

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees her nor knows her. You know her, because she abides with you, and she will be in you.

John 14:12-17

There is a story told by Ted Engstrom, past president of World Vision, about a friend of his who took his daughter on a cruise to Catalina Island, off the coast of southern California. It happened to be a beautiful, clear day, and the air was as transparent as crystal. As the girl looked over the Pacific to the horizon she exclaimed, "Daddy, I can see farther than my eyes can look!"

The girl didn't realize it, but she described the paradoxical quality every great leader has. Most all great leaders have the vision to see farther than eye can see, the ability to see what's not there. Only by seeing what's not there can one bring something new, creative, and exciting into existence.

There have been many great visionaries in our country's history. Walt Disney is one of the first mentioned by those who write about such people, yet I desire to celebrate someone who had more than "Mickey Mouse" dreams for our country. There is a visionary who we hope will be as successful as Disney. Martin Luther King, Jr. told us from the steps of the Capital Building about a vision he had of a color blind society, one in which people are judged by the content of their character, rather than the color of their skin. We are still working to make this vision come true.

Great leaders tend to be great visionaries. Those leaders who have no vision for the future find that they may not be leaders for very long. The former President Bush admitted in an interview that the reason he lost his re-election bid was that he was not good at what he called "the vision thing." If you remember, after the first Gulf War, then President Bush had an eighty-five percent approval rating, the kind of political clout that most sitting presidents dream about having. At that time, President Bush could have addressed the country this way: "My fellow Americans, we have just led the world in an overwhelming victory against the Iraqi aggressors. Our victory shows our ingenuity and commitment for a better future. Now here is my vision for the country..." Whatever he said next would have been undertaken in a heartbeat. However, he did not share any vision for the future. Instead, President Bush decided to become the caretaker and manager of what was, and it was one of the things that cost him re-election.

The Bible speaks about the troubles of those who lack a vision of new possibilities. Those of us who follow the lectionary know that we are coming to the third

Sunday of Easter. The post-resurrection stories of the risen Jesus are now behind us. One thing all of those stories have in common is the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus even when he is standing right before them, until he gives them some sort of sign, whether it be a catch of fish, breaking bread, showing his wounds, or calling their name... "Mary." The texts don't explain why this is so, but leave us to surmise the reason. One interpretation is that the disciples were not able to recognize Jesus because they had no vision beyond the death they experienced just a few days before. The disciples were so convinced of the power of death that they could not entertain the possibility of Jesus' presence among them and his story continuing.

Our text today anticipates great things being done by his disciples, because of that enduring presence. Those of us who keep Jesus' commandments and who believe that the Spirit is with us and in us are capable, no, are expected to do even more wondrous things than Jesus did in his earthly ministry. Many of those things are beyond what we now know, and therefore, will take a Spirit inspired vision to call them into being.

The Council is the visioning and coordinating body of the presbytery. Given the hard realities of declining memberships and less mission dollars, the Council and some of its committees have prudently begun to envision a new, leaner structure for the presbytery. Some of you may think this is no vision at all, but simply an inevitable consequence of a dying Church. It also may be, however, a way to respond more quickly to the needs of churches today than is possible with the more cumbersome structure we now have, and frankly, can barely afford.

Whatever the result, the presbytery staff will likely be smaller. The position I now hold as Contract Staff for Congregational Health and Transformation will probably not be a part of this leaner model. However, while I am still with you, my aim is to work to help us fulfill as best we can goal number one of the presbytery, to "Develop Vital Congregations."

The question we need to ask ourselves is "What does a vital congregation look like in this day and age?" Vision must proceed developing our mission goals, because how do we know what to do if we don't know where the Spirit is leading us.

For instance, many, if not all of our churches, have some sort of goal to become a "growing community of ever-maturing disciples." By "ever-maturing" there I mean not in age, but in a deepening sense of faith. We're doing just fine at growing older. The question before us is what does that vision look like in the era of Facebook, virtual communities and 24/7 family busy-ness. One thing I do know is that the traditional Sunday school model isn't cutting it anymore. We need to envision a better way to nurture mature disciples.

Stan Ott, lead consultant of the Vital Church movement, says that traditional churches, like most of ours, struggle with visioning the future. Being a traditional church means that you place more emphasis on where you have been than on where you might

be going. The past shapes not only our identity, but also our sense of mission. Stan Ott says that the first impulse of a traditional church is to replicate past programs.

He tells a story about a women's organization that was celebrating forty years of mission and ministry at the Presbyterian church he pastored in the Pittsburgh area. Since he was the pastor of the host church, Stan said he needed to be present for the event. He admits that he was not terribly interested in the keynote speaker, so during the speech he got up from his folding chair in the back of the auditorium and walked to the side of the room where there were a series of long tables lined up. On the tables were the brochures for the women's organization for each of the forty years. They had preserved all of these brochures, because as a traditional organization, they had valued their past. He said he was looking at the current year's brochure, which told of all the mission and ministry projects of the organization for that year. Then he got an idea. Stan took the current year's brochure and walked it to far end of the line of tables where the first year's brochure was. He compared the two brochures and found that they were practically identical. Even though the world has changed drastically over forty years, this mission and ministry of this traditional organization barely had.

I want to give you some homework. When you return to your churches get out your Annual Reports and/or newsletters for this year and compare them to those of five, ten, twenty, even forty years ago if you still have them. Ask yourself, "what has changed in that time." Certainly, they won't be exactly the same, but I would have you pay attention to those events that people got excited about. What events did the membership turn out for en masse. Is it still the roast beef dinner, the rummage sale, or the Christmas pageant?

I don't mean to imply that just because something is old that it is no good anymore. For instance, right now my church is gearing up for the CROP Walk. It's a big event at Trinity. Twenty years ago, Trinity also was gearing up for the CROP Walk. The last I heard there were still many hungry people in our world. The question we need to ask ourselves is that if God is calling us to address the needs of hungry people is there a more effective way to do it besides or in addition to the CROP Walk today?

One last thing I want to ask of you is that whenever you get a group together at your church to plan an event for the future, I want you to avoid asking the following question: "What did we do last year?" In fact, ban the question from all your planning meetings. Instead I want you to replace it with this question, "What do we need to do today based on where the Spirit leading us?" If you ask this question people may just look at you like you have two heads. If that happens, you need to stop your planning session. What you need to do instead is gather all the church leaders to discuss God's vision for your church for the future. If yours is a traditionally minded church people may respond that visioning the future is easier said than done. Respond by saying that in the long run visioning is easier done than not done at all. How do we know what we are to do now if we don't know where God is leading us into the future?

Our hymn is "Live Into Hope."