

July 31, 2016

Sermon: *Living from a Vision*

Pastor Clay Oglesbee

Texts: Acts 10:9-18, Matthew 17:1-9

One day, a wealthy young man stopped at a small, neglected, and decaying little church a mile or so below a small hillside city in Italy. The man had been struggling with his sense of calling—whether to go into military service, into commerce in his father’s prosperous fabric business, or into a religious vocation. As he entered the little church, one he had bypassed countless times in his boyhood and youth, he knelt and began to pray. He looked at the face of the Christ painted on a crucifix over the altar. The body of the Christ was torn at hands, feet and side. His friends report that as he prayed, this man heard a voice speaking to him, and saying, *“Don’t you see that my house has collapsed? Go and repair it for me.”*

His reply was, *“Yes, Lord, I will...”* He thought at first that God had asked him to gather stones and contribute money to rebuild the little church, which he did. He begged, borrowed from many people, and stole from his father, enough money and materials to repair and restore not only the little church of San Damiano, but two other small churches in the area. His friends said, he felt “great joy” that Jesus had spoken to him and put him to work. It was only with the passage of time that this young man realized that the vision he had been given was not simply to re-build old churches, but to repair, rebuild, revive, restore and renew Christ’s universal Church—from the interior heart of each Christian, to the

little chapels of each family or small community, to the immense cathedral of all Christian believers. Inspired by other visions, he began a great lay preaching movement, utterly committed to sharing the Gospel and sharing signs of hope and healing, by living in complete poverty, owning nothing and unswervingly imitating the way of Jesus of Nazareth and his first followers.

These visions were, of course, those of Francis of Assisi. He went on to live them out in depth, holding nothing at all back from his imitation of Christ and the first apostles, for two full decades until his exhausted death in 1226—aged 44, almost exactly 20 years later. Starting with *two* persons who followed him in his vision, Francis created a lay movement of thousands of Franciscan men and women in his own day, and today, he has millions upon millions of followers, including a former nightclub bouncer, whom we know today as Pope Francis!

That young man, that Francis of Assisi *lived* from a Vision.

But...Imagine for a moment that Francis heard God's voice and saw the Vision, and was inspired to consider a life of voluntary poverty and service to others, yet turned back to sell satins and silks from his father's shop. What then?

It seems to me that we are all guided by Visions. We all live by Vision. But most of us have little idea what the core vision is that we are living from. The question is simply, *do we know what our Vision is? Do we know what motivates us to action?* For some of us, we may say, our driving Vision is Christ's love, when in fact, our driving Vision may instead be

personal security, control, safety, prosperity, comfort, or just staying distracted from what we really think or feel. The rich young man who met Jesus was offered the Kingdom Vision and an invitation to follow Jesus, but do you remember what he did, once he saw the Vision? He “turned away”. His religious idealism was one thing, but his actual functioning, operating Vision was of something else.

Seek a Vision from God. Pray for a Vision from God. Live a Vision from God. Be the Gospel. Or...

The Scriptures suggest that *every* human soul is created by God, not only with the inalienable dignity of equality, freedom, and worth, but also with the God-donated capacity to prophesy, to dream and to envision God’s possibilities. As Peter preached early in the life of the new Christian movement, *In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams* (Acts 2:17 and Joel 2:28).

Unfortunately, not all divinely-instilled potential or possibility is fully realized. Either we are *prevented in some way by others* from dreaming or receiving vision, or we find it too heavy a thing, too costly, or too burdensome be the bearers of God’s dreams. The author, Zora Neale Thurston, who recognized her calling as a writer at a very young age, felt it involved such a weight of responsibility and loneliness, that she commented later in life, *“It is one of the blessings of this world that few people see visions and dream dreams.”*

The risk we take, of course, if we avoid the visions and dreams we are meant to receive and translate into reality for our communities, is that we will never become fully the persons God created and shaped us to become. Visions and dreams are not idly passed along to us to entertain us, or so that we may shop among them, choosing some that please us and setting aside those that would cost us our ease, or lead us to high demands, or even bring us into suffering for God's sake and for our neighbors.

As the Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, *"It is very dangerous to go into eternity with possibilities which one has oneself prevented from becoming realities. A possibility is a hint from God. One must follow it."*

If you think about it for a moment, it may even seem clear that the entirety of the Holy Scriptures are a gathering of more or less interior hints and possibilities, visions and dreams, illuminations and insights--all having their source from God, all gathered together in an interwoven series of spiritual encounters, and all bearing the promise of transforming souls and human history forever. In the older or originating Covenant which we call the Old Testament, visions seem to have been common enough that an absence of visions was felt painfully among the people—and they dared to believe it was due to their own lack of responsiveness. Not only individual souls, but entire nations, and periods of history, falter because, as the Proverbs tell us, ***"Without vision, the people perish"*** (Proverbs 29:18).

Yet ***with vision***—**the people thrive**. God used visions in the Old and New Testaments to reveal purpose, to further it, and to prepare people for positions or roles of spiritual and historic influence.

In Genesis 15:1, God used a vision to re-state the Abrahamic Covenant, and with Isaac and Jacob, reminding Abram and Sarai that they would have a son and so become parents of many nations. That *impossible God-Vision* set the stage for the growth of three enduring and dynamic faith movements: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. From the originating Vision, given only to Abraham and Sarai, have come 4.5 billion adherents of these faiths alive today, about 60% of the world's population today.

If one looks at the Jesus as a Vision-Bearer from God, and ask what Vision was it which he received, perhaps while in the wilderness alone, texts like Matthew 17, suggest that Jesus himself clearly is given a Vision, and presented as a Vision to others. **It is of the Kingdom or Rule of God, and of himself as a spiritual figure even more significant than Moses or Elijah.** He narrates his calling and vision as only this: to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal. In a word, he summons one and all to an immediate experience of the Kingdom of God, where grace and mercy, abundant provision and generous sharing are the way of life on earth.

How has the world been changed by his openness to that Vision from God?

(Acts 10:1-15): Again, God spoke to a Roman centurion named Cornelius and to the disciple, Peter. In their visions and conversations, as well as their obedience to the visions, they perceived that God was showing them that the old laws of ethnic purity were being set aside by the Gospel of Jesus. Peter himself was praying on the rooftop of a house in Joppa, and God gave him a vision of animals lowered in something like a sheet. A voice from heaven told Peter to kill the animals (some of which were unclean) and eat them. The Vision showed Peter that his objections to offering Christ to people his faith considered unclean or unworthy should come to an end, and that “God shows no partiality” in his, **all ethnicities and all persons** are “clean” in God’s eyes and acceptable to the divine love.

Paul also had visions during his missionary career. One sent him to preach in Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). By following that vision, Paul expanded the preaching of the Gospel from Asia-- to **all Europe and beyond**. He opened the way for truly universal, global mission.

As the United Church of Christ slogan says, “God is *still* speaking.” Dreams and visions, insights and illuminations, still flourish. God can communicate with us in so many ways--through Scripture, but also through the light and shadow, color and form, of poetry, stories, art, experience, nature, and so forth. The visions await us.

The most challenging and provocative question in all of this is certainly not whether God still speaks, but whether we

still watch for visions, listen to our dreams, and most importantly, whether we *do* what they call us to do. Could we also *live* from God's vision?

In my dreams and visions, I seemed to see a line, and on the other side of that line were green fields, and lovely flowers, and beautiful white ladies, who stretched out their arms to me over the line, but I couldn't reach them no-how. I always fell before I got to the line. Harriet Tubman