

Lydia Neufeld Harder, September 15, 2013

“ Needed: An Anchor, A Sail and A Compass”

a) A map and a compass (Isaiah 55: 1-9, 12-13; Matt: 5: 38-45)

The overall theme we have chosen for the coming two weeks uses images that speak of a sea voyage. The theme of a journey came easily for us since we have just “journeyed” around the Gaspé peninsula, including a rather rough crossing of the St. Lawrence River at a time when it was very foggy and at a place where the river had turned into a sea! And for many of us still on a “school schedule”, September does signal the beginning of a new year and thus a new phase of our life’s journey. After a summer filled with vacations and picnics and camping and lazy evenings we enter the next phase of life, focussed again on school and work. So too, here at MFM, after a more flexible and relaxed summer, we want to think and reflect again on the direction and shape of our congregational life. And so we ask: what is needed for this journey at this time, in this place?

In the spring months Gary and I have listened to your stories—to your personal stories and to the stories of how you have connected with MFM. (We will present a listening report about what we have heard in October.) But during these two weekends in September we want to reflect on and explore in a more general way the “*anchor, the sail and the compass*” that we will need for this journey.

Several images will guide our reflections. In the adult class Gary explored the theme of anchor and sail. This morning, I want to use the

images of a map and compass to speak about finding a direction for the future. These images grows out of a sense that as a fellowship we have been through a time of disorientation and confusion and conflict, perhaps even of “lostness” and so are seeking a map, a compass to help us chart the way ahead.

When Gary and I are on a trip we usually get into an argument. This time was no different! You see, Gary and I have different inner maps and so find it difficult to decide together how to get to where we hope to go! Gary’s inner map was formed on the prairies. He knows how roads are supposed to be built. You see, the roads through the prairies are straight and run either parallel to each other or at right angles. You only need to know whether you want to go north or south, east or west and then you can plan your trip very easily. You can see far ahead because there is nothing to obstruct your view except an occasional bush. And the horizon is open, allowing you to see the sun or moon and easily determine the direction you are going. But this also makes you hesitate to go on a road that is not straight, for you are afraid you might get lost because you have lost your sense of direction! Gary finds it difficult to explore a new path, to move into the unfamiliar, to enjoy the occasional side-trip, because he is afraid to get lost.

I grew up in Ontario, in Niagara, where the roads follow what used to be cattle herding trails over hills and valleys, through woods and over escarpments. No roads seemed to go straight; in fact sometimes the same road can go east, west, north and south as it meanders over the country side. I am much less afraid to get lost because I know that

there will always be a creative way to get where I am going. I do not panic when I lose direction because eventually I will find a familiar road, or see a familiar lake or hill and know that I can go forward from there. I find it boring to always go the same way, but as a result I frequently find myself lost and disoriented. It often takes me a long time to go where I want to go.

Our inner maps do not work in the same way and so we get frustrated with each other when we are on a trip together. We also frequently get lost and argue about how to read a map! If you want details about how those conflicts go, ask us how we fared in Quebec City!

Just as Gary and I have unique inner maps that guide us as we travel, so we can also speak about the internal maps that each of us have about aspects of our life's journey –maps that tell us how the world works, how our family and community need to work and even how the church is supposed to function. Over time we have developed understandings that shape the habits and practices that form our church life. We don't think about these maps or decide if we want to use them; they become part of our ingrained way of relating to the world in families, churches, and societies. And when we have different inner maps we sometimes get frustrated with each other and the direction we are going. Instead of using the strengths of each of our inner maps we argue about which map to follow, or how to read the map we are following. Along the way we suddenly find ourselves lost without a compass to guide us.

To use a more updated image our inner assumptions about church are like a GPS that comes preloaded with a set of maps. We learn to trust the GPS because it rarely fails us and takes us exactly to where we want to go. We don't have to pay too much attention to the road signs or geography that we pass through, though we might make small adjustments if we already know the terrain.

But sometimes the GPS leads us the wrong way. We may have typed in the wrong address, or the GPS maps are out-dated. What follows is a time of disorientation, of confusion and frustration and even anxiety when the maps don't lead us to our destination. The internal map has failed us and we are lost.

Alan Roxborough, a leading writer about the church of our day, suggests that the maps many of us have internalized about what it means to be church no longer connect with or match the dramatically changing environments in which we are living. He suggests we have crossed the threshold into a new space. Therefore we are in a situation in which we have to become map-makers in a new world—that is we have to let go of our old maps and chart out new maps that will guide our small ship as it moves into the future.

The larger Mennonite and ecumenical church is seeking a new path because they recognize that we are in a new context, a post-Christian, Postmodern age. The maps that we have inherited from our parents are outdated and do not actually reflect the church we came from nor the church in its many new and varied expressions. We are not alone

in seeking a different path than the path outlined by the church of our parents and grandparents. Yet in addition, here at MFM we have the complexity of coming from a wide variety of churches which means that we have a wide variety of inner maps . Often we are not even aware that the model that we are championing is a model constructed from reactions and responses to the church we grew up in.

Our text from Mathew suggests that Jesus too challenged the inner maps on which the community relied as it structured its life together. “You have heard that it was said to the people of long ago. . .but now I say to you...” The words of the Torah, the five books of Moses, had guided the people through some rough times in the past. In the course of time, these maps had become old and brittle, especially because more and more details had been added to ensure that the maps were closely followed---to the letter of the law! No longer was the journey life giving and rich for the people—often they were too intent on the literal law that they were not able to see the larger goals of those laws. So Jesus sets out a new direction, focusses again on the compass that guides all of the life of the community and suggests a new map that can better guide them on the way ahead.

This was not the first time that the people were challenged to redraw their inner maps using a compass that could be trusted. Isaiah also calls a people in exile, a people lost and confused, to remake the maps on which they were relying. He challenges them to move into the future with hope because a situation of lostness brings not only a time of disorientation but also a time filled with opportunity for creative

newness. This does not mean totally rejecting the past, but it does mean an openness to new interpretations of the past, a willingness to change directions and above all a readiness to embrace a new hope built on the sure compass that has always guided the community of faith.

Isaiah 55, the scripture that was read is in the form of an invitation to leave behind that which is less than satisfying and instead reach out to that which will give abundant life and bring joy and peace and comfort to the people. (Read: vs. 1-2.)

Ho, everyone who thirsts

Come to the waters;

And you who have no money,

Come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk

Without money and without price

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*

Isaiah recognizes that the people are thirsty and hungry for substance, for something more, something deeply satisfying. To move into the new they must recognize that their present map is not good enough, that they have gone astray, that they need to repent-- that is-- turn around and find a much bigger and more encompassing map to guide them.

Listen to parts of verses 6-9

Seek the Lord while he may be found,

Call upon him while he is near---
--return to the Lord
for he will have mercy--
he will abundantly pardon

For my thoughts are not your thoughts
Nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Isaiah is pointing the people to a God who is much greater than they had imagined, whose thoughts are higher and beyond their human attempts to follow an inadequate map. It is this God who is ready to make a new covenant with the people, a new agreement that will bring about life rather than death.

This reminds me of a small book that influenced me very much at a time when I felt personally very lost. The book was called “Your God is too small!” I have found that so often “the “god” in my own mind is a very small god. . It is only when I recognize this, that I can begin to seek the living God who is worthy of my allegiance and my praise! But perhaps the most encouraging part of this chapter is the hope that Isaiah puts before the people. It is interesting to me that this hope is built on the ancient promise to Abraham and Sara: the promise that they would be blessed and that they would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

In this chapter Isaiah suggests that if the people renew their covenant with the true God, God will make them as a sign to all the peoples—a sign that witnesses to the living God who leads his people. Even *“nations that you do not know shall run to you” because of the Lord your God.*

And the people themselves? *“They shall go out with joy and be led back in peace.”* But even more than that, the entire world of creation will rejoice for even nature shall flourish again.

Using our image of map-making Isaiah is saying it is time to put away inadequate inner maps that have not satisfied our needs for direction for a full and abundant life. Instead, begin again by looking to the One who can truly guide, the One whose maps are more accurate because they reflect the knowledge of someone fully aware both of the turbulent sea that we are sailing on and the peaceful shore that is our destination. And with this guidance, we can be assured that we too will become crew on a ship that travels not only for its own pleasure but rather one that has as its goal the flourishing life of other peoples and of the whole created world.

I want to end with a personal story because it explains why I have so much hope for every individual and every congregation that finds itself in a state of disorientation and perhaps even of “lostness”. During the time that I was away at college my home church went through a time of crisis which affected my family in particular. It was

a congregation that still had a group of lay ministers with one lead pastor. My Dad was one of the original lay ministers who began that church. During my teen years, the church doubled and tripled in size because of the large influx of immigrants: some who had fled Russia and came to Canada through Germany, some who had fled to Paraguay and were now coming to Canada, and some who came directly from the Danzig area in Northern Germany. These immigrants were all Mennonites, but they had had very different experiences and traumas during the war and came from different cultural backgrounds. Each of these groups brought with them an “altester” or bishop. And because these groups were all Mennonites, we just added these leaders to our list of lay ministers, assuming that we all had the same inner maps to guide us.

But then the expectations began to clash, particularly in the ministerial circle. Some ministers danced at weddings and drank wine. Others saw this as sin. Some ministers wrote their prayers out at home and then just read them, while others prayed extemporaneously. Some expected a dramatic conversion experience for everyone; others thought that you became Christian by gradually developing a more Christian life. Some spent many hours working through a scholarly sermon that felt like a lecture; others preached passionately from lessons learned in a concentration camp.

Instead of addressing these differences, the ministers and then also the congregational members began blaming each other. Talk of a conspiracy to get some of the ministers to resign began to surface.

I came home from College and found a church in turmoil. I attended a congregational meeting where some of the adults I had previously admired used abusive language and threats, particularly against my father. I learned of the gossip that was rampant and saw how all of this conflict was affecting my mother and father.

I went back to college disillusioned with the church and beginning to doubt even the very notion of God. During this time I had also been studying biblical criticism and so was not at all sure about God's presence in the Bible. If God was not present through the church and also not in the Bible, where was God? I asked myself.

That semester I had a course on I Corinthians. As I studied that letter to the church at Corinth, I discovered a church every bit as sinful and divided as my home church. But more than that, I discovered God's love for the church and God's Spirit working through that early church. And as I studied and struggled, I also heard God speaking to me, telling me that God takes imperfect human beings --such as me and creates something new--a vibrant community that can again proclaim God's peace and love to its surroundings. That voice was so real that despite various challenges to my faith throughout my life, I have never again doubted that the living God is actively working in this world.

And my home church—it is thriving with a growing cultural mix. There were times of reconciliation and new beginnings. My parents

remained in the church and a lot of healing took place. But that is a story for another time.

And so I end this sermon with an invitation and a promise: An invitation to let go of old inner maps that are no longer useful. An invitation to be open to new maps, drawn according to the compass given to us by God. And the promise? You will become a blessing and a sign to the world that joy, peace and love are possible and can be bought without money and without price. May this promise come true within and among us. Amen.