, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton offers some different definitions of Christian discernment, but I think this one might just be the best: “Christian discernment is the ever-increasing capacity to ‘see’ or discern the works of God in the midst of the human situation [the world, the nation, the community, the church, etc.] so that we can align ourselves with whatever it is God is doing.”

In our two Scripture passages this morning, our Call to Worship from the Old Testament and the primary Scripture reading from the New Testament, God is at work in the world. In the first, the story of Moses and the burning bush it tells us that Moses was just out doing his ordinary work. He was a shepherd taking care of his sheep. By now, Moses probably thought that God had given up on him. After killing the Egyptian in anger he fled to the desert. While Moses is thinking God had given up on him, deserted him, the Israelites are thinking the same thing. While Moses is tending sheep in the desert, he actually has it pretty good. While he is tending sheep in the desert the Israelites are being oppressed, greater and greater, in their slavery to the Egyptians. It says in Exodus 2:23, “The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.”

So Moses is just out doing his work, that which he probably did, day in and day out, getting up early every morning, taking his sheep from the pen and taking them to some field to graze in where they could find enough food to eat. And to make matters worse, there was no Starbucks or nice coffee shop he could stop in on the way out to pick up his favorite expresso or drink to start the day. We really don’t know how good we have it ☺

So there he is tending his sheep, he looks over, and there is a bush burning. Which probably was not that unusual in the very hot desert. But what was unusual was that the bush was not burning up. It was not being consumed. Moses could have just ignored it but God presented it in such away to draw his attention. *And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burning up.” When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.”*

I offer this as a warning to you this morning: whenever you think you might be hearing God calling you, be cautious before you use those three words “Here I am,” or four “Here I am Lord.” Because once you utter those words you never know what God might have in store for you. For Moses those words resulted in God leading him back to Egypt and leading the Israelites out of Egypt, through the wilderness on the way to the promised land. And I am sure that there were many times Moses said to himself, “why didn’t I just ignore that burning bush and why did I have to say “Here I am.”

God was at work in the world. He was calling Moses through the burning bush, but Moses had to stop what he was doing and go and see for himself. He had to check it out, and because He did God was able to use him greatly. If Moses had ignored the burning bush, would God have found some other way to get his attention? I’m thinking yes!

And then we have the familiar story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, that which we just used on Easter morning. But that too is a story of how God is at work in the world and how we can easily miss it. *Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing Him?* Why were they kept from recognizing him? Were they just too busy with their own lives, their own grief that they couldn’t see God at work?

Jesus said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Jesus didn’t have to read from the Scriptures to them, he could just tell them about all that they said. After all He was the living Word become flesh.

1. Prayerfully stop, look and listen

The first step of getting ready to discern the will of God together is to prayerfully stop, look and listen to what God is already doing. What is He saying in all that is happening around us?

Three questions that we would like you to start thinking about and talking about over the next several weeks. They are on the bottom of your bulletin insert:

Where has God already been at work in the life of Oak Grove and in our community over the past several years?

Based on where God has led us over the past several years, where might he be leading us to, specifically in the four foundational pillars of the church we talked about in our last series – mission, worship, discipleship and community?

If God is calling us to new things, what might he be calling us away from?

Don’t skip over question #3. I strongly believe that is our biggest challenge today. What is God calling us to let go of? Just because we have done some things for many years, and they once

served a very good and useful purpose, that might not be the case today. It's especially important due to the busyness of our lives; most women today working outside of the home, more demands from just about everything we are involved in – our jobs, our children's activities such as sports. We can try and deny it all we want, but those are the realities. To do the things that God is calling us to do today will entail giving up some things that we did yesterday.

The first step of getting ready, preparing for discernment, is pausing, stepping back and trying to see where God is already at work.

2. **Affirming Our Guiding Values and Principles**

The Second step of Getting Ready, Preparing for Discerning God's Will Together is Affirming the Guiding Principles and Values of the Group. As Oak Grove Mennonite Church what are our guiding principles and values?

1. As I pointed out last week, first and foremost, the Word of God. The Word of God in Scripture and the Word of God in Jesus is where we start.
2. Second, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, that which as a whole is strongly supported by Scripture, is what we hold to overall as a group. Might there be some areas in which not everyone completely agrees with all 24 articles? Yes. Our *Confession of Faith* is not the Bible nor should it be held with the same authority as the Bible.
3. Our Purpose, Mission and Vision statements which are found on the back of the bulletin on most Sundays.

Our Purpose -

To glorify God by loving Him; by loving others; by becoming and making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our Mission-

To share the Love of Christ in our community and around the world.

Our Vision-

*As a body of believers at Oak Grove Mennonite Church we desire to **SHARE** the love of Christ in our community and around the world by:*

Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with our neighbors and friends.

Helping each other with mutual care and support.

Aiming to worship God in Spirit and in truth.

Responding to the needs of hurting persons in our community and around the world.

Equipping children, youth and adults for Christian discipleship and ministry.

Whatever discernment we participate in should take into account those things – the Word of God revealed to us both in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* and our Purpose, Mission and Vision Statements.

And as I mentioned last week all of it has to be done with great humility and with the help of the Holy Spirit. That Scripture that Alex used on the first Sunday of this series, 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 is just so poignant when it comes to discerning the will of God, whether in our own lives or the life of the church: *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.*

Getting Ready for Discernment begins with pausing, stopping and seeing where God is already at work. It involves affirming our guiding values and principles. It then involves clarifying the question or question(s) for discernment. That is not as easy as we think it is. We often go into discernment thinking we are trying to decide one thing and we find out that there is even a much bigger issue. Many churches take on big building projects, costing millions of dollars, before even discerning what their primary purpose, mission and vision is. Many times we try and discern to resolve a conflict or problem, only to discover that really isn't the primary conflict or problem, it is much greater than that. The more specific we can make the discernment, the greater the chance of it being successful.

Once we have clarified the question or questions for discernment, then we have to determine the rules for the question being discerned. Our rules are set forth in the church's Constitution. Many times the questions or issues being discerned are minor issues and they can be discerned by the Elder Team and/or Church Council. Sometimes we ask for feedback from the congregation in helping us to discern.

Occasionally we are called upon to discern and make big decisions. Our church Constitution reads: *“Before making major decisions, the Church Council shall bring appropriate recommendations to the congregation for approval.”* What constitutes minor decisions from major decisions, that in itself is often a difficult call. Our Constitution says that any changes to the Constitution need to be voted on by the members of the congregation with a minimum of 75% approval.

Apart from Constitutional changes, what other decisions might qualify as major decisions? In her book, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton, offers these kinds of decisions which might warrant a full discernment process:

- Decisions that shape the identity and mission, policies, values and direction of the church.
- Allocation of significant resources – not just money, but also less tangible resources like human resources, time, energy and focus, that which she defines as “organizational energy.”
- Key personnel staff – like the hiring of pastors.
- Decisions affecting the pace and quality of life for the staff and the congregation.

When it comes to making decisions, sometimes the Church Council and the Elders ask the congregation for input before making decisions and for the major decisions the Council and Elders bring recommendations and input for the congregation to make the decision. Our Constitution says that on issues other than Constitutional amendments, active members and active participants, age 16 and over may vote on issues brought before them with a minimum of 60% approval needed. The Council, Elders or majority of people present at a meeting may require a higher percentage on any specific decision.

But here is the problem with this, as Alex mentioned a couple of weeks ago in his introductory message of Discerning God's Will Together, church was never meant to be a democracy. So how do we work with that? Well, first and foremost we should always be working toward consensus instead of just a majority, even a supermajority which is 60%, or two-thirds, or three-fourths. Why?

Because one of God's guiding values and principles for the church, that which he established, is unity.

In Jesus' great priestly prayer found in John 17, Jesus prays:

"May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:23 (NIV)

"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand." Matthew 12:25 (NIV)

Is unity the overall goal of Christian discernment? No. A church can be 100% united regarding a decision that goes 100% against the will of God. We need to be careful that we don't deceive ourselves that God desires unity about everything else. On the other hand, if we are mature Christians, grounded in God's Holy Scriptures, looking foremost to Jesus, not only as our Savior but as Lord of our lives, we're humble, and we're allowing God's Holy Spirit to work in our lives – both individually and collectively, than unity or consensus should be a sign that we are moving towards God's will in our discernment.

Quaker author, Eden Grace, puts it this way, "Since Christ is not divided, the nearer we come to him, the nearer we will be to one another. Thus the sense of being led into Unity with one another becomes a fundamental mark of God's Divine work in the world."

Becoming united in Christ and actually discerning God's will is no easy task. It takes time. It takes stopping and stepping back from the busyness of our lives. It takes studying the Scriptures, prayerfully inviting the Holy Spirit to enlighten us. It takes the sacrifice of ourselves for the greater good. The greater good being God's good – His good, pleasing and perfect will.