

Discerning God's Guidance

When to control and plan? When not to control or plan?

You have probably heard that preachers preach what they need to hear themselves? Like you, I struggle to discern God's guidance in my life, and probably like you I often wonder at the time, or even after the fact, if certain seeming 'coincidences' were just that or were God's guidance.

I won't tell you the whole story, but my journey as a young mom with 4 years of art school education and little experience as an artist is a good example. I was feeling frustrated that my art career seemed to be stalled, with lack of time for much of anything beside my family. However, I was painting little wall hangings for children's rooms for a bazaar, when my sons were napping, and people liked them and wanted to buy them. Around the same time, coincidentally it seemed, friends returned from Indonesia with some beautiful hand-done batik wall hangings and I looked at them and said "I could do that" and I did! I figured out how to use the wax and dyes and gradually developed a style, using images of Canadian landscapes with people in a kind of folk-art style. In time, craft galleries wanted to exhibit them and the local college (now Kwantlen University) *invited me* to teach textile design! That was in 1975. Now it would be impossible to teach at a university level without a Master's Degree and a fair amount of professional success behind you. It all happened without my "planning". Another day I will tell you how I became a United church minister! And perhaps another day I will tell you about all the projects I planned with such effort that totally failed!

Our Gospel text today, from Matthew, is about letting go of our ways and letting God lead us. This process is not as easy as we might think! I feel like many times I could be one of the 'children' Jesus referred to who represented those in Jesus' generation that just didn't get it.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is a contemporary Christian song writer whose song called "We Played the Flute! The Children Said", describes our human behaviour well:

*"We played the flute! The children said- "you would not dance or join our game!
We wailed like those who grieve the dead, and yet you would not do the same:.
When John would fast for many days, The crowds would murmur and condemn;
Yet they complained at Jesus' ways "He eats and drinks with those who sin!"*

*Forgive us, Lord, what we expect! We want a faith that we control-
Yet faith is not what we direct, For it's your grace that makes us whole.*

*And when we let our burdens go And take your yoke, and learn from you,
We'll find your rest, and then we'll know Your way, not ours, will see us through.*

There are so many stories in the Bible, and in our lives, that speak to our need to let go of control. But Carolyn sums it up well in her last line: “Your way, not ours, will see us through”.

I believe that is what Jesus’ metaphor of the yoke is all about, but I want to emphasize that we are not like people yoked together blindly following the farmer’s commands. It is more like we are yoked to one another and to Jesus and therefore to God, and it is in that *interconnectedness that we participate in God’s guidance*.

The image of a yoke may not mean much to us here where we don’t use oxen in our farming methods (that I know of!). Perhaps it helps us to understand God as an energy of love and wisdom that we are able to connect with through letting go of control, asking for God’s Presence, having humility, praying and working for justice and peace, and following Jesus as best we can. Guidance will come. We have different ways of experiencing God’s Presence, for me it begins as a subtle inner vibration when I am quiet enough or attentive enough to feel it.

Many times, however, I work from my own rather strong will to come up with a plan. You know what they say if you want to make God laugh: “Tell Her your plan!” There is a place for a strong will and a good plan if it is backed by wise guidance from a Greater Will with a Bigger Plan!

In preparing this message today I came across a sermon by Rev. George Hermanson entitled “Navigating Without a Plan” that I found very helpful. He wrote that planning can almost make us miss the unexpected. We need to work with God to create the plan!

This makes sense to me. For example, the two denominations here worshipping and working together had to develop a plan. God may not have been guiding all the details but I am sure it was a collaboration, in between times of some people wanting to control the details! Another example relevant for us today is in the process of reconciliation between the people of Canada and Canadian First Nations Peoples. There has been a plan, partly inspired by that of the people in South Africa, and also I believe, inspired by God. Another relevant example is the collaboration of many people, nations, scientists and others, to develop and follow plans to avert what could be an environmental catastrophe for the planet. We desperately need God’s guidance on this one!

I am sure there are many examples in your life of God working with you to create and implement a plan.

Hermanson also challenges us with the question: Does God have a plan? Does God have a map to follow?

In responding to those questions I reflected on the astounding story today from Genesis about Abraham's servant's journey to find a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. That servant sure seemed connected to God/ the Source. As the story goes, he just followed his feet and was led to the right well at the right time to meet the right woman who agreed with his plan! We can't imagine many women today leaving everything to marry a man she had never met. But knowing how Rebecca later showed herself to be quite a schemer in her preference for her son Jacob over Esau. Perhaps she knew the advantages to herself and her family of her marrying Isaac. ... (The jewellery might also have helped)..

But today's story reads like such a perfect "set up" that the reader concludes that God must have had a plan! That is what I have thought about the times in my life when events seemed to happen beyond my will....but then again, I guess I did participate...

I was challenged especially by Hermansons' response to his own questions. He asked "is it a reality that the world does not have a straight path, that God has not decided the future, that we live in randomness and chance? This seems to me to be heading into quantum physics territory and a bit over my head, but I wonder: can we develop a faith that will guide us without guarantees?"

Most of us have had to do that because we don't know the future. Our challenge is to trust and to have faith in God's Presence and Guidance and to not become afraid, discouraged, depressed or despairing. This isn't easy when we know human behaviour is very seriously damaging the planet yet so many people deny it is a reality, to choose just one example.

If God does not have a fixed plan, could it be crucial that we work with God to save the planet? To care for immigrants and refugees, help those who are struggling and suffering, participate in the processes of reconciliation, for example?

Yes, I believe that is so, and Hermanson further helped me by sharing his experience of hearing a piece of music by John Coltrane that answered *his* questions. One line of a song was "I will do all that is worthy of you- love that is worthy of worship. Coltrane's prayer was that this "*Uncontrolling Love Supreme*" would help him to resolve his fears and weaknesses.

What a powerful and challenging image: Uncontrolling Love Supreme! Of course we are not like puppets manipulated by a puppet master. We have been helped to understand God as the ideal parent, Father/Mother, who surely is an uncontrolling parent allowing his or her child to learn and grow by making mistakes.

God is constantly guiding us but it is our role to be alert and aware of events in our lives and their guiding purpose. We pray to do the right thing at the right time. We ask for

forgiveness when we make a mistake and hopefully don't do it again. We work together like in the model of the yoke, knowing it connects us with God. The times we become untethered and go off on our own willfull way, God calls us back. As Jesus taught us, his yoke is therefore easy and his burden is light.

Let our prayer be our hymn "Walk With Me" #649 VU, ist and last verse....