

Seeking a Vision

^{KJV} **Proverbs 29:18** Where *there* is no vision, the people perish.

Jeremiah 17:5-8 The LORD proclaims: Cursed are those who trust in mere humans, who depend on human strength and turn their hearts from the LORD. ⁶ They will be like a desert shrub that doesn't know when relief comes. They will live in the parched places of the wilderness, in a barren land where no one survives. ⁷ Happy are those who trust in the LORD, who rely on the LORD. ⁸ They will be like trees planted by the streams, whose roots reach down to the water. They won't fear drought when it comes; their leaves will remain green. They won't be stressed in the time of drought or fail to bear fruit.

Jeremiah 48:10 Cursed is the one who is halfhearted in doing the LORD's work.

^{CEB} **Joel 2:28** I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions.

Seeking a Vision

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Proverbs 29:18 Ever since I ran across that verse several years ago, it has returned again and again to haunt me. How do we find a vision? How do we know it's the right vision? Over my life I have chased various dreams. Sometimes their greatest value lay in the lessons I learned the hard way. For instance, loving music was not going to make me a competent bassoonist.

This congregation is at a crossroads. We can turn this way or that out of habit or impulse, but what we need is a vision, a vision of how we can best serve God in Thomasville, North Carolina. Over the past several weeks, the sermons have been aimed at providing various pieces of the puzzle of finding the vision that fits us. A few weeks ago we looked at Paul's message to the Romans about love. In clear terms Paul assured us that first and foremost, God loves us. God loved us before we could talk, before we had any concept of the divine. God is persistent about loving us. And all of the commandments are summed up in one thought: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love like that isn't easy. It means that we are to be a community with people who aren't like us, people who disagree with us, and sometimes we are called on to forgive one another. But just as we have received God's love and forgiveness, so are we to show it to others. So, whether we have tattoos and communicate mostly with thumb-driven social media, or we long for the days of rotary dialed phones, we are to be together in a loving community.

Another sermon approached some of the same issues from a different direction. We thought about churches where the rules are all important and they form a boundary to keep you safe and saved. Say “damn” and you are outside the boundary, but “dang” is barely permissible. Somehow, the more detailed the rules, the more they crowd out the rule of love. When we try to build the circle around the saved, those inside the coral all begin to look alike. Not only does that fly in the face of all of the vast diversity of God's creation, it also leads to self-righteousness and stagnation.

If, rather than planting rules to be fence posts circling the church, we would focus on God's steadfast love for us and sharing that good news with others, we would be far more humble and far happier. It changes the focus from being right - to having right relationships with those around us.

Last Sunday we were confronted by texts that challenged us to take risks. We can take risks with our time by reaching out to get to know someone in the congregation who is

outside our usual circle of friends. We can risk our time by singing in the choir, teaching a class, or working on a committee. We can take risks with our aptitudes by volunteering to help with serving a meal of grace at CCM, working on Empower House, or helping with children's and youth activities. And we can take risks with our giving by stretching a bit with our offerings and by supporting new programs for church growth. We need to be consciously "marching to Zion" rather than comfortably "hunkering down on Randolph." Being timid, shy, or cautious aren't virtues in the kingdom of God.

A few weeks ago we sang *Trust and Obey*. Can we learn to really to trust in God? Can we obey and really love our neighbors as ourselves? Not long ago we looked at the story of Peter walking on the water to meet Jesus. Because of his trust in the Lord, Peter was able to walk on the water – until he let fear get the better of him. We tend to run Peter down because he was overcome by fear. Fair enough. But truth be told, most of us are huddled in the boat with all the other disciples, too afraid, too unimaginative to even think about getting out of the boat!

Most of the time, we leave God out of our calculations. We face every situation as if we have to handle it by ourselves. We forget to factor God into the decision. Jeremiah said, "Cursed are those who trust in mere humans, who depend on human strength and turn their hearts from the LORD." When we leave God out we are indeed cursed – cursed to do little, cursed to shrivel up instead of striding forward, cursed to live in fear rather than in faith.

I said that we are at a crossroads. In the broadest terms, we can either step into the future and grow, or we can have a stately decline and demise. If you put your mind to it, you can find examples of the second choice close by. When I was seeking a call, I met with a congregation of ten elderly members. Though the town where the church was located was prospering and growing, they hadn't had a new member in years. Showing a bit of reluctance to step into this situation on faith, I asked if, God forbid, two of the members should be struck by a bus, would my salary be in danger? They replied that it would not be a financial problem. You see, with a comfortable endowment, they were proceeding in a refined and stately procession toward closing the doors, even if they didn't see it in those terms.

As a former engineer and construction worker, it's easy for me to take note of the physical facilities. I'm here during the week, wandering the halls on various errands and I notice where there's a bit of wear and tear. I think about the age of various systems and when they may need repair or replacement. It's the sort of place where my meandering mind tends to settle. Several weeks ago, we received gifts from two families totaling \$ 25,000. Some of the first thoughts included various maintenance and refurbishment projects around the church. I'll confess that the terribly noisy air conditioner in my office certainly came to my mind! During the warm months, Carole and I have to shout at each other to be heard. But, is our vision restricted to caring for our building, or can it also include building up the body of Christ?

As I said, we are at a crossroads. One road will take that money, make repairs and updates our facilities, and bury the rest in an account for a rainy day. That's the safe, no risk path. It's cautious and prudent, but God calls for us to risk getting out of the boat and to take a few steps on the water. You see, the other verse that keeps echoing in my head is "Cursed is the one who is halfhearted in doing the LORD's work." When one seeks a vision we need to be bold, but we tend to squint. Last night some of us watched the movie, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. When we watched it a few years ago, the idea that there could be

a Pope who was humble and who cared more for those who suffered than he did for power and prestige seemed like a fanciful and unrealistic dream. Today, Pope Francis seems to embody those very ideals. We limit the future by limiting our visions.

So at this crossroads, what is the other road? The other road is focused on building up this congregation, growing this body of Christ in Thomasville. There are plenty of boundaried churches in this town that will make it clear to you whether you may say “damn” or “dang.” Incidentally, they would throw the apostle Paul out for some of the crude Greek that he used. There are plenty of churches in the area that will entertain you with praise music and platitudes. There are plenty of churches where every effort will be made to scare the Hell out of you by preaching a God of harsh judgment, eager to cast you into Hell for believing the wrong things, for doubting or questioning. I believe that there is a place, a need, for a congregation that sings gospel songs, Wesleyan hymns, and contemporary Celtic hymns. I believe there is a place, a need, for a church where red and yellow, black and white, all pray together. I believe there is a place, a need for a congregation where silver haired patriarchs and matriarchs worship beside toddlers and young children. I believe that there is a place, a need, for a church that isn’t homesteading, but instead is on the journey, asking questions, studying the life and teaching of Jesus, and is marching onward to Zion!

Just a few days ago, I was chatting with a woman at physical therapy. When she learned that I was pastor at First Pres, she told me that she and her husband were members here for fifteen years. One of their children moved back to Thomasville. When grandchildren started arriving, the parents searched for a church that had an active and vigorous program for children and youth. The lady I was speaking with (and her husband) followed their child and grandchildren to another church so that all three generations could worship together. When I arrived here eight years ago, I constantly heard the yearning for younger families. “Young families and their children are the future of the church,” people said. A few weeks ago, I pointed out that young families are about 20% of the congregation, and the only segment that is growing. I would suggest to us all that we need to recognize that, celebrate that, and look for ways to support and increase that. When I meet with our young families on Sunday afternoons, there is a lively spirit among them. There are moments when our sons and daughters prophesy and our young men see visions. The prophet Joel also called for the older generations to dream dreams. If we were to be sure of God’s steadfast love, if we were to be willing to risk, if we were to have a vision of a congregation overflowing with young families, then perhaps the generosity of two families might inspire the rest of us to also invest in the future and provide funding to focus on ministry to young families. Some of us are at a time in our lives when we can best show our faith by planting oaks although we will not live to sit in their shade. We can invest in the future of First Pres in Thomasville out of gratitude for all that it has meant to us over the years. The rest of us will have to decide whether we are going to sit in the boat – or screw our faith together and risk walking on water for a while. Amen.

Be certain of God's love.

Hold fast to that assurance.

Dream dreams and see visions of a glorious future for this congregation.

Plant shade trees for future generations.

Get out of the boat and start walking on water!