

Wade in the Water
Plenary Session by David Driedger
Friday July 4th, 2014
Mennonite Church Canada Assembly, Winnipeg, MB

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

- Mark 4:37

I want to start by saying that the theme passage for this Assembly seems a little ironic, at least for me. And I would venture a guess that a good many of you, like me, have no clue what it is like to be out in a storm at sea. This picture was taken from the gravel road in front of the farm I grew up at; an hour's drive south of Winnipeg. Flat, solid ground and big sky.



I know nothing of the sea. I know nothing of being on a small boat when the once clear and fixed horizon begins to role in waves and the sure orienting North Star is lost from sight. A tippy canoe on Moose Lake in the wake of a ski boat is as close as it gets for me. And yet it would have, and actually has been, relatively easy for me to speak on this sort of passage without being able to situate myself in its real and pressing experience.

This approach to discernment and understanding is a problem for the church. To be sure it is a problem for many, many others . . . but it is a problem for the church.

Ain't it like most people? I'm no different
We love to talk on things we don't know about – The Avett Brothers

This line has stuck with me in the months leading up to Assembly. This line reflects one of our options when we face the unknown, when we consider things we don't know about, we keep talking like we do know. One of the church's most trusted and most destructive postures in response to what remains unknown or otherwise than itself is to re-entrench its position as knowing and possessing the truth and then applying that truth to those outside its parameters.

In extreme cases we have seen this form of Christianity make recent headlines in the United States. In these cases the church not only keeps talking but is willing to enforce its truth with violence. Former senator Sarah Palin recently asserted that if she were in charge waterboarding would be how she baptizes terrorists. Then there was the story of how World Vision attempted to create an equal opportunity hiring policy with respect to sexual orientation. Those who did not agree with this position responded by pulling their funding that helped support development in struggling countries. People

were willing to pull funding that helped children a world away so that they could keep other people from possible employment. And there are the debates between creationists and scientists that are as much about character attacks and politics as anything else. There is a way of re-entrenching a believed truth in the face of the unknown or the unwanted that is simply violent.

In light of this option I have appreciated Mennonite Church Canada's initiative in the Being a Faithful Church (BFC) process which is trying to engage and respond to the pressing issues of our time; to face questions we may be unclear about and consider again what it means to be faithful in this new and unknown season. The BFC process has been clear from the beginning that discernment is ongoing and that both the Bible and church have gone through periods where it re-affirmed, modified, and changed positions. This is an important and often neglected reminder.

I am concerned, however, that this process still flirts with the same logic or notion of faithfulness as what is behind some of the more expressly violent religious expressions that I just mentioned. This logic promotes an image of faithfulness as possessing the essence of an unassailable truth; where Christianity can name and overcome anything unknown that it encounters and that its own essence will remain unchanged; that the church is sufficient and superior prior to encountering anything foreign or unknown.

This logic, this notion of faithfulness, emerged most clearly in BFC 5 which states that the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem represent the ideals of God's desire for relationships as they are meant to be. To be clear, the bulk of the document actually demonstrates the tremendous diversity and dynamic nature of faithfulness and sexuality in the Bible. But the document always casts these expressions as broken compromises or re-designs outside the ideal horizons. And so those two horizons, those ideals loom over us and function literally as otherworldly images that become at once the most important *and* the most inaccessible part of our discernment. They cannot be attained and they also cannot really be questioned either. This sort of model can tempt us to keep talking on things we don't know about.

I think framing the issue of faithfulness and sexuality in this way places the church in a dangerous position. The document asserts that we all fall short of the ideals of sexuality, but as we also know from experience that what this will mean in practice is that *some will fall more short than others*; because despite the best of intentions these unattainable or otherworldly ideals become tools for the powers around us. To put it bluntly, if a group believes it holds exclusive access to a fixed expression of truth I think we come very close to an accurate definition of idolatry. And this is why I am concerned that this approach to faithfulness can lend itself as a tool for those in power and not an expression of the life-giving Good News. So what do I mean by this?

We all know that the Bible and our faith tradition speak harshly against things like greed, jealousy, interest, apathy towards the poor and vulnerable, and many other things (this too is stated in BFC 5). But in the face of *these* claims we often try to humbly talk about our imperfections, limitations, and then acknowledge God's grace for us as we try our best. Yes, these things are wrong *but we are all sinners*. Contrast this expression to the experience of those who are already on the margins of society or the church. Somehow it is much easier to 'stand-up' for God's ideal intentions against people who already have no voice and no power in the church. I am guessing I don't need to rehearse the litany of various groups and individuals in the course of history that have felt the righteous zeal of the church trying to uphold such a truth at their expense. The people in

power get grace and those on the fringes don't. It is like the joke about the blacksmith found guilty of murder. The morning of the execution a tailor was strung up on the gallows. When somebody asked why the tailor was being executed the response was that the town only had one blacksmith and it already had three tailors.

I think this relationship between power and otherworldly ideals can be so obvious that we can miss it right under our noses. Look at BFC 5.1 which showed the feedback from our church's engagement with the topic of sexuality and spirituality. We were told that most responses indicated a desire to not change our current stated position on issues of same-sex relationships. I find this response interesting first of all because we were not asked to give this specific feedback, but more importantly this feedback was given despite the fact that, to my knowledge, nowhere in this process or in these documents has there been a formal and official space for the voice of a person or a group who is not straight to share *their* testimony, to give witness to what it is to be faithful. Nothing. We felt sufficient to be able to speak and determine the faith of others without them having a voice at all.

*Ain't it like most people? I'm no different
We love to talk on things we don't know about.*

But we have the truth, right? We have the essence of God's intended design. We have this gift for the world. There is a problem for the church when it is ready to assert access to God's will for people or groups without giving space for their testimony of faithfulness. This is the temptation that the BFC process flirts with and this is why I say the logic is the same as can be found in more violent religious expressions. We also assert and apply the church's possession of a truth that is sufficient and superior prior to contact or relationships with those outside our accepted parameters.

To again be fair, the authors of the BFC documents did not claim a full or exhaustive account of what it is to be a faithful church in this regard. So in light of that opening I want to explore another image of being a faithful church, one that does not rely on the logic that we possess the essence of God's otherworldly intention. The church does not need to face the horizon of an unknown season by trying to re-entrench its claim to the essence or ideal of truth or by trying to project its theological imagination onto the horizon before us.

I think our theme verse for this Assembly can help orient us to another way. And returning to this passage I want to make an important note about the Bible. These two images of faithfulness do NOT amount to a choice between accepting or rejecting the Bible. This characterization remains an unfortunate and false choice that still gets hauled out in too many of these conversations. What follows is a rich and pervasive image of biblical thought that rejects the idea that we can possess some unassailable essence or ideal of God's intention.

After all, when we start with the Bible we don't actually start with a perfect image of God and humanity do we? When I start reading the Bible it starts with a mess and spirit hovering in the darkness. And then what, well then you have two different accounts and one of the creation accounts does not begin with a male and female but with an androgynous human called earthling (Adam in Hebrew). God makes other animals but when the human doesn't relate well enough to the animals *then* another human is made. It

seems like God was already re-designing in the Garden, does that mean the original design was to be open to re-designing?

And what happens after these first creation accounts, the earth is destroyed and we have *another* creation account at the Flood, and another creation account when the wind blows, dry land appears and a new people are created at the crossing of the Red Sea. And then there other creation accounts in the prophets. Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River provides all the imagery of a creation account. If you take this biblical imagery seriously one might think there is a *process* to faithfulness, something ongoing where there is no pure ideal or origin but rather a way of being faithful in the midst of life.

There is a Jewish interpretative tradition that asks why the very first letter in the Torah is a *beth* and not *aleph* (b not a) and the answer is that we are not permitted into the origin of things. The Bible begins in the thick of things and we should take that seriously. The Garden of Eden and Revelation are not ideal horizons, they too were culturally appropriate responses to their time. To be sure we can learn an immense amount from them but they too were part of the process of faithfulness. To again be clear I think the BFC 5 document attempts to resist this logic in much of its work but by placing the creation story and Revelation on a separate plane than not only from the rest of life but the rest of scripture we are drawn into an unhelpful expression that needs to be identified.

And so in contrast to faithfulness as possession of an ideal, there is an image of faithfulness that looks to the Spirit hovering over the waters of creation and the dove descending on Jesus emerging from the waters of baptism and asks if we are to be the community willing to wade in the water; the community out on the sea not the ones on the shore who have too often been making waves for others. And after the events of Ascension and Pentecost the church has been giving the calling and opportunity to make this choice.

So what if we as individuals and as a church want to consider wading into the waters? When we wade into the water we hold out the possibility that some of our once unquestionable ideals will be dissolved, others will be re-affirmed, and some new forms will emerge. In this process we learn that faithfulness is a discipline, a practice, a way of relating and maintaining a space; it is not the protection or privileging of an otherworldly ideal. This wading, this dissolving is, if you are like me, deeply unnerving and disorienting. I think this is a crucial point. Even if we have not literally been out in a storm at sea it is at this point where I think we can all best relate.

I will go out on a limb and guess that we do all know these waters. If we do not know these waters for ourselves or our church then know it for someone or some group close to us. We know those times and spaces where we lost our stable point of reference for life or value. Being plunged into the waters of disorientation when trusted, committed relationships begin to fracture; unfaithfulness in marriage, estrangement between parent and child, bitterness and anger between siblings, neighbours, or church members. These waters lap over the tops of our noses in the midst of addictions. There is the exhausting treading of water that comes with grinding debt or unemployment. We become sick and nauseous as the waves of insecurities and anxiety toss us about seemingly at will. The waters of rejection or prejudice can chill straight through the bone. There are times when the chaos of mental illness is only compounded by the threat of it being found out by others. There is the complete undoing and oceanic depth of sexual abuse or violent trauma. We know these waters. Or perhaps for some of you here today it is closer to the dead calm around you that wonders where or how God possibly exists.

We know these waters and I want to suggest that our faithfulness comes not in trying to re-entrench or privilege some distant ideal but in attending to one another in the midst of the waves. As theologian Catherine Keller says, *to love is to bear with the chaos. Not to like it or to foster it but to recognize there the unformed future.* I can think of few more thoroughly biblical statements and perhaps few more helpful for the church right now.

This image of faithfulness is not the defense of some otherworldly ideal that plays so easily into existing power structures. This image of faithfulness attends to the opening and maintaining of such a space and such a posture that can face the waves, wade through them and so find the future. If there is to be a ‘Wild Hope’ it is because our faith will allow us to continue to gather in the spaces where the horizon shifts, the stars disappear and our orientation dissolves. We do this, not as some heroic calling, we do this because we are part of systems that make the waves; *we do this because so many are already out in the waves.* If not you then your loved one, if not your loved one then your neighbour, if not your neighbour then your church or community.

After all, once we have voiced our ideals and stood our ground for whatever image of righteousness we defend, we will go home and the waves will come and we will be asked again and again what faithfulness will mean. One approach to faithfulness finds its stability and calm in the re-assertion of unassailable truths. This can indeed bring calm and unity but too often it will come at the cost of casting others into the sea.

Another path of faithfulness is to wade in the water. As we are able and as is appropriate to help bear with the chaos as it threatens, to enter again and again these baptismal waters to strengthen the forms that protect the vulnerable, to re-affirm the statements that bring healing and dissolve any ideals that are not loving and are not attentive to the Spirit and to our neighbour.

In closing I want to say a word about authority. For a long time we have heard it said that the church is experiencing a loosening of morals as well as a decline into truth as something relative. This is certainly not what I am saying this morning because there are real choices in how we orient our sense of authority and that to follow one image of faithfulness will mean rejecting others. There are real differences and diversity in our churches. Our views and practices are not simply relative, our ways of being faithful have real effects and consequences. There are indeed boundaries and rules and principles but how these expressions are formed and practiced will look very different depending on what images of faithfulness we adopt and live into. Part of the question it seems is the extent to which we can continue to attend to those in the waves and submit our authority to the Spirit who hovers there.

So I want to be clear again that the choice is **not** between accepting or rejecting the Bible, it is **not** between standing for the truth or accepting relativity, it is **not** between holiness or compromise. But there are choices. In the face of an unknown season I would ask that we become aware of whether or not we are simply shouting truth from the shoreline; to pause and ask if we are talking on things we don’t know about, just adding waves to those already out at sea.

In our gathering this weekend I ask that you would consider what it means in your life, in the life of your church and in our life as a national body to wade in the water, to dissolve the powers that bind, to experience the disorienting waves, to keep our attention on the face our neighbour and then to bear with the chaos as the Spirit hovers; believing that this is the site of creation; that this is the work of love.

Postscript

After some feedback and reflection I thought it might be helpful (at least for myself) to try and summarize and clarify at least part of what I hoped to communicate in the talk.

My engagement with the BFC process was also (and perhaps primarily) an engagement with longstanding positions and postures that the broader and historical church has taken towards discernment and engagement. I could have been clearer that the BFC was far from an isolated incident in this regard and that indeed BFC tried to put measures in place to guard against particular misuses. That said, I stand by my concern that elements of this logic remain operative in the documents and in this process.

I would summarize my concerns in the following way,

- 1) It is problematic for the church to assume its own sufficiency and superiority prior to contact, relationship, or influence with those outside its established or accepted parameters.
- 2) This approach often goes unchallenged because the in-group or privileged discourse already has established language of ‘God’s intention or ideal’
 - a. While this language is meant to remain ‘open’ to God’s leading, in practice this ends up serving the existing structure because it does not *need* the ‘other’ for its faithfulness; it is self-authorizing.
 - b. These ideals remain somehow ‘transcendent’; in this way no way can really question them (or at the very least questions or differences will always have the taint of compromise), allowing them to fit more easily into existing power structures that are also difficult to question.
- 3) As a result this process tends to silence, minimize or discredit testimonies of faith that do not conform to the present notion of ‘God’s intention’.
- 4) Those are my concerns that I see operative pervasively in the church and in this way it is no surprise that they come up in the BFC documents. In as much as we have added a lot of nuance to our understanding/reading of scripture or God’s will this logic still plays into or even maintains this type of discernment.

In response I wanted to advocate for the following,

- 1) The church’s approach to discernment and authority accepts the ongoing work and process of creation. A process which does not attempt to name or locate a pure origin.
 - a. Theologically the church has been invited to recognize and enter into this process in the movements of Ascension and Pentecost.
- 2) This means that forms, boundaries, and rules exist because they emerged in works of creation that were testified to (which is another way of saying the Good News was preached and heard).
 - a. When John’s disciples asked if he was the one he told them to report what they saw and heard.
 - b. Who saw Jesus at the resurrection? Mary’s posture of attentiveness opened her eyes while the men who interrogated the tomb saw only remnants.

- 3) This also means that the present forms, boundaries, and rules are subject to our awareness of the chaos we have a hand in creating and the chaos we experience and is being experienced by those around us.
- 4) As we attend to these realities (wade in the water) we open ourselves to dissolving the forms that that are abusing/exploiting/demeaning while testifying to the forms that heal/restore/empower.
- 5) This process is ongoing and so I invite further feedback. Thanks.