

**Mayflower Talking**  
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I leaned over to my spouse during the movie and said, “now they know what to do... they’re singing themselves into it.” They were singing “children of the heavenly father” a song they’d been singing all their lives. It was deep in their bones.

Seldom is a movie better than the book it’s based upon. Better, in this case, meaning more captivating, evocative. But I think the movie “Women Talking” is just that. The novel is really good. The movie is even better. You must see it.

It moved me to tears. Partly I’m sure because it’s only the third movie I’ve seen on the big screen in the last three years: Are your emotions more at the ready these days as well? But also, and even more, tears of joy because their faith saves them. The very religion that had oppressed them, when *they* interpret it themselves, it saves them.

Most of the movie takes place in a hayloft where eight women gather for hours and hours one week end to discern (and I use the word discern rather than decide because God is consciously ever present and felt) ... What in God’s name should we do?, they were discerning. At first there is a lot of doubt. The doubt of this small body of Christ, this gathering of women, is palpable. They lack confidence that they as women can make a decision. Also, the disagreement between them is fierce. But they keep talking and singing and crying and hugging and praying and eventually they reach an agreement. Mind you, a lot is at stake.

What these women are discerning is whether:

To do nothing

To stay and fight

Or to leave.

And they have very little time.

They live in a remote Mennonite colony, completely cut off from the rest of the world. “For the past two years, each of these women and more than a hundred other women and girls in their colony has been repeatedly raped in the night by demons coming to punish them for their sins, or so they are told. Now that the women have learned they were in fact drugged and attacked by a group of men from their own community, they are determined to protect themselves and their daughters from future harm. While the men of the colony are off in the city, attempting to raise enough money to bail out the rapists and bring them home, these women- all illiterate, without any knowledge of the world outside their community and unable

even to speak the language of the country they live in- have very little time to make the decision.” (book cover) This book/movie is loosely based on real events.

Even with the urgency of this meeting, the first thing they do when they gather is wash one another’s feet. It was a symbolic act representing “their service to each other, just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, knowing that his hour had come”. They listen deeply to one another and forgive one another their occasional emotional outbursts. They sing, not as a diversion, but to take themselves more deeply into their faith and into their unity... “in Song, the women’s voices soar in perfect harmony.” They **do** deep theology together... Forgiveness? Forgive the men? “Is forgiveness that is coerced true forgiveness?” They think and they find that they like to think on their own without being told what to think. They pray... to God, to keep them trusting one another’s intentions... “forgive me my trespasses, my suspicions, and imbue me with the same faith that Ona (one of the women) has in her sister colonists, in all of us, in goodness.” They recite verses from scripture like this from Philippians to help them think of what is good. “Whatever is true, what is honorable, what is just, what is commendable, worthy of praise... think about these things.” They do more theology. “ ‘Our duty is to God’ one says. ‘Precisely, to our souls, which are the manifestations of God’, another responds.”

You need to listen to these women talking. Finally, they land on three things they can agree upon.

We want to keep the children safe.

We want to keep our faith.

And we want to think.

And the note taker, the only man present, a young man who left the colony to be educated and came back to teach the young ones, and who is entirely sympathetic to these women, shows them how to read the stars, how to follow a guiding star for directions... And at one point, this young man thinks to himself... “I am struck by a thought: Perhaps it is the first time the women have interpreted the word of God for themselves.”

They sing another hymn... “nearer my God to thee”. And then one of them says: “Listen, we’re embarking on a journey. We’re initiating a change that we have interpreted over the last two days as being God’s will and testament to our faith and responsibilities and natural instincts as mothers and as human beings with souls. We must believe in it.”

Yes, their Christian faith saves them! No wonder I’m so emotional as the credits roll....

I wonder what Paul, the great writer and encourager of Christian communities, would have written to *this* body of Christ? These women in the hayloft? Maybe just one word... I think... simply...BRAVA! Or YES!

Paul, and then some Pauline communities, (not all letters attributed to him were penned by him) Paul, the convert to the Jesus path was so passionate about this life-giving faith that he founded and visited so many new churches around the Mediterranean, and would continue this connection, this conversation through letters, especially after he was imprisoned for his faith. Love letters! Sometimes these churches have problems or big decisions. But all the churches were under pressure from the empire. Paul acknowledges everything openly and tries to help. Sometimes he offers correctives, questioning the woo woo or the false prophets rising up in the communities. Sometimes he simply offers encouragement to those churches in the midst of doubt, lacking confidence or unsure about a decision needing to be made.

The church in Phillipi is a vital, urban church with women leaders, (it seems like there are 2 Alpha females with a power struggle going on, nothing terribly awry),... and he writes to the community about humility, that is, being careful with ego; about communal sharing and harmony. He writes about seeking the *same* mind in Christ... but he also encourages them to “think about these things...”: Don’t just submit to a leader type. And as always, and ever, “to stand fast in their faith”.

Do you hear the echo of Women Talking? Paul, it seems, would have liked this hayloft conversation, the humility and listening; the faith, seeking the mind of Christ; *and* the thinking! And thereby moving from being a community in self-doubt to a community of strong conviction.

What Paul initiated through his letters; Christian communities have since tried to refine into a process for communal discernment. Ignatius of the Jesuits and the Quakers have some of the finest methods to help people of faith make hard decisions in an often-bewildering world.

The first question one must ask, as a community,---knowing that there are differing understandings of the word **God**, but agreeing that it points to the ultimate, the ultimate referent... beyond our own desires... beyond the desires of our time and place... it’s the ultimate referent, having to do with Being itself and the alpha and omega...----yes, the first question a community must ask: Are we willing to do God’s will even before we know it?

Essential features of Christian discernment on weighty issues are:

- Keeping God ever present, in mind and in heart. Leaving spaces of silence... beseeching God...”be thou a guiding star above us...”
- believing that God’s will or God’s yearning is a value higher than all other values like expediency, efficiency, even unity at all costs...
- asking good questions, that both frame the issue well and also stir open the imagination to new ideas... it’s about openness and not control...
- creating a trusting space where people can speak their truth

-having the courage to speak from your heart

-listening, listening, listening deeply to everyone, to their words and their silences

Reasoned discourse as its limits. Discernment is not a tug of war but more like a dance when all of the participants' wisdom and gifts are called forth until the divine presence breaks in and lights the right path.

Here's a warning from Dorothy Bass. "The discernment process is destroyed when voices are silenced, when honest listening is absent, when people push their own agendas or when leaders wield their authority and power in ways that over-ride the spirit-led authority and power of other participants."

I don't know that we can ever count on complete certainty as to God's yearning or will and there will always be stumbling and unintended consequences, YET STILL the practice of discernment, when you give it the time it needs, can be miraculously effective.

Every church I know is in a time of stress and self-doubt, this time of climate disruption and of a world-wide pandemic and its aftereffects...; which means it is a ripe, ripe time for discernment. Mayflower is having several big conversations about big things... like ministries to families with young children, and the impact of live streaming, and how does and should the worldwide reckoning precipitated by the crucifixion of George Floyd affect this church, and where are we with our pledge to become carbon neutral, and how should we honor our 100 year anniversary, in two years, and initiate the next 100 years? Who do we want to be?

These are exciting times to be a church. Exciting is not a euphemism. Yes, there is uncertainty and doubt, but mostly excitement. Mayflower is well grounded, like a tree beside the water, in our progressive Christian faith identity. We are faithful and so can engage subjects without fear. We are faithful, committed to alternative ways of seeing and being in the world. We are thinkers. **Listening to Mayflower talking in these conversations hosted by the race matters team is as fascinating as listening to women talking** in the movie. Not only are we not afraid of Mayflower talking, we're open and intrigued. "Without the call to high adventure the faith has never flourished", Vida Scudder said 100 years ago. Driven by our faithfulness Mayflower has often been out front...women in leadership, Open and Affirming, solar. Significant Changes in church structure have happened several times in our hundred-year history. We're not afraid of change. What's more, in the last two decades plus, this church has been very intentional, it's been the work of so many, in creating a culture of healthy communication and clear lines of decision making. Think MRCE circles. Think policy governance. Think healthy communication guidelines. Yes, WE are ready and willing to have the big conversations that these times invite.

What would Paul write to us? What kind of love letter would he write to Mayflower? I wonder... I think... and this is to the entire church, not just to leadership.... Leadership comes and goes...but Paul writing to this church, including the departed saints and the future generations....

Mayflower, Paul would write, YOU GOT THIS.

You've always had that call to high adventure, driven by your faith, unafraid.

You've learned to attend carefully to healthy communication and healthy feedback, how to love one another through speaking your truth at the right times and listening deeply.

You are not afraid of heat. You know how transformative processes as a community, catalytic reactions, excitement, enthusiasm creates a certain amount of heat.

But do be careful to attend to God's still small voice... you have a lot of smart and creative people with a lot of ideas, but I would encourage you to take great care to leave enough silence, and to invite the spirit of God into all the conversations, and trust that you might be led somewhere surprising even to your leaders....

Leave room for silence but keep on singing too. And you will sing yourself into a rich, remarkable, faithful future... Sing to remember who you are and whose you are and why you are...

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,

Paul

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