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“The Vocation of the Church as a Discerning Community”

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Delegate session 1: 60 minutes:

The Logic and Politics of Discernment:

It is indeed very good to be with you. I am honoured by the invitation to think together about the vocation of the church as a discerning community. I congratulate you on identifying this as a significant, important, and timely theme; one that is worth dedicating time to - and to do so together with all the delegates of all the churches. It sometimes feels like a luxury to take this time out, but it isn't. It is important for the church to review our destination and to adjust our map if necessary. This is important in order to be who we are; and to become who we want to be. The Mennonite leaders in Colombia used to say: if you don't know where you're coming from and you don't know where you're going, then any bus will do. One Canadian politician said recently: if we keep going the way we are, I'm afraid we're going to get there. Origins and destinations don't matter to those who have no vocation. They do matter a great deal to the church.

Our theme is “The Vocation of the Church as a Discerning Community.” The Bible has a great deal to say about this; so much that we won't be able to take it all in. So let's not try. But let's at least enjoy some of what there is. I want to take you on a journey during these 3 sessions assigned to me; or maybe it's a trek or a hike; or maybe a stroll. But we want to take some time to walk through Paul's letter to the Philippians. We want to stop to smell the roses, and to watch the scenery. It's a bit like walking through a beautiful flower garden: we can take many paths because we know they will all take us to the same places. But it's important to take one, and enjoy the incredible experience awaiting us. In some places we may want to stay a while; in other places we'll just walk by and enjoy what we can.

I've entitled this first presentation: The Logic and Politics of Discernment.

Logic and Politics: these are two words that we don't often associate with faith and discipleship. Isn't faith feeling and trusting the unknown? Isn't politics what the church stays away from? I've chosen these two words because the Apostle Paul chose these two words. He used “Politics” when he wrote to the Philippians:

Only, *live your life* in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... (Phil.1:27);

“Live your life,” (RSV) “Conduct yourselves,” (NAS); “Let your conversations be” (KJV). The word being translated here is the word “politics.” It is one of those roses we want to stop to smell

a bit. There are three interesting things about this word: It is a verb, an action word (not a noun like in English); it is an imperative verb (not a descriptive word); and it is plural. Each of these is important: it is imperative that we (plural), as a church, act together, so that our common life is worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our life together (our politics) needs to reflect the mind and life (politics) of Jesus. We could translate this:

Make sure that your church politics is worthy of the gospel of Christ; or

Make sure that your church understands its life as political, so make sure it is political in the sense of being worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The other word he chose has to do with logic. It comes from Phil.4:8:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, **think about** these things.

“Think about” (KJV; NRS); “Let your mind dwell on” (NAS). I notice in your program for this gathering that you have times of “dwelling in the Word.” That’s very good and important. This business of thinking clearly about what’s going on contains the root word “logic.” It is another one of those roses that’s worth stopping at for a bit. It has the very same three interesting characteristics: it is a verb; it is imperative; and it is plural. While the first rose exhorts us to act in ways that are worthy, this rose exhorts us to think clearly about what is honorable, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, true, just, and worthy of praise. Think about this; work it through; and do it together.

We could translate this:

Make sure that your logic leads you to what is true and pure.... or,

Make sure that you fill your minds with what is true and just

Even though the translations of the letter to the Philippians do not use the word “discernment,” the letter exhorts us to think logically, to act worthily, and to keep the positive intentions of the gospel in the forefront of everything we do.”Gospel,” after all, is good news for those who commit to it.

But let’s continue our trek. You’ll notice that we’re not following a path that leads from chapter 1 to 4; and that’s ok. We’ll just continue to enjoy the journey.

So we’ve seen that this letter exhorts us to worthy living, and clear thinking. And these are important; they frame the letter at the beginning (chapter 1) and at the end (chapter 4). Is there anything else that might clarify this vocation for us in a helpful way? I think there is. Let’s keep our eyes open.

Let’s gather these together to see them as a whole.

Paul says:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight *to help you to determine what is best*, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless. (Phil.1:9-10).

The intention is “*to help you to determine what is best.*” This is discernment. And discernment is best accomplished, now note this, *when love overflows with knowledge and insight*: another unusual surprise. The Beatles sang the song: “All you need is Love; all you really need is love; all you really need is love, love; all you really need is love.” Paul says that love needs something else: it needs to be informed by insight and by knowledge. There are two Greek words behind these translations: one, in the New Testament, refers exclusively to knowing or understanding things about God and Christ (*epignosis*). The other refers more to knowing things through human experience, and through the senses (*aesthesis*). In other words, the exercise of love needs to be informed by knowledge of the divine initiatives and by human experience. Uninformed love turns out to be something other than love. Or we could turn this around: our knowledge and our experience need to be shaped by love if they are to be understood as discerning and wise. We do not choose between the two: should we be loving or wise. We discern how wisdom must be loving and how love must be informed. These are not opposites that we need to choose from. Rather, it is not really love if it is not wise; and it is not really wise if it not also loving. These are two sides of the same coin, or, using our image, these are two petals of the same rose. That’s what makes the rose so very beautiful.

But let’s go on. We find this amazing statement by Paul that we could sit with and ponder for a long time. In fact, it’s one of those that if you think you understand it after the first reading, you likely don’t. He says:

Let those of us then who are mature *be of the same mind*; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you (Phil. 3:15).

Let’s take a closer look. First of all, notice the phrase “*be of the same mind.*” This phrase appears 5 times in this letter. Our minds, our thinking, are to be synchronized. But synchronized to what? Many times we assume the simple answer: we are to agree with each other. Mature, wise people are those who can learn to agree with each other. Perhaps this implies that we also need to learn to disagree with each other. Not so long ago (1997-8), our predecessor denominations, and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada passed a statement called “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love.” The point was that we need to learn to agree with each other, and if we can’t, then we need to learn to disagree in a proper way. Now there is, no doubt, value in that. But that is not the sense here. Nor is it the sense in the rest of the letter when this phrase “be of the same mind” is used. “Be of the same mind” does not refer, first and foremost, to agreeing with each other. It refers to agreeing with Christ; to having the same mind as Christ, together. Yes, we need to all

synchronize our thinking; but not with each other. Together we are to synchronize it with the mind of Christ. That's a very important distinction; one that we should not overlook.

Paul has explained his own journey with Jewish scripture and identity in the first 14 verses of chapter 3: a journey entirely changed by knowing Christ. So dramatic is the change that he is willing to give up all his previous knowledge, insight, experience, wisdom, and identity in exchange for what he has learned through Jesus. And he calls on others to do the same: to be of the same mind. He wants the community, together, to have the mind of Christ. This has important implications for being a discerning community. Sometimes we think the real answer is to get degrees in mediation and conflict resolution, or in counselling so that we can learn to live with disagreement. These may all be helpful tools, but fundamentally this is not what Paul is talking about. It is not the art of compromise and political manoeuvring that builds our community; it is discerning the mind of Christ together. That is the community Paul seeks to construct. And that is defined as maturity – actually the word is perfection. That is what it means to fulfill the will of God as a body of Christ. In the eyes of Paul, all else is symptom; it is not the root.

The confusing part in this verse is the second phrase: *“if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.”* What in the world does that mean?

This time the meaning is confused, not clarified, by the Greek: “if you (singular) think (plural) differently about anything, this (??) too God will reveal to you (plural).” The singular pronoun (someone; sometimes translated “you”) is coupled with a plural verb (think); a somewhat unusual construction. And the final pronoun (you) is plural, apparently referring to the plural verb (think), and very likely referring to the community, not to the individual.

Also it is difficult to know exactly what the “this” refers to. There are two options: it is a reference to what has gone before in 3:1-14, namely, the replacement of all that has been, with the new understandings of life under the Lordship of Christ; or it is a reference to the different “thinking” that the one (or many) are exhibiting.

This is quite a passage. At first glance, it appears to be giving us exactly what we so eagerly and anxiously seek: What do we do when some, or someone, disagree? He's getting to the kernel of our quest. Isn't it true that what we are really concerned about, the reason why we chose this theme for our assembly, is what do we do when we disagree? How unfortunate that this scriptural kernel seems to be ambiguous at best, or somewhat unclear at exactly the point at which we are seeking clarity and precision! So what do we do? Exactly at the point of identifying “our” problem, the text is unclear.

Well, this is scripture. Perhaps, indeed, it is good for us to have it this way. Perhaps, what is important for us is to note the matter-of-fact, almost casual tone the Apostle uses to talk about

dissent in the discerning community. How are we to understand this? One possible understanding is something like this:

If someone among you thinks differently than you do as a community, that too will be clarified to the someone and/or to the community, in time, by God.

It doesn't say how; it only says that God will reveal (*apocalypse*) it. Perhaps the sense of non-urgency in the face of dissent is good for us. And perhaps the dynamics of this non-urgency are clarified in the next verse:

Only let us hold fast to what we have attained (Phil. 3:16).

Now, is this a beautiful rose? Or is this a thistle? Or is it maybe the thorn on the rose bush? One of the Greek versions inserts the word "canon" here, indicating more strongly that we should "hold fast (keep agreeing) with where we have arrived, with the standards (*canon*) that have functioned as our foundation. We have enough; let us hold fast and keep on. And, God will reveal to us how disagreement will be clarified and resolved. We don't need to panic.

It is a very strange construction, made even more complex by a lack of unanimity in the Greek texts that underlie the translations. I think, however, that this is suggesting that when there is disagreement in the community about something, proposals for change and/or for holding fast need to be built upon a foundation of love overflowing with knowledge and insight. That is what justifies change or status quo. That is, there is a foundation, and the need for change in the foundation needs to be clearly demonstrated by love overflowing with knowledge and insight. And God will reveal to us how this will be; but until then, those who are of the "same mind" will continue to work at what has been attained, or where we have come to.

Now for many of us, that may feel like the thorn on the stem of the rose. It hurts. But let me hasten to add how context may influence how we understand what I just said. In *our* minds, to say that the need for change needs to be demonstrated by love, knowledge, and insight may sound like a very conservative approach. But in Paul's context, and the context of the Philippians, it was not that. In our day, "those who disagree" likely want to push toward some new understanding of our faith and action. And they discover resistance in those who hang on to the old. In Paul's day, "those who disagree" likely were those who wished to go back to what had been. In other words, Phil. 3:1-14 makes it clear that what we have attained, and what we need to hold on to, are the new insights. The resistance comes from those who prefer the old. Paul has just come through a major transformation of understanding. His conversion has to do especially with three things. First, he now thinks differently about what constitutes the people of God. His insight that God's people now include the Gentiles is a major shift in his understanding of people-hood. Secondly, this insight has led him to understand Hebrew scripture differently, including a reconstruction of the place and role of the law within people-hood. He has changed his mind dramatically in terms of things like food laws and circumcision. And thirdly, he has

come to a new insight about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. He now understands him to have been God's chosen Messiah, and this changes everything. It has changed him from being a persecutor of the community that believes this, to being its champion. So when Paul talks about "holding fast to what has been attained," he is talking about a radical shift in understanding of Jewish scripture, identity and ethics. This is not conservative stubbornness. These are no small things.

In our day, often, the "liberals" push for change and the "conservatives" resist change. In Paul's letter it is the other way around: the "conservatives" are pushing for change; they want to go back to the way things were, and the "liberals" want to hold on to what has already been achieved. So "holding fast" to the arrived at "canon" is, in Paul's letter, not a conservative action: it is the radical thing to do. And those who disagree are not the liberals who prefer something new; they are the conservatives who want to go back and reject the new that has come about through Christ. Let me give a few modern examples. My wife Irene and I just spent some time in South Africa where our youngest son Andrew and his wife Karen are working. After a very long and difficult struggle, the church, especially the Dutch Reformed Church, changed its mind. For decades it had advocated apartheid as God's will for South Africa, and now it declares it as disobedience and heresy. This is an enormous shift for the church. And there are still folks there who yearn for the old days, and want to go back to previous understandings. Paul would say: "Hold fast to what we have attained." It hasn't been an easy struggle and, although it is causing significant disagreement, hold on to where we have arrived. Another illustration would be the issue of slavery. If someone among us today disagrees with the position the church has come to, namely that slavery is not the will of God for us, and this someone is agitating for the church to go back to the way things were in the 1800s, Paul would say: Hold fast to what has been achieved. Hold fast to our new understandings; they are now the standard (canon). Don't give up on those. Those who prefer to have slaves, will need to demonstrate how that can be the will of God. And, in time, God will also reveal and clarify this situation to them and to the community.

Paul was not advocating entrenchment; he was concerned about erosion. He was not talking about standing still. He understood that the church should continue to move ahead in its chosen path of "being of one mind with Christ." This was indeed its foundational achievement. Others wanted to erode this achievement by going back to more familiar or less radical lives. For those with Jewish backgrounds, this would likely have been former understandings of law, covenant, and people-hood. For the Gentiles, it would have been a desire to go back to the beliefs, ethics, and culture that were familiar to them. To both, Paul says, no. Our common vocation now is to live together in one community according to the mind of Christ. And to that we need to hold fast. We need to let go of former things in order that we can hold fast to what we have achieved.

What makes this complex for us is, of course, that, in a way, this is what the Jewish scholars, the Pharisees, were also trying to do. They too were “holding fast” to the canon they had arrived at. But Paul now sees them differently.

² Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!
³ For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh-- ⁴ even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.(Phil.3:2-11).

This is the crux of the issue for us, is it not? How do we know when “holding fast to what we have attained” is Pharisaic entrenchment, cutting us off from further insight and wisdom of the Spirit, because of our legitimate concern for non-conformity to the spirits of the day? Or when “holding fast” is legitimate concern that significant new insights should not be eroded or lost entirely?

Are we like Paul - hanging on to radical advances - or like the Pharisees - resisting changes that new insight, knowledge, and experience bring to us? We have pointed to two key insights from the text. One, the somewhat frustrating statement: “if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.” The other the exhortation that love must overflow more and more with knowledge and insight, i.e, with divine insight and human experience. This means that the new experience is so overwhelming, the data so clear, and the new insight so clearly an expression of overflowing love, that the new must become the new norm. That is, after all, what Paul himself had experienced. He marvels at how this could have happened to him - of all people. He was a Jewish Jew; a Pharisee’s Pharisee. He was meticulous in terms of understanding and practicing the law. How then was it that all this could now be counted as nothing? It has to do with new insight and experience, not with a desire to return to a previous golden era. When the newness becomes overwhelmingly compelling, then not responding to it is entrenchment, it is being closed to the leading of God’s Spirit. But the new needs somehow to address the same norms, namely, does it reflect the mind of Christ? Paul did also face those who were anxious to move forward in non-acceptable directions, not backward. His letters are full of

these examples, perhaps the most common being the multiple faces of Gnosticism that he and the church encountered. He applied the same standard: hold on to what has been attained if it is faithful to the mind of Christ. If it is faithful, then embrace it and incorporate it into the life of faith. If the new is unfaithful to this, then resist it and reject it.

I just came back from an extended time in Cuba, teaching and interacting with the Cuban churches and context. You will have heard that they just had a big Communist Party Congress where they tried to deal with the complexities of Cuban politics, economics, and social life. Big changes are in the wind. Fidel Castro, although he is no longer President, nor is he the First Secretary of the Party, was present at the closing ceremony of the Congress. While he did not speak (he is clearly frail), he was quoted: “We need to change everything that needs to be changed.” One Cuban church leader said to me: “That’s exactly what is needed in the church.” I think this expresses, in some way, the experience of Paul. After his encounter with Jesus, and his new insights about the nature of God’s people, the role of law, and the identity of Jesus as Messiah, Paul was ready to “change everything that needed to be changed,” and then exhort the new community to “hold fast to what has been attained.”

And so we live in this permanent triangle of tensions: stubborn entrenchment - the temptation to deny new insight; conformity to ungodly living; and the potential of eroding the positive understandings that have already been revealed to us. Ladies and gentlemen: Welcome to the life of the church.

Paul’s passion is to live this tension. He expresses it frequently in this letter, albeit with different words. Let’s just enjoy some of these beautiful roses, knowing full well that the thorns are part of the beauty of the rose:

- 1) “to help you determine what is best” (1:10);
- 2) “live your life worthy in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:27);
- 3) “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (2:2);
- 4) “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5);
- 5) “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12);
- 6) “Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you” (3:14-15);
- 7) Only let us hold fast to what we have attained” (3:16);
- 8) “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2).
- 9) “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (4:7);
- 10) “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (4:8);

11) “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (4:9).

I want to end this presentation by going back to the basics. I know it may not be needed here, but I would not be fair to Paul’s writings if I did not highlight the essential framework that informs this teaching and his argument. These roses are too important to pass by.

First, he would not argue, exhort, and encourage the church at all, if it were not for this new life-giving paradigm that has overwhelmed him, a paradigm that he identifies as “gospel.”

The word “gospel” appears 9 times in this short letter. And it is this that propels him to act and compels him to teach.

- 1) He rejoices that the people in Philippi were open to “sharing in the gospel” (1:5): meaning that they were open to listening, and willing to commit to it;
- 2) He identifies them as partners in the “defense and confirmation of the gospel” (1:7): meaning that they helped to articulate it, and thus guarantee its ongoing presence there. He identifies his vocation of being that of “defense of the gospel” (1:16): in both cases, the word “defense” refers to the Greek word “apology,” where we get the idea of apologetics;
- 3) He is concerned about the “spread of the gospel” (1:12): and identifies his own persecution as a helpful instrument in the gospel becoming known in the Empire;
- 4) The gospel is now the new standard, the thing by which our life becomes “worthy” or not (1:27);
- 5) He rejoices in that side by side they can now attest to the “faith of the gospel” 1:27): namely, that the gospel can be trusted to give life;
- 6) He commends Timothy, Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, and other co-workers for partnering with him in the “work of the gospel” (2:22; 4:3);
- 7) He is grateful that the people of Philippi supported him even in “the early days of the gospel” (4:15): a short-hand way of identifying his entire ministry as “gospel.”

The critical, basic point is that discernment is not whatever task; it is the vocation of discerning the good news of Christ for the present generation. Gospel is the hub of all ministry. Discerning its essence is essential to guarantee the faithfulness of the ministry.

The second point is even more basic. The word Gospel (*euangelion*) simply, and literally means news that is good and positive. In and of itself, it does not mean anything; or we could say it can mean whatever you want it to mean. I could say that driving a Prius is gospel; and you could say, no it needs to be a Honda. Paul anticipates this and makes sure that the word gospel cannot be just anything; it needs to be something. And that something is the new shape of things revealed in the coming, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If gospel is not related to that, it is not gospel.

Paul mentions Jesus 22 times in this letter, and Christ 39 times. In other words, Jesus/Christ is mentioned 61 times in 104 verses. Our mind, our politics, our logic, our thinking, rejoicing, praying, our holding fast or discounting everything as rubbish: it all has to do with gospel which is defined exclusively by the way Jesus shows us the will of God. This, in Paul's mind, is what sets gospel apart from law and other wisdom – or better said, this is what fulfills the intention of law and wisdom in the Old Testament. For us, this is the Christian contribution to inter-faith dialogue. This is the church's contribution to pluralism. This is the vocation of the church in the entire world.

We are stewards of the revealed good news in Jesus Christ. To exercise this stewardship requires faith, knowledge, insight, and love that only can be given by the grace of God. This is the hope of discernment. This is the task of faithfulness.

May it be so.