

Welcome Home

John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

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“What is your vision for the church?”

I get asked this frequently.

“We are anxious to hear your vision.”

“How do you envision: outreach, worship, stewardship, youth ministry, children’s ministry, Sunday School, pastoral care, the hybrid church, social media, the staffing pattern, community engagement, the use of our buildings?”

For a number of years now, I’ve been asked often about “my vision” for THE church, for the Presbyterian church, for many church-related things and, since December, for this particular church. The questions come with a great deal of energy and interest, with hope and no small amount of anxiety. They are posed with an eagerness and a trust that I find both heartening and a little frightening. I am grateful that the people of God want a strong articulation of what the Spirit is saying to the church but, you see, I’m enough of a Calvinist to recognize that the kind of deference with which these queries come is territory ripe for pride and sin and it is always a danger to conflate our will with God’s.

What is MY vision for the church, you ask?

Ah, yes, sit back and let me paint you a picture of the future of the church: sanctuaries packed every Lord’s Day, the budget met, no exceeded, you know like that account in *Exodus 36* when the building campaign is so over-subscribed that Moses goes to the people and says, “Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary.” And the Bible adds, “So the people were restrained from giving.” Yes, that sounds good.

I envision an *Acts 2* type situation, where my preaching is so on point that thousands are cut to the heart and moved to ask, “What do we do?” And then we have this huge baptism and then everyone shares everything in common and no one lacks anything and we devote ourselves to Bible study and fellowship and the breaking of bread and prayers. No conflict, no questions: The end.

You can see how quickly our vision gets conflated with our egos. We easily forget that events like those in *Exodus 36* and *Acts 2* come about not because of our abilities but as a result of God's power moving in God's people through called, but flawed disciples. We forget that we may plant and water, but it is God and God alone who gives the growth.

That's the miraculous, gracious truth of God's living Word: it moves ordinary, sinful people to act in ways that are extraordinary, transformative and good. We are promised the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit does not disappoint. When we abide in God, God abides in us and we abide in God when we follow Jesus' command to love one another in daily, often unnoticed, seemingly unspectacular ways. When we love as Christ loved us, washing feet, welcoming children, feeding and tending whatever flock God has entrusted us to shepherd, people's hearts are moved, and their actions follow. This is when there is a family resemblance between the Body of Christ, the church, and Jesus its head.

Hence, I don't want First Presbyterian Church to be shaped so much by my vision as I want it to be a reflection of God's vision and God does not leave us to guess what that divine dream looks like. It looks like Jesus. It looks like embodied grace and truth. It looks like doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with our God. It looks strange, maybe even foolish, as we sing alleluia in graveyards and pray for our enemies and dedicate ourselves to the people and places others have left for dead.

God's vision for First Presbyterian Church, for every church, for all of creation, is that we love one another.

There is a Georgetown professor named Cal Newport who writes about doing what he calls "deep work." He writes about having a "craftsman mindset" as opposed to the "passion mindset." He puts it like this:

"the craftsman mindset, (is) a focus on what value you're producing in your job, and the passion mindset, (is) a focus on what value your job offers you."

You get the difference, right? One mindset is outward looking and other oriented, one is inward focused and self-absorbed. One is about what we contribute to the world, the other is an endless quest for what feels good to us.

Newport argues that when we have a craftsman mindset everything changes. We deliberately practice in order to get better at what we want to offer the world. We automatically shift our priorities so as to hone that which we want to give, our ego gets less important because our goal isn't self- fulfillment or self-agrandizment, but instead giving of ourselves and serving of others. We simply take the next step, practice the needed skill and offer our best for the sake of the greater good. He

argues that it is this daily, dutiful work that makes some people so good at their craft, whatever it is, they cannot be ignored.

My friends, I want us to be so skilled and practiced at loving one another we cannot be ignored. I want us to focus relentlessly on the value we are to offer the world in the Christ's name and that value is first and always: God's love of all creation, and every human being. We are to offer God's embodied, incarnate love made known in Christ Jesus our Lord because without this flesh and blood love for one another, everything we do, anything we do, no matter how lovely or seemingly good, will be nothing more than a noisy gong and clanging cymbal.

I want us to be craftspeople of grace, artisans of kindness, master teachers of mercy because there are countless people in our world who do not know their holy worth. Far too many people who are not treated as the beloved children of God they are. Right here in this place too many of you do not realize you are precious in God's sight. Glorious images of the divine. So valuable that God sent the only Son for your sake. So gifted and important that the household of God isn't complete without you.

And so today I want to welcome you home. Tell you emphatically that you belong here. Assure you that you are wanted and loved. Declare that Jesus has prepared a place for you: here, in this branch of the vine, in the Body of Christ, in the presence of God.

Marianne Thompson, a scholar on the Gospel of John, writes, "To abide in Jesus means to be faithful; it also means to find one's home—ones' family and identity in Jesus."

<https://pres-outlook.org/2018/01/musings-home-jesus-words-gospel-john/>

My greatest hope, my most vivid vision, is for us to love one another, to abide in Jesus, find our home, our family, our identity in him.

While I might not mind if we came to a place where we need to constrain people from giving and I certainly would welcome an influx of new followers cut to the heart and eager to do the work of the Lord, what I really long for is such a closeness with God that we cannot help but bear good fruit that brings joy to the world and gives life to those desperate to know they matter. I want people to feel truly, completely at home in Jesus, treasured here in his body, our church.

I want those intimate scenes of the Bible, the ones no one knew would turn the world, to get retold and replayed and reimagined and relived in this place. You know, ones like *Genesis 45* when Joseph reunites with the brothers who betrayed him and his desire to be with them trumps any bitterness or blame, where he weeps on their neck, assures them of his forgiveness, and asks about his father. A relived *Acts 10* would be radical, too, we could be disciples who pray and pay attention to

wild dreams and go eat with those we didn't think belonged around our table and learn that God's love excludes no one and we are, in fact, united in Christ and inextricably joined together.

This kind of love would be hard to ignore.

So, in our time and place, in this branch of the vine: I ask you. What is love calling us to do next? What is love calling us to do next in our community? With our neighbors? Around our dinner table? In our workplace? Can we listen for the answer and then fearlessly do it together?

That's my vision: that we love one another daily, dutifully, tangibly, even when it's hard.

My friends:

Welcome home.

You belong here.

You are wanted.

You are beloved.

The household of God isn't complete without you and there are many other members of our family who still need to be welcomed and celebrated. So, let's love one another so well we can't be ignored, so well that everyone knows they have a home in Christ and a place here right now with us.