

“What’s a Quadrilateral?”

Date: June 22, 2014 Texts: 2 Peter 1:16-21; 2 timothy 4:1-8
Place: Lakewood Theme: Discernment, thinking theologically
Occasion: Series on social issues

If you read our church newsletter, you may have read that I’m going to be doing a summer sermon series on issues that people brought to my attention last summer. Some of you suggested sermon topics you wanted me to preach upon.

In the next several weeks we’re going to be talking about such issues as inclusive language in worship, race relations in America, homosexuality, global warming and gun control. Some of these are hot topics. Keep me in prayer as I get ready to preach; they aren’t easy topics.

But before we begin to tackle those sensitive and controversial issues, I thought it wise to spend some time talking about *how* we as Christians make moral decisions. How do we form those opinions that we have?

United Methodists believe two things about the way God intends us to make decisions about our beliefs and our actions. First, we believe God has created us with free will. God loved us so much that God created us with the ability to make up our own minds.

We are not merely robots, programmed to do this or do that. We have the choice to think and to decide freely. Sometimes that freedom gets us into trouble as we chose to believe or to do the wrong things.

The second thing United Methodists believe is that God has given us four tools to help us in making our free decisions about what

to believe and what to do. Which brings me to this morning's sermon title: "What is a quadrilateral?" I can tell you what it's not. It's not a four-sided geometrical figure; that's a quadrangle. But the root of the word gives a hint to its meaning: Quad, meaning four.

The term itself was coined by a 20th century American scholar and student of John Wesley. His name was Albert Outler. After studying Wesley, Outler theorized that the founder of Methodism used four sources in coming to theological and moral conclusions.

Outler called it The Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The term has taken on a life of its own after Outler began to use it. In fact, John Wesley never used the term itself. So what is it? The Wesleyan Quadrilateral teaches that the four sources for doing theology and ethics are: Scripture, tradition, experience and reason.

The centrality of Scripture was so important for Wesley that he called himself "a man of one book." However, doctrine or church teaching had to be in keeping with Christian tradition. And so, tradition became the second aspect of the quadrilateral.

Wesley knew and understood, however, that faith is more than the acknowledgement of ideas. So Wesley contended that a good theological method would involve experiential faith. In other words, the truth would be verified in personal experience.

Finally, Wesley held that every doctrine must be able to be defended using sound reasoning. He never divorced faith from reason. Nor did he believe people should accept things blindly without careful thought and scrutiny.

Scripture, tradition, experience and reason – these are the tools we will use to decide difficult choices.

Let's look at each of these tools a little more closely. The Bible is the most important source of discerning truth for Christians. We need to search the Scriptures to see what the Bible says that might shed light on our particular topic.

We need to be careful though, in how we use and understand the Bible. Some people use it as a sledge hammer to try and convince people that their point of view is correct. Sometimes, and we are all guilty, we go searching the Bible to find passages that support our own point of view. That's a dangerous practice.

The Bible requires a lifetime of study to help us understand it. And we need to be open to the different ways that people read and interpret Scripture. Some people believe that the words of the Bible were dictated by God and there are no errors or inconsistencies.

However, others believe the Bible is the Word of God because it tells about God's presence as Creator, as Christ and as Holy Spirit. But God didn't dictate it word for word. The Bible, for many faithful Christians, is the written record of human beings who have had an experience with God. We read the Bible to discover the Word of God *behind all of the human words* about God.

And for some other faithful Christians, the Bible contains the Word of God because it tells the record of how God revealed God's self to the human race in Jesus Christ. The real purpose of the Bible is to tell us about Christ – who is *the Word made flesh*.

Using the Bible to help us make decisions is not necessarily easy. We often disagree about what the Bible says. But we take it seriously. It is the first book we go to. We need to listen carefully to

what it says. We cannot simply dismiss it because we don't like what it says.

The second tool is tradition. What has the Church taught about this issue or belief? What have those who have gone before think was important to believe and to do? Have the church's beliefs and actions changed over the years?

In the United Methodist Church, the only official voice that can speak for the denomination as a whole is General Conference which meets every four years. At General Conference our delegates pray, study, debate and decide upon official positions as a church. They can be found in our Book of Discipline, our Social Principles and our Book of Resolutions, published every four years.

You may like what our church has to say about certain social issues. You may disagree with what our church has to say on other issues. I know that I do. If you want, you can write a piece of legislation to send to General Conference asking that our official position be changed. It may or may not be approved.

But knowing what the general church has to say helps us to inform our opinion. It is part of our tradition.

The third tool is experience. What does your own experience have to say? What about the experience of others? I have very limited experiences with owning a gun. I have my opinions. At this year's annual conference I met a man who held different opinions than I did, and I listened to what his experience told him about gun ownership. I gained new insight.

It is important to not only base our opinions on our own experience, but to be willing to listen to the experience of others.

Also, our culture has an influence on the way we form our opinions on issues. For example: in a certain period of time, it would have been wrong for a woman to come to church wearing pants and not a dress. Look around the sanctuary today. Times change, and it influences what we consider to be right and wrong.

Another example: at one time divorce was considered a sin that carried a terrible stigma. It was argued that there are certain conditions when divorce is better than staying in a marriage. Now, today, we have come to accept divorce. The culture has changed.

Which television stations we watch, the papers and magazines we read, the opinions of our friends – they all influence our experience, sometimes in ways we're not even aware of. As we attempt to discern God's will, we try to become aware of those different influences, and see what effect they have on our decision.

The fourth tool that we need to use is our reason. It is important to think through our decisions. Weigh the evidence. Be open to the possibility that we might be wrong. Gather all the information we can, and think critically.

God has created us with good minds and common sense. Does your answer, your point of view make sense?

Well, my friends, we have quite a journey ahead of us as we tackle these difficult issues. But these tools are not just for pastors to use in preparing sermons. These are tools that everyone can use as they form their opinions, as they make moral decisions, as they strive to live as Jesus calls, "Come, follow me." So be it. Amen.