



**Mennonite
Church**
Canada

Formation

Sermon

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Navigating Faithfulness

I have often found myself using the word 'navigate' when it comes to addressing difficult, confusing, or new situations. "Navigate" implies a sense of orientation, perspective, and understanding of our place, our abilities, and our environment. We learn how to navigate in a new city. A young couple tries to navigate parenthood. A student learns how to navigate high school. And Mennonite Church Canada is currently in a process of navigation asking what it means to be a faithful church today.

Being a faithful church? Does that imply we have become unfaithful, or lost our bearings and orientation? Mennonite Church Canada has, helpfully stated that "seeking clarity in faithfulness in Christian life is the never-ending non-optional vocation of God's people." This statement suggests that the people of God are called to always be a discerning people. The church and the people of God have never had a pure origin which we try to recover. We are always in process, on a journey, always navigating.

Before we explore what it means to commit to ongoing discernment I want to take a moment to consider the implications of not committing to this process. To opt-out of ongoing discernment is to believe that the map you currently have is complete and fully sufficient. Does that mean we no longer need to respect our context - but rather expect the world to conform to our map? If so, that means believing more in your map than in anything else.

What might that look like? Look at the European explorers who landed in the Americas. They literally projected their navigational map on to the residents here - believing they were in India. And they also, shamefully, projected their cultural map of superiority and domination. For years the indigenous people of this land were

made to either fit a European map or be erased from the map completely.

Another example is how we understand gender. We currently live with a linguistic and anatomical map that clearly divides male and female /man and woman. But we know that some people are born biologically ambiguous or outside of that clear division. Or, we could think of how governments and corporations create economic maps which turn organic nature into mechanical resources and turn people into labour and consumers.

Now we cannot live without maps. And some maps continue to be trustworthy. But a map must always be tested by how it helps us engage and navigate our environment. Our maps of holiness, faithfulness, and truth are not abstract realities. They form our vision and shape our actions. And if we hold them too highly or too rigidly it will not only hinder our ability to navigate life together, but they may become destructive for those who cannot find themselves or their place on our maps.

And so as a church it is important that we affirm the commitment made by Mennonite Church Canada to be a people of discernment, a people willing to engage what is happening around us so that we might faithfully navigate our context. The practical implication of this understanding is "that the church will always speak, and then it must always speak again." This does not mean we will always change but it does mean that we will take time to give attention to concerns and issues that surface or become pressing. When the church speaks there are at least three things we can do. First, the church can reaffirm what has already been said. Throughout the Bible we hear continued affirmations of justice and warnings against idolatry. The Mennonite church has grappled

with its peace position but has, over time, reaffirmed this as a central aspect of its theology.

Second, when the church speaks it can modify what has been said previously. In the Bible, Jesus and the prophets often came to modify people's current understanding of faithfulness. And while the Mennonite church has reaffirmed a peace position it has, over time, modified its understanding of what that means.

Finally, when the church speaks it can also change what has been said before. In the wake of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the early church struggled to understand anew its relationship between Jews and Gentiles. More recently churches have changed their position on slavery and the role of women in ministry.

So, the commitment to ongoing discernment does not necessarily mean we will change position on a given topic. Nor does it mean that current changes are final. This is, admittedly, a difficult posture to maintain. It is much easier to forge ahead with a clear and decisive map than to give attention and remain open to the people and issues involved in our lives.

As the church we speak and we will have to speak again. This is the commitment to being a faithful people of discernment. So how do we begin to navigate and live out this commitment? What is the role of the Bible in this process? Is the Bible a trustworthy map?

I would suggest that people who see the Bible as a divine map that can be directly applied to all areas of life, may not in fact, be taking the Bible seriously enough. Taking the Bible seriously in discernment also means listening to it when it points us away from using scripture as a fixed and divine map. One of the most important things we can learn from the Bible and our faith may not be right answers or right rules but a right posture for discernment.

In matters of discernment and faithfulness I think there are two key postures: First, we need to embrace a posture that frees us to consider the issues and context at hand. The Bible goes to surprisingly great lengths to remind us that this text is not a fixed and static map for direct application. The prophets drive this point home telling the people they cannot "do the law" and expect to be righteous. There must be a lived engagement with God's vision. Even Moses who was given the law by revelation needed to remain open to hear such cases as the daughters of Zelophehad who petitioned that the law be changed so that unmarried women could receive family inheritance. Jesus reminds some religious leaders that that searching the Bible alone will not lead them to eternal life. The Bible itself continually points away from itself to help us understand what it means to be faithful to the living God. So the first posture of discernment is to know that as a people of faith we are free, released, to speak into our reality.

Equally important, the second posture of discernment is to approach issues with great humility. Because we can't simply cut and paste our ethics and understanding from the Bible (and so wash our hands of the matter), because we are released to speak into the world, we become accountable and responsible for our positions and actions that we develop as a church. In this respect we approach the Bible with great interest and investment as this is our primary witness of how a community over the millennia has wrestled with the question of being faithful to the living God. The witness of the Bible has an undeniable place because there is no other tangible resource from which we can learn so much about these postures.

Within the posture of humility and responsibility I also think we should become invested in all relevant voices outside the Bible. We don't want to miss out on the Spirit speaking, which the Bible says is poured out on all flesh. And we also don't want to miss insights from each other's understanding of the Bible. The Mennonite Church has a long commitment of community interpretation. As a people of faith we gather these voices as our acts of worship so that we may open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who we trust will lead us into truth. And from these humble and rigorous actions we make decisions, take stands, and act.

As we approach the topic of human sexuality we should remember that we are free. We are free to explore how we might best understand and live out of our commitments to love, peace, justice, forgiveness, and holiness. And as we approach the topic of human sexuality we should remember that we are accountable. We are accountable for the implications that our understanding and actions have on our lives, the lives of our families and friends, and the lives of our neighbours and strangers.

Human sexuality is a topic worthy of the church's attention because it already has our attention. We are already implicated in how sexuality is being communicated and expressed. Questions and expressions around sexual orientation continue to challenge traditional understandings. Forms of addiction, sexual exploitation, and abuse continue. Pornography, incest, and prostitution are real.

How do we understand and encourage a healthy sexuality for young people dating, for single adults, for the elderly? How do we understand our own sexual desires? How do we release, nurture and guard them? Is our sexuality culturally produced, biologically determined, or divinely given? Is sexuality a part of our faith?

I invite us into a commitment of dialogue and discernment, into the postures of freedom and humility. I invite us to hear the Bible even when the Bible is asking us to speak. And I invite

the Holy Spirit to guide us into paths of truth and
life so God would be glorified and all God's

creation be redeemed. Amen.