

***For such a time as this***  
Discerning God's Will Together  
July 9, 2017

*When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. <sup>2</sup> But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. <sup>3</sup> In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.*

*<sup>4</sup> When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. <sup>5</sup> Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.*

*<sup>6</sup> So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. <sup>7</sup> Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. <sup>8</sup> He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.*

*<sup>9</sup> Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup> Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, <sup>11</sup> "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."*

*<sup>12</sup> When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, <sup>13</sup> he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. <sup>14</sup> For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"*

*<sup>15</sup> Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup> "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."*

*<sup>17</sup> So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.*

Esther 4:1-17 (NIV)

Today we are continuing our series "Discerning God's Will Together." This morning we are starting the process, that which we envision will take us through the end of the month. This morning is about where God has led us as a congregation. Next Sunday and the following Sunday will be about where God is leading us. And for both of those Sundays, July 16<sup>th</sup> and July 23<sup>rd</sup>, we invite all the adult Sunday school classes, as well as the youth, to join us in the fellowship hall during the Sunday school time to help us "Discern God's Will Together."

But before we discern where God might be leading us, it's important for us to know where God has led us from. I have said it before, and I will say it again, if we truly believe that God is

sovereign, and that God is still at work in our lives today, than nobody is here today by chance. That applies to those of you who grew up in this church and have spent your entire life here, those of us that have come from other church backgrounds, those who are relatively new, members and non-members, and even those who might just be visiting. God has brought each of us to this church for a reason.

So, where have we come from as a church? Well our history as a Mennonite or Anabaptist Church goes all the way back to Germany and Switzerland around 1525 and what many refer to as the “radical reformation.” Mennonites and Anabaptists were called the “radical reformers” because they felt that the original reformers, like Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli did not go far enough in their suggested reforms of the church. They still practiced things that they could not find any biblical support for and they both encouraged a state church – hence mixing the kingdom of this world with the kingdom of God. The original Mennonites and Anabaptists called for the separation of church and state, the freedom of choice for one to choose to accept Jesus Christ as their own Savior and Lord at an age of accountability, and where they were most radical is that they believed that it was possible to follow the teachings and the way of Jesus, not by one’s own power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit working in one’s life. Where it really stretched the others, way back in the 1500’s and it still does today, the majority of Mennonites and Anabaptists believed in pacifism – the belief that it is wrong to use war or violence to settle disputes – for no other reason than that is what Jesus calls us to do in his *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7). For much of our history, most Mennonites and Anabaptists have refused to bear arms and have adopted an attitude or policy of nonresistance. For some it resulted in literally giving up their lives, being martyred, and for others it led to them migrating to different countries in the world – like Canada and the United States where they could live out their faith convictions without having to bear arms.

This church began around the same time as several other Mennonite churches around here, as an Amish Mennonite Community that migrated to Ohio from Pennsylvania in the mid 1800’s. The original meeting house, called the Hooley Meeting House, was built in 1857 on Ludlow Road where the Oak Grove cemetery is now located. They build on this site in 1875, changing the name to Oak Grove because it was situated in the middle of a grove of oak trees. It seems like we have lacked creativity throughout our history.

In 1897 Oak Grove became part of the newly formed Eastern Amish Mennonite Conference which was organized for the primary purposes of aiding in the spiritual growth of current church members, evangelizing and missions or outreach. One of the results of the local Mennonite churches wanting to reach out to people in need was the establishment of an orphanage in West Liberty right around 1900, that which we have come to be known as Adriel.

At that time the local Mennonite churches worked very well together, but they weren’t just concerned about doing missions work in our own community. While almost all the Mennonite men refused to take up arms and registered as Conscientious Objectors in World War I, after the war several of the leaders from the local Mennonite churches traveled all the way to France to help in the reconstruction work.

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the three local Mennonite churches worked very well together, both in local efforts and in missions outside the local area. Oak Grove is primarily responsible for planting another Amish Mennonite Church in Plain City in 1926, that which would become known as Sharon Mennonite Church.

But, it's important to note that even for the first 50-75 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost all the members of the local Mennonite churches would have been from traditional ethnic families that could trace their roots back to Switzerland or Germany. You would have had a very hard time finding someone in any of the three local Mennonite churches who wasn't named Yoder, Stoltzfus, Kauffman, King, Wayre, etc. Apparently their evangelism efforts outside of the traditional ethnic Mennonite families had failed. Over the years the Eastern Amish Mennonite Conference would merge with the Ohio Mennonite Conference and it would eventually become just one – "The Ohio Mennonite Conference."

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought quite a few changes to the local Mennonite churches:

For the first time pastors started getting paid, and because they were getting paid more was expected of them. Many attended college and seminary. Eventually they started being called from outside the congregations.

Mennonite Disaster Service was formed and many of the men from all three of the local Mennonite churches served in the local MDS unit. Many Mennonites came to the West Liberty area and served at Adriel during WWII and the later wars as part of their voluntary service. Many chose to stay in the West Liberty community and became part of the Mennonite churches.

One of the unfortunate results of the later years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that the three local Mennonite churches became more independent and they began to do less and less together. Well into the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was still strong oversight by a Bishop – usually one of the pastors from the three churches. Much authority was given to the Bishop and the pastors. Towards the end of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the authority of the Bishop and local pastors would be passed on to Ohio Conference (a Conference Minister and Regional Pastors) and the local pastors.

That is very important for us to understand today because the Mennonite Church, that which Ohio Conference was a part of, that which gave quite a bit of authority to the Conference's oversight, would merge in 2001 with the General Conference of the Mennonite Church, to become Mennonite Church USA. The General Conference gave most of its authority to the local congregations. That is the problem that we have in the bigger Mennonite church today. Who is responsible for making decisions? Who has the authority – is it the local congregations, is it the Conferences, is it the leaders of MCUSA? And what happens when we differ? It's really a clash between congregationalism and denominationalism and it really is quite a mess as Alex and I can attest to after spending probably two of the most intense days of our lives at the MCUSA – denominational assembly in Orlando . Intense in both a good way and a bad way.

But here is the bigger question for us, how many of you really care about all that stuff? God calls us to be faithful to Him in our local congregations, in the communities He has placed us in. While our past is important, what is most important is who we are today! Who is God calling us to be today?

There are some things in our recent past that have helped to set us apart from many of the other Mennonite congregations in our conference. One of those was Pastor Larry Augsburg who served from 1984 – 2004 who was able to see that our future was not just with traditional ethnic Mennonite families. Unless we started to reach out to others in our community, this church would have shrunk like many of the other rural Mennonite churches around us, in the conference and in America.

For those among us today who have been part of this congregation for all of their lives, or at least since 1994, one of the most important things that took place in the life of this congregation was the building of the new sanctuary, providing us with more space to worship and more Sunday school space. It took place in what many contemporary church historians refer to as the “seeker-sensitive/Build it and they will come” movement. And come they did. Many new families were added during that time. But one of the problems with the “seeker-sensitive” and “build it and they will come” concept is that many who come are not new Christians, or even un-churched Christians, but Christians from other churches wanting to try something new. Fortunately, some new believers get caught in the wave, but overall the Kingdom of God doesn’t get much bigger, it just relocates. That’s not to discount some of the good things involved. Every church should be seeker sensitive! After all Jesus did say, *“Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened”* (Matthew 7:7-8). Every church, every body of Christ, should be a place where those who are seeking can find Jesus!

But most contemporary church historians would also say that the “seeker sensitive, build and they will come” concept no longer works in our current culture. While there may be a lot of people seeking, seeking often for what they do not even know, very few think they will be able to find it in the church today, for a variety of reasons. In general, our culture is anti-church. That’s the bad news. The good news is that the “build it and they will come church” is not the church that Jesus ever called us to be. The church that Jesus’ calls us to be is one that goes out. Goes out into the community it has been placed sharing the Good News in words and actions, and inviting people into the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God where Jesus is King.

This past week we celebrated the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the founding of the nation, the United States of America. A great nation that was founded on some great values – freedom and democracy. But as I shared last Sunday at the Green Hills service, as great as our nation has been, founded by many God honoring men, many with good Christian values, it is still a Kingdom of this World nation. And while many pledge allegiance to the flag and to the nation, Jesus tells us that we can’t have two allegiances.

*“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”* Matthew 6:24 (NIV)

While Jesus refers to serving God or money in his *Sermon on the Mount*, he really is talking about anything and everything. We can't have two masters when it comes to anything.

I am currently reading a new book entitled *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* by a man by the name of Matthew Bates, a non-Mennonite or Anabaptist, but one who's theology I believe aligns very well with the original Mennonites and Anabaptists.

If there is one place where we have erred as a Mennonite/Anabaptist church in America over the past 30 years, or so, is that we have become more and more like the culture and the world around us, so much so is that it has become hard to distinguish what is of the Kingdom of God and what is of the Kingdom of this world and who really is our master and who do we owe our allegiance to?

In our Bible story for today Queen Esther and Mordecai found themselves in that exact position. Were they going to be faithful and loyal to God, their master and King, even at the cost of death, or were they going to give in to the earthly king? Mordecai had already decided for himself. It was now Esther's turn. Esther knew her life was at stake.

Mordecai's words to her are appropriate for all Christ followers today – *And who knows but you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?* If we're Christian, then every single one of us is in a royal position, for such a time as this.

As much as our past as a church might be a guide, what's most important is that we are faithful to who God calls us to be today, in this time and place, for such a time as this. What does it mean to be a faithful Mennonite/Anabaptist church today, in 2017, in the community of West Liberty, Ohio, and the surrounding area with Jesus as our Master, Lord and King?

That's the question we want you to try and help us answer over the course of the next couple of weeks.