

“CENTERED LIVING IN AN OFF-CENTERED WORLD:
V – HOW I MAKE A DECISION”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Psalm 119:1-16, 105

Luke 4:16-21

Back when I was thinking about this theme of “Centered Living in an Off-Centered World,” the reason it kept coming into my mind, and the minds of others to whom I looked for counsel, was that our world does seem a little off-centered these days, and living in it is a challenge. Sometimes it seems like a free-for-all, where anything goes. Anybody can do anything he or she wants, anybody can say anything he or she wants, there doesn’t seem to be any standards anymore – it’s, well, an off-centered world. So how do we, who have our lives centered in Jesus Christ, live in it?

Over the weeks, we’ve talked about how we speak and act, how we use our gifts, how we treat one another, how we feel about money and possessions, and today, how we make decisions. When I first put this series together, I knew that “how we make decisions” had to be a part of it, not just because it’s an election year, and God knows we need guidance for that, but because the decisions we make, and how we live them out are a reflection of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ.

Now, you and I make decisions all the time – big ones and little ones. We’ve made a bunch of them already today – little ones, like what to have for breakfast, what to wear to church. And we’ve made some big ones as well – like whether to even come to church. And if you don’t think that was a big one, well, let me set you straight. It’s huge, in this day and age, when more and more people choose not to attend church. And I’m not talking about bad people, I’m talking about people just like you and me – simply not coming to church on way too many Sundays – making what they think is a little choice, but which in reality, is a really big choice. It says a lot about their relationship with the Lord.

So we make big choices and little choices all the time. Oh, that those choices could be as easily made as we made them when we were children. Remember how we did it? “Eenie, meenie, miney, mo . . . “ or “One potato, two potato, three potato four . . . “ or “rock, paper, scissors,” or we turned to the Magic 8 ball. Anybody ever have one of those?

Oh, those were the days, when decisions came easily. Not so these days. There are so many things to consider when making decisions, so many people to

consider, so many consequences to consider. It can be a scary thing, can't it? I mean, when you're faced with the big decisions of life, sometimes you feel all alone and totally inadequate to decide. Big decisions like whether to change jobs, where to go to school, whether to stay in a bad marriage, whether to buy a home or a car, and yes, for whom to vote in a presidential election.

Our starting point for making decisions as Christians should always be "what is the will of God for this situation?" Writer Adam Hamilton put it this way: "Christians seek, above all, to know and do the will of God. Ultimately, nothing matters more than this. God has created us, has a plan for us, and we believe we will be held accountable for how we respond to God's will." (Adam Hamilton, *Confronting the Controversies*, p. 17)

So, seeking and knowing the will of God is first and foremost. But how do we discern that?

Well, friends, be of good cheer, for I have come with guidance for you this morning – for your discernment of God's will, for your decision making, and it comes from an old friend – a man by the name of John Wesley. Most of you are aware that John Wesley founded Methodism in the early 1700's. He was an Anglican priest, and a scholar at Oxford, and among the great things he passed on to us (of which there were many) was his way of making decisions.

We call it now by the big, strange-sounding name of "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral." He didn't call it that – he just used this method for making decisions. It's obviously a four-fold method, thus the name "quadrilateral." And the four parts are – scripture, tradition, experience and reason.

So let me walk you through them – one by one. Scripture. John Wesley called himself "a man of one book." In one of his writings, he said this: "God himself has condescended to teach me the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He has written it down in a book! O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is enough for me. Let me be a man of one book! Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone. Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven."

No matter what the decision you are facing, you will find guidance and direction from scripture. I am amazed, still, after spending time in scripture for most of my 61 years of life, how it lives and breathes, and speaks to my life every day. How I can pick up the Bible and read a passage, and feel like it is speaking to me personally and helping to guide my path in life.

Scripture is first, Wesley says, nothing holds more weight in life and in decision making, than scripture. That is the ultimate authority.

But then, he says, look at tradition as well. After you have delved into the Bible, think about the tradition of the church, of people of faith, and how they have acted and are acting in light of scripture. Trust the tradition. Trust the beliefs of the church, the teachings of the church, the stands of the church. For us, as United Methodists, that means receiving guidance from things like *The Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Resolutions*, which tell our church's stance on many issues.

The third part of the quadrilateral is "experience." That doesn't just mean what has been your experience in the past and how does it influence your decision. No, more importantly, Wesley says, it's about your experiencing God through the power of the Holy Spirit. How has God spoken to you through the Holy Spirit in the past and what might he be saying to you through the Holy Spirit now for this present decision you're facing?

Then finally, reason. Wesley reminds us that God gave each of us brains and the ability to think. And clearly it is the gift of reason on which we usually primarily rely for making decisions. But one writer wrote this: "Reason by itself can be manipulated and lead us in the wrong direction – it is obviously possible to make a 'reasonable' argument on either side of an issue – but reason can be used along with the other three tools and be constrained by them." (Hamilton, *ibid.*)

Frankly, too often, these days, we rely on that gift alone – reason – to make decisions, when we would do well instead to use Wesley's four-pronged approach because it certainly would lead us more clearly into seeking and doing God's will.

Now, all of that may seem a little academic, so to bring it alive, let me apply it to a decision all of us are making today – the decision about our financial pledges to Christ through this church for 2017.

We start by looking at scripture. What does scripture say about what we have and how we use what we have? Well, clearly it tells us that everything we have comes from God as a gift from God, and we are called to be stewards of those gifts. It also gives us guidance on how we should give. From the very early chapters of scripture, we read about giving God the first fruits of the gifts, and about tithing, giving 10% back to God. And throughout the scripture, we see people giving that and more.

Tradition would have us look at the path that those who came before us in the faith took in their giving, and we know, by the gifts that surround us – like the gift of this beautiful building, and the incredible ministries that go on here and places far and wide – that those who came before us gave generously and sacrificially. And also that the United Methodist Church worldwide gives generously in so many ways, such that things like malaria are well on their way to

being eradicated. The tradition of the church, both the church at large, and our United Methodist Church, would lead us into giving generously.

Thirdly, experience. Your experience with God is your experience. Only you know how God has spoken and guided you in the past, and I would encourage you to trust that he will do that in the future, and even in this decision about your giving. God will not lead you to give in a way that will hurt you – that is for sure. So trust the guidance of his Spirit – trust what your heart is feeling.

Finally, reason. You know the facts and figures of your life. You know the facts and figures of your financial life. Use your head and after considering scripture, tradition and experience, make your decision and give it over to God. You'll know if you've made the right one. You'll feel it in your bones.

Friends, I want to tell you something honestly. If you follow Wesley's lead on this decision about your pledge, you cannot go wrong. I know that personally. When I first starting giving to the church, I'll admit I was very cautious. And I'll admit that I didn't look at it through a multi-faceted lens – it was pretty much all reason. How much money do I have, how much do I need, and how much can I afford to give to God for the ministries of the church? All of that thinking led to me giving nothing near a tithe to the church.

But over the years, I've grown and yes, used Wesley's pattern for making this decision. So my decision making has changed considerably – it's now way more about trust in God, than calculating the dollars. And you know what, it's never been wrong! There are times when I write down the pledge that it makes me nervous – it seems like a lot of money – and my reason starts rearing its ugly head to say "Can I afford it? Will I need that money when I retire?" But that's when I rely on my experience with God and know that he's never failed me in the past and I know he won't fail me in the future. And ever since I started giving more fully and faithfully, I've been more blessed than ever.

And I can't tell you the joy it gives me to know that I'm helping to build God's kingdom on earth. I'm filled with joy when, on days like last Sunday, I saw those precious acolytes get those crosses, because my giving helps make that happen. And the other night, when I could hardly find a parking space here at church, and looked around and saw other church parking lots sitting empty, I was so happy to know that my gifts help keep this building open for great things to happen here – great things that bring many people into God's house.

I'm filled with joy when I hear the choir and know that my gifts help to buy their music and pay their leaders. And I'm filled with joy when I hear that deaths from malaria throughout the world are diminishing at a rapid pace, because I helped make that happen by buying anti-malaria nets at Christmas and Easter.

When I made good decisions regarding my giving by considering scripture, tradition, experience and reason, God has taken my gifts and made great things happen – and I am filled with joy about that. So when I lay down my pledge today, it is a time of great joy for me. God has richly blessed me, and invited me to join him in blessing others – and so I do – and so I hope you will too. Trust God in your giving. Follow the lead of those who came before you, and those who sit beside you today.

Friends, my prayer is that the decision you're making today will be a source of joy in your life, that after you have come and laid your pledge before God, you will leave feeling in partnership with him towards a better world for all of us. And that, in all your decisions, turning to scripture, tradition, experience and reason will help you live a centered life in this off-centered world. May it be so.

Amen.