

10.10.21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

It is good to be together here on this yard on this chilly, October morning to worship God, to fellowship with one another, to be reminded and encouraged on our discipleship journey as we try to follow Jesus faithfully. As we sit here, many of us with our feet on this ground or the wheels of our vehicles on this ground, I invite us to remember, with gratitude, those whose feet have been on this ground before us – the forebears of our families and those who have shared our faith, and further back, the indigenous people who lived and walked on this ground.

We'll continue in our Anabaptist Essentials series, this morning focusing on how we seek God's will through reading the scriptures and listening for the Holy Spirit's guidance together.

Let's offer the **Call to Worship and prayer** together:

Holy God, you call us together to reflect on your Word and our life in your world. Be with us now as we sing and pray together, that we may hear your voice and understand your way. This we pray through Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

SONG – *Here in this Place* VT 10

CHILDREN'S STORY – DELBERT PETERS

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

God, we want to be listening for your voice – in the silence and in the noise and especially in this place, during this time of worship. Thank you for your Holy Spirit presence with us here, and always.

We're grateful for this harvest season and for those who have planted, tended and are now harvesting. We thank you, God, for students and teachers, especially those in the midweek program here at Alexanderwohl. We pray your blessing on them as their faith grows and develops.

We pray also for your blessing, God, on the four young men who will be baptized in the river out at camp this afternoon, for Caiden, Eddie, Jacob and Timothy. Be present with them as they share their faith confessions and make a commitment to follow Jesus in the company of this congregation.

Loving God, we pray for your healing and comfort for Judy Unruh as she recovers from a hip replacement. Thank you for the healing that has already come and we ask for patience and perseverance for her as she does the hard work of rehab. Be also with Darrell as he travels and tends to Judy during this time. We pray also for Meribeth Schmidt and for Rannie and their family as Meribeth struggles with her health. Be with them, offering what is needed for each day. O God, we pray for those in the medical field who go on caring for those with covid-19 and other illnesses. Grant strength and continued compassion to those giving care and grant healing to those who are ill.

Be with us now, God, as we continue to worship you. Bless this time together. Open our minds and our hearts to hear your good news – and then give us courage to act on it. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

SERMON – PASTOR CALEB YODER
IT SEEMED GOOD TO THE HOLY SPIRIT AND TO US
Acts 15:1-35

One could say that discipleship is conforming to the will of God in your daily life. But how do we know what God's will is for us, either as individuals or as a community?

We all know some stories of people who found clarity. For example, I have a friend that felt a nudge to pull over at a particular rest stop. There he had a conversation with a stranger that was instrumental in how he chose the seminary he attended.

I don't know about you, but I have never felt that God's voice was quite that obvious for my own life. But that doesn't mean we give up. We are well advised to give this time, to seek the insights of wise, trusted friends, to pray, and to read scripture.

This congregation is the fruit of a very significant decision of the Alexanderwohl church and village in now-Ukraine to migrate to Kansas. That decision required high-stakes discernment, both prayer and deliberate leadership. No one would have taken the decision to migrate lightly.

We can think about discerning God's will in three ways:

1. What God is calling an individual to
2. What God is calling our community to (whether this is how to engage in ministry, what to let go of, or what new call to take up)
3. How to interpret the Bible

Anabaptists Christians encourage individual Bible study, but we prioritize interpreting the Scriptures together. We believe doctrine is important, but the first question we bring to Scripture, is not "what am I supposed to believe?" but "how is God calling us to live and to follow Jesus?"

Our scripture text describes an important discernment of the church in Jerusalem in the first years after the resurrection of Jesus. We'll take some time to learn from how the New Testament church engaged in discernment.

Much of the New Testament has to do with how the believers in Jesus came to discover that God was forming a new people in Christ that included folks that were not from Jewish background. This new work in Christ was bringing Jew and Gentile into one new covenant people with a common faith in Christ and life together as a sign of God's reign.

Actually, there wasn't disagreement on this point. No one was arguing that Gentiles could not be a part of the church. There already were Gentile-converts or "God-fearers" that were part of local synagogues in different countries of the ancient world.

The disagreement instead was about the real implications of Gentiles joining the church as believers in Jesus. The special mark of Jews being a covenant people was circumcision. Circumcision began with Abraham. It was a sign of becoming a child of Abraham.

You can read about laws concerning circumcision in many places in the Old Testament. There was no way to require circumcision of Gentile neighbors, but there's no question for Israelites.

This wasn't optional. There wasn't any verse that implied that in some special situation, circumcision can be set aside.

Secondly, in Acts, there isn't really an issue about whether Jews who believe in Jesus should continue to circumcise. The issue has to do with the status of Gentile believers. Do these believers have to become Jews first? Do they need to complete a process of becoming Jewish proselytes in order to be part of a covenant people formed by the work of Christ?

Or does the work of Christ transcend the distinction between Jew and Gentile? Is the important thing to have faith in Jesus?

At the beginning of the chapter, there are some Jewish believers that come from Judea and raise questions about Paul and Barnabbas' work in the church of Antioch. The church decides to send Paul and Barnabbas and some others as a delegation to Jerusalem to seek direction from the Jerusalem leadership.

Once in Jerusalem, there are again believers from "the Pharisee party" that again argue that in order to be "saved" or fully participate in God's covenant people, everyone has to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses.

They aren't trying to make conflict for conflict's sake. If you could place yourself back in that situation, the answer isn't obvious – especially put yourself in the shoes of Jewish people who have maintained distinct practices for centuries and even suffered persecution because of it.

The question requires *discernment*. So what do we learn from the process the church pursues in Acts 15?

To begin, I notice that Acts 15 twice mentions three groups of people together: apostles, elders, and the whole church. The entire congregation is involved in the discernment, but the leadership of the apostles and elders has a special role. Community discernment doesn't eliminate the need for leadership. After the delegation arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders and they began a conversation.

The apostle Peter stood up to give important words through his role in preaching to Gentiles in the "early days." To ask the Gentiles to become fully Jewish in order to participate in this new thing God is doing is really to test God, because we aren't finding faith in the fruit of this new thing God is doing!

After Peter speaks there is *silence*. Does this mean the objection is no longer there? Probably not. Silence might not be remarkable for us, who are good at being quiet, but in some communities, silence is the exception, and it means there is a God-moment.

After some testimony from Paul and Barnabbas, James begins to speak. James is in the role of the presiding leader, and seems to have weighty decision-making power, but not in an authoritarian way.

James' appears to have listened carefully to everything that has been said. His judgment (judgment in the sense of a carefully discerned verdict) is that the Gentile believers should not be troubled with the requirement of essentially converting to full Judaism in order to share in the faith of Jesus.

James also cites Scripture! Where does he turn? There would be lots of verses about circumcision in the Old Testament that he could have turned to. But he doesn't do that. James picks a passage from the prophet Amos that concerns God's promise to "rebuild David's dwelling" – which they understood to be fulfilled in Jesus.

The purpose is to "allow all other peoples to seek the Lord." The passage doesn't mention circumcision, but does express God's ultimate mission to include all peoples. Setting up any unnecessary barriers for people wouldn't help that mission.

However, James proposes a kind of compromise. Everyone will agree to abstain from sexual immorality, from food sacrificed to idols, and from eating meat with blood or animals that had died by strangling (therefore without the blood being drained).

We could spend all day talking about why these specific requirements. Some scholars believe that James may be drawing from Old Testament laws concerning "resident aliens" – folks that were not Israelite, but lived in Israelite territory.

However that may be, they decide to write a letter to communicate the decision with the church in Antioch, and the whole church of Jerusalem respects the decision.

I believe this careful discernment honored not only faith in the new thing that God is doing through Jesus, but also pragmatic concerns for creating a sense of unity between Jews and Gentiles, by at least asking Gentile believers to avoid practices that would be particularly offensive to Jewish believers.

IT SEEMED GOOD TO THE HOLY SPIRIT AND TO US

In the letter sent to Antioch, I'm most struck by this phrase: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." The Holy Spirit was active in the discerning process, even though there was no voice from heaven. The Spirit didn't dictate the decision.

The "to us" part of the equation suggests that the agency of the members of the church was *also* important.

The lesson for me is that:

- God's will involves and includes agency for humans when that is consistent with the gospel.

- Perhaps part of the reason discerning will of God is challenging is because God doesn't tell us what to do in a way that bypasses the agency that God has given us to think critically, to develop wisdom, to exercise moral judgment, and to lovingly consider the common good of all who are involved.

PREACHING, TEACHING, AND DIALOGUE

In *Anabaptist Essentials*, Palmer Becker discusses three ways that discernment happens in the church. These are through preaching, teaching, and dialogue. One is not better to the exclusion of the others. All three are part of the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, as well as the practices of the early Anabaptists.

Early Anabaptists had plenty of disagreement and diversity, but they also could reach remarkable consensus, such as the Schleithem Confession of 1527.

Traditional churches, however, do tend to default to preaching and teaching, with less of a space for dialogue. Dialogue is “applying what we have learned to our lives and situations.” The back and forth conversation allows us to test our discernment with others.

The Quakers or Friends have a process of discernment called “Clearness Committee.” This practice is centered around discernment of an individual, but involves trusted people who know the person and also don’t have a stake in the outcome.

The process starts with silence. The individual speaks first, then the trusted people are allowed to *only* ask questions – open and honest questions. No advice, nor leading questions.

Each time the individual can respond and further open questions may build on what the individual expresses.

I have never followed this process exactly, but I was inspired by it to set up an intentional conversation when I was making a decision about a couple of possible churches to pastor (this was before Alexanderwohl had become an option).

I sat down with Beth, with an aunt and uncle who know me well, and with another couple who were good friends with my uncle and aunt, while the wife had also been a mentor and good friend to Beth. It was an opportunity for me to speak my questions and to also have questions and insights spoken back to me by trustworthy people who knew us well.

I wonder if there are aspects of this process that can be helpful to consider for the various kinds of discernment we engage in.

Here at Alexanderwohl, we are at point after a year and half of Covid where community discernment is particularly important. Where do we go from here? What are the ministries we need to focus on, especially when some are feeling burn-out? What is the best structure for our church leadership at the present time?

Who are we as a church, and what may God be calling us to do?

Pastor Lois and I would like to form a small team to organize spaces for discernment through dialogue. We think this would happen best in small group settings where there is already some trust between the participants, and where we have specific questions to focus our time.

Stay tuned for more information about how we hope to accomplish this. Our hope is that God's Spirit will help us to re-envision who we are and what God is calling us to going forward.

CONCLUSION

This morning we have reflected on how we discern God's will for us both as individuals and as a community. We have considered the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 as an example to learn from.

The questions we wrestle with will be varied: how do we interpret the Bible? How do I discern God's will for a major decision in my life? How do we as a congregation discern God's will for our congregational life?

Discerning God's will is not easy or obvious. We will not have the certainty of being right, but our faith teaches that authentic discernment is possible. Let's give ourselves to this important task, let's listen to the Spirit, and let's stay hopeful!