

Where is God Leading Us?
Part I – Mission & Discipleship
July 16, 2017

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.”

²⁰ After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. ²¹ By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Exodus 13:17-22 (NIV)

This morning we are continuing our series “Discerning God’s Will Together” and we are getting down to the meat of it, actually doing it. Last week we looked at where God has led us as an Anabaptist/Mennonite congregation in West Liberty, Ohio in 2017. Today we want to start looking at, based on where God had led us, where is He leading us in the immediate future? And today we want to focus specifically on the two foundational pillars of the church of Mission & Discipleship.

Mission is all about “going!” Jesus ends his ministry here on earth with the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28. **Therefore go!** In Mark’s gospel Jesus’ last words are pretty much the same, *Go! Jesus said to them “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation”* (Mark 16:15). At the end of John’s gospel Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

As Christians we cannot overemphasize the importance of “going.” Going out! And what are we called to do as we are going? It’s actually pretty simple. Just two things –

1. The Great Commandment –

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Mark 12:30-31

2. The Great Commission –

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18-20

Discipleship is really the hallmark of what it means to be Mennonite and Anabaptist. It is really the hallmark of what it means to be Christian. When people try and explain what it means to be Mennonite or Anabaptist, both those outside the Mennonite church, and many from within, they often say it's our peace position or pacifism. The problem with that is we have started in the wrong place. We start with discipleship – trying to follow Jesus in everything that he taught and did – and we get to our peace position because that is what He taught and did.

Traditionally, Mennonites and Anabaptists have also held to a high view of the authority of Scripture, a more literal reading, and the revealing of God's will for His people over time. So God's fullest revelation for His people is found in the New Testament and especially in the life and teachings of Jesus, especially in His *Sermon on the Mount*.

These words from our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4 on Scripture:

“We acknowledge the Scripture as the fully reliable and trustworthy Word of God written in human language. We believe that God continues to speak through the living and written Word. Because Jesus Christ is the Word become flesh, Scripture as a whole has its center and fulfillment in him.”

And these words from the commentary regarding that article:

“Since the beginning of the Anabaptist reformation in 16th century Europe, Mennonites have sought to be a biblical people in ways that both borrowed from the Protestant reformation and differed from it. Mennonites have shared the traditional Protestant emphasis on the authority of Scripture for doctrine. In addition, Mennonites have underscored the following emphases:

- The authority of Scripture for ethics, for the relation of church to society, and for church polity.
- The interpretation of Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ, in the sense that his life, teachings, death and resurrection are essential to understanding the Bible as a whole.
- The congregation of believers as the place where individual understandings and interpretations of Scripture are to be tested.”

I had a very nice conversation this past week with someone who is a new Christian. She said that she just recently started to read the Bible from the beginning, back in Genesis, but she is really struggling. My suggestion to her was that she skip ahead to the New Testament – read the four Gospels, the accounts of Jesus' life, his teachings, death and resurrection, then the story of the early church, and then Paul's letters. And then go back to the beginning of the Old Testament. Then it is much easier to understand the Bible as a whole, God revealing His will overtime, and salvation coming through His Son, Jesus Christ.

So when it comes specifically to mission and discipleship, where is it that God has led us over the past several years?

Mission –

When it comes to mission one of the big things that God has led us to is the opening of *The Grove* in downtown West Liberty, giving us a presence in town and the ability to interact with our neighbors, people that we wouldn't have had the opportunity to interact with before.

So, one of the things we want to try and discern together in our Sunday school time today is, is God leading us to continue our ministry at *The Grove*? And if so are there some new things we could be doing there, or what concerns might you have?

And the other questions regarding mission have to do with how the face of our community might be changing, and due to that change, are there some different things we could be doing? What are some of the communities' needs we could be meeting.

Discipleship –

When it comes to discipleship, one of the things that God seems to have led us to over the past couple of years is the Missional Discipleship Groups? Are those something that God is calling us to continue? How do we get more people involved? Does its name adequately reflect what they are?

One of the other things when it comes to discipleship that we would like to try and discern is Vacation Bible School. Throughout a good part of our history as a congregation, especially the past 30-40 years, Vacation Bible School has been an important element, both for our own children and as a mission or outreach to the children from our community. Over the past ten years or so, due to the busyness of our lives, it has become increasingly more and more difficult to get our own people involved and to bring in children from the community. Do we want to continue it in its same format or are there some changes we could make to it?

Is it still possible to attract a significant number of children from our community? I think it is, but we need to be creative about it. I was talking with a woman from a different community, small if not smaller than West Liberty, and she said her church has about 30 people in attendance on a Sunday morning. They were doing Vacation Bible School in the evenings this past week and their attendance was in the 90's every night. I think the big question is how important do we think it is as both a mission to our community and discipleship for our own children, and how willing are we to get involved?

The other question regarding discipleship we would like you to consider is how well are we doing when it comes to communicating our Anabaptist and Mennonite values?

As I mentioned last week, one of the biggest problems we face today, both as Christians in general, and specifically as Anabaptist and Mennonite Christians, is we have become more and more like the culture around us. We have become Americanized, Materialized, Commercialized, Sportsatized, Gun violence de-sensitized, just to name a few. So much so, we really have a hard time distinguishing what is supposed to be the kingdom of God and what is the kingdom of this world. I am reading a very good book about Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, which really is Jesus' grand picture of what the Kingdom of God is supposed to look like if we, Jesus followers, are living the life he wants us to live. There are many good quotes in the book, but this one is very challenging, it's about all our idols:

“The supreme hindrance to the coming of God's Kingdom is idolatry not evil doing. We worship the wrong gods.”
Hugh Martin, *The Beatitudes*

What are the idols that you are worshiping that is hindering God's Kingdom from coming into your own life? We all have some!

8 Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Galatians 6:8-9 (NIV)

This was from one of my devotionals this past week, reflecting on that passage from Galatians:

“Faith has an insatiable appetite for experiencing as much of God’s grace as possible. Therefore, faith presses toward the river where God’s grace flows most freely, namely, the river of love.

“What other force will move us out of our contented living rooms to take upon ourselves the inconveniences and suffering that love requires?

“What will propel us . . . to greet strangers when we feel shy? To go to the enemy and plead for reconciliation when we feel indignant? To tithe when we’ve never tried it or we can’t meet the bills? To speak to our colleagues about Christ? To invite our neighbors to church? To cross cultures with the gospel? To create a new ministry for alcoholics or the drug addicted? To spend our free time driving someone to a doctor’s appointment? To invest a morning praying for renewal?

“None of these costly acts of love just happen. They are impelled by a new appetite – the appetite of faith for the fullest experience of God’s grace and love.

“Faith loves to rely on God and see him work miracles in us and others. Therefore, faith pushes us into the current where the power of God’s future grace flows most freely – the current of love.”

John Piper, *Solid Joys Devotional*, July 13, 2017

So this morning we are going to invite you to help us discern some things regarding Mission and Discipleship during the Sunday school time. Three questions from each of the areas:

Missional Questions:

1. How have you seen the face of our community, specifically West Liberty and the surrounding area, change over the past several years?
2. How are we as a church adapting to that change? Try to be specific.
3. Becoming more missional in our own community has led us to the opening of *The Grove*. Do you feel that *The Grove* is something we should continue? If so, what activities would you affirm and any suggestions of some other ways we may make the space available to the community? Any concerns about *The Grove*?

Discipleship Questions:

1. If you have participated in a Missional Discipleship Group over the past couple of years, do you think it is something we should continue? Why or why not? Any suggested changes? Is there a better name for them which fits the purpose they are serving?

2. Vacation Bible School has been an important element of Oak Grove over the years, both for our own children and for the children from the community. Do you still see VBS as an important element and if so, any suggested changes?
3. How well do you think we have done over the past several years communicating our Anabaptist/Mennonite values? Too much? Too little? Any suggestions?

Response Song:

"By Our Love"

Brothers, let us come together
Walking in the Spirit, there's much to be done...
We will come reaching, out from our comforts
And they will know us by our love...

Sisters, we were made for kindness
We can pierce the darkness as He shines through us...
We will come reaching, with a song of healing...
And they will know us by our love!

The time is now
Come Church arise...
Love with His hands
See with His eyes...
Bind it around you,
Let it never leave you,
And they will know us by our love...

Children, You are hope for justice,
Stand firm in the Truth now, set your hearts above
You will be reaching, long after we're gone,
And they will know you by your love!

Closing Prayer:

O God, mercifully receive the prayers of your servants who call upon you. Grant that we may know and understand what things we ought to do, and that we may have the grace and power to faithfully accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.