

Ephesians 3:16-21 New Revised Standard Version

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:16-21 First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament

My prayer for you is that from the great treasures of his beauty, Creator will gift you with the Spirit's mighty power and strengthen you in your inner being. In this way, the Chosen One will make his home in your heart. I pray that as you trust in him, your roots will go deep into the soil of his great love, and that from these roots you will draw the strength and courage needed to walk this sacred path together with all his holy people. This path of love is higher than the stars, deeper than the great waters, wider than the sky. Yes, this love comes from and reaches to all directions.

*I pray that you would feel how deep the Chosen One's great love is. **It is a love that goes beyond our small and weak ways of thinking.** This love fills us with the Great Spirit, the one who fills all things. I am praying to the Maker of Life, who, by his great power working in us, can do far more than what we ask for, **more than our small minds** can imagine.*

May his sacred family and the Chosen One bring honor to him across all generations, to the time beyond the end of all days. Aho! May it be so!

We had a great day yesterday at our Vision Discovery Day!

Yesterday began a time of listening and discerning God's will for our church as we enter a new season of being the church. Yesterday did not bring answers or great change — what it did was make us think about and hear and understand a little more deeply what it is we value. It got us thinking and listening a little more deeply about what we are doing and why. This is a beginning. From here we will be able to narrow down and focus in on our mission, vision and purpose. From there we will dream out the distant future: 10 years from now, what do we hope our church will be doing? Then we will begin to make plans and decisions for the near future: 3 years from now, and next year.

Paul wrote this letter to the Church to help them understand their vision and purpose. When Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, he was likely not writing to just one church in Ephesus but to many Gentile churches across Asia. In these early days, churches are forming and growing. It's a time of great change in the church. In this passage Paul offers a prayer for the church. His prayer is that they would comprehend—be rooted and grounded in—the vastness of God's great love; and that all they do and all they would come out of that place and space of God's infinite love.

The words Paul uses are poetic and rich. I love the First Nations Version which captures some of that poetry. Paul is trying to describe God's love which is indescribable. Somehow those churches will have to take the mystery and the beauty of that awareness and translate it into concrete action and ways of living.

It is the same for us as a congregation, and also for us as individuals who follow Jesus. We have experienced a sacred indwelling of Christ's love. We've experienced *something*. Something that has changed us. Something special to us. The question then becomes *How shall we live?* What does this look like in my life? What does this mean for how we live as a community of faith? How does this mean we understand the world and how the world should be?

It's interesting how we make decisions in our lives as churches, as communities and individuals. How do you decide what to do when you are faced with an important decision? How many of you make a "pros and cons" list on paper or in your head? How many of you seek out the opinions of other people you respect, or do research to get more facts about the decision? A year ago, I was doing all these things when deciding whether or not to get another dog and then what kind of dog to get. (In the end I chose a curly white bichon frise, but that's beside the point!)

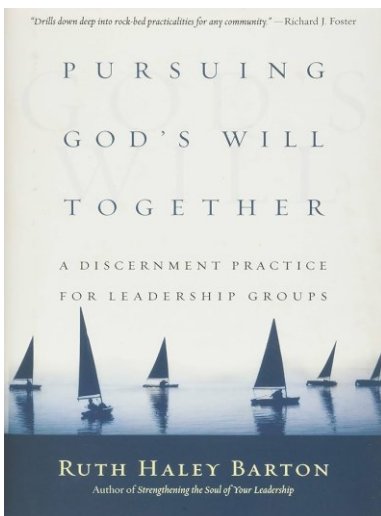
The church has its own process for making decisions. The United Church of Canada and this church follow a formalized process to make decisions at the board and committee level. Interestingly we follow the same rules of order as Parliament, Bourinot's rules of order. (I have a cheat sheet on my desk). An idea is presented in the form of a motion with a mover and seconder and then the motion is discussed and debated and voted on. In the case of the Federal and provincial government there is also the ruling party and the opposition. The ruling party tends to put the motions forward and the job of the opposition is to critique it. The hope is that, with debate and opposing voices, good decisions will be made. Having debates and hearing different opinions can help to bring a diversity of ideas and perhaps to see where an idea is weak and or where a good idea might be tweaked and adjusted a little to make it even better. Once a motion is carried or defeated, you move on. Sometimes you move on with unanimity, and sometimes with winners and losers and people celebrating the victory and others grumbling about it in the parking lot or protesting on the streets.

Research, pros and cons lists or formalized rules of order can absolutely help us to make some good decisions. However, one of the problems in our modern/post-modern society is that the frame of reference — the centre point — is increasingly **me**. Is this good for *me*? Do *I* agree with this? Will this help *me*? Our society used to have more of a sense of the collective good. Will this benefit all or many? Will this lift up those who are struggling and add to the greater good even if it doesn't directly benefit me? In other words, the center point was not '*me*', as an individual or people just like me, but a

common good. We see this shift in provincial and federal politics. Sometimes it seems like the goal is no longer a better society but that one particular ideology wins over another: my tribe vs. your tribe. This is present everywhere — government, discussions on social media, even in the church.

The problem is that we've been taught to have an opinion and to be critical of other opinions. We've been taught to take sides and then dig into being on that side or that opinion. Sides have winners and losers. My way or your way. The right way or the wrong way. The problem is, we don't leave much room for God's way. When Paul talks about God's love and way he says: "**It is a love that goes beyond our small and weak ways of thinking.**" God's way is bigger than our small ways of thinking. How do we get to know the mind of God?

A few of us having been reading a book about discernment: *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*



Discernment is the Spiritual practice of discovering the will of God. Like any spiritual gift, some people are particularly good at it, but all of us are called to practice it. (Some people have an amazing gift of prayer, but all of us are called to pray; some of us give generously and sacrificially but all of us are called to give.) Part of following Jesus is learning to figure out where Jesus is leading.

Good discernment often takes time. It takes trust and **faith that God is good** and does want to connect with us. God wants good for you, life for you. God wants good for others and for the world and so calls us to be part of that.

When you are faced with big questions like -- should I enter into a relationship with this person? Should I quit my job and go back to school? Should I move into a more supportive living situation? Wouldn't you like to know what God wants for you? As a church, wouldn't we want to know if God is calling us to start a new program for families and youth, or if we should continue with another program?

Take a moment to think of something in your life you'd like God's guidance on. When you are seeking discernment for a particular life question or church question whether big or small, there are some things you can do to help with that. If you want to know the will of God, it's important to practice some **spiritual practices** like reading the Bible, like joining for worship, like prayer and/or meditation, like listening or playing or singing Christian music. (I trust the thoughts, ideas I have when I am in a prayerful space more than the ones I have when I am cleaning up someone else's mess with annoyance!)

If you are choosing people to practice discernment for the church or help you with your discernment, it's important that they be people who are on an intentional journey of transformation — which simply means that they recognize in themselves that there's room for improvement and that God wants to help. Once the groundwork has been laid, you begin by **praying for God's guidance and God's wisdom**, God's will in whatever question or situation you have.

One key part of discernment is to pray for indifference and for freedom from a particular outcome. The goal when we are seeking God's will is to get to God's will, and that means we have to be *willing to die to our will*. If you continue to cling to an outcome, you're not yet ready to listen for God's will. That's okay. Be compassionate with yourself. Admit that and continue to pray, turning your will over to God. You might ask "What am I willing to let die to give God room to start something new?" Remember back to how I said we normally make decisions? How will this benefit me and my tribe? This is pretty different!

But if you look at **Jesus**, you see him doing this. Just before his arrest and ultimately his execution, Jesus wrestles in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. It was an anguished prayer, until his will was less and God's will was more.

Detachment to our way and attachment to God's way. Once we detect in ourselves a level of indifference or detachment, then we are ready to pray for and listen for God's wisdom and God's way. God's will sometimes leads us to do things that don't feel good to us. Things like forgiving someone who hurt us, or making costly reparations for damages done to people when we weren't even directly part of the problem. I have no doubt that God's will is for true reconciliation and reparations for the hurt that was caused to Indigenous Peoples in Canada because God hates injustice. God sees the hurt – hurt done to children – the most vulnerable in our society. But arriving at that space means making room for the vastness of God by setting aside and dying to the smallness of our will and our way.

I've told this one before, but good stories are worth repeating. When I became a United Church minister 24 years ago, at that time they had a system in place called the Transfer and Settlement Process. After ordination, the church sent you to your first posting. You could rank the conferences and give needs that you had and preferences, but basically a committee decided where you were sent. My husband and my little 1-year old tyke Anna would find out at the end of May where we would be moving the 1st of July, and it could be anywhere in the country! I honestly thought they'd send me to Quebec because I am bilingual. I remember about six months before, my mother started saying to me: "*You'd better not take my granddaughter to Alberta!*" (I don't think she had anything in particular against Alberta, it was just her saying 'Don't take my

granddaughter far away!") My mother retired early, partly because of an offer by the government, but in large part because Anna was born. So she would periodically say "You'd better not take my granddaughter to Alberta!" And I would respond "Mom, they're not going to send us to Alberta!"

Anyway, the phone call came at the end of May in 1999. We had maps of the country sprawled out on the living room floor and the phone was there. (This was back before cell phones were common, so we couldn't leave the apartment in Toronto as we waited for the call.) Finally the phone rang. After some some pleasantries the woman on the other end said "How would you like to go to Alberta?" I started stuttering. I asked if I could think about it — because as she reminded me of the process, I could say no ... but then you go to the bottom of the pile! And there is no guarantee that they will find a match. And *if you are not matched, you are not ordained!* The woman said she would call back in 10 minutes.

When I hung up, I freaked out. Alex! We can't go to Alberta! My mother will kill me! After a mini freakout we knelt down on the living room rug and prayed. *God, if this is your will, we will go to Alberta. Show us your will and your way. Amen.* As soon as we said 'Amen', the phone rang. It was my mother! My mother and father were in the car and my mother was calling us long distance from the car phone. (Anyone remember that giant shoebox-sized phone you'd put in the car? Anyway you mostly had those for emergencies.)

My mother knew this was the day of the phone call, and she suddenly **knew** she had to call me. "Hi Kim, it's your mother. I just felt like I needed to say that if you need to go to Alberta, *you go to Alberta!*" I started stuttering again. "Ah, ah, ok. Well, I gotta go!" We moved to Alberta less than two months later, and lived there for 8 years.

Talk about an answer to prayer! I wish all the prayers that I have prayed for God's wisdom were that clearly answered. Most of them take more time and more listening and a leap of faith, along with a letting go of my will and my way. But it's worth it. Why? Because God's way is so much more amazing than my way!

"God's path of love is higher than the stars, deeper than the great waters, wider than the sky. Yes, this love comes from and reaches to all directions."

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.