

“Where There Is No Vision...”

Acts 16:9-10 says this: "During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them."

Paul and Timothy were partners in missionary work, starting churches and spreading the message about Jesus to the pagan world of the first century. Acts 16 says the Holy Spirit prevented them from going to several areas. We're not sure what happened, but they saw this as the Holy Spirit blocking that effort. As they are recalculating their plans, one night Paul has a vision. A man of Macedonia (a Roman province in Europe) pleads with him in this vision, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Immediately, Paul heeds the vision, and heads for Macedonia.

Most of us have probably never had a vision from God where we've actually seen a person, or heard an audible voice. I never have. But have you ever felt inside that God is calling you to do something? Have you ever had a dream or vision of something God wants you to do? *I hope so!*

Having a sense of vision is so important to life! It's important for us as individuals - for if we've never felt, or no longer feel, that there's something important in life that God wants us to do, there is something in us that dies. ***It's also important for us as a congregation*** - for when churches lose a sense that there's a world out there saying in one way or another, "Come and help us!", congregations are on the path to decline and death.

Proverbs 29:18 in the King James Version says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Bible scholars tell us that's this is not the best translation of the Hebrew in this verse. But it's true – when people have no vision for the future – no hopes, no dreams – they *do* perish!

Most, if not all, of the great things done for God and the kingdom of God have come about because someone has had a vision of what God wanted to pull off! David Brainerd won many thousands of American Indians to Christ. He said, "I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went thru, so that I could but gain souls for Christ. While I was asleep I dreamed of these things, and when I awoke, it was the first thought that I had, the thought of this great work." David Livingston, the first man to take the gospel into the heart of Africa, said, "I must open a way to the interior or perish." J. Hudson Taylor, pioneer missionary to China, said, "I feel as though I cannot live if something is not done for China." Just like the Apostle Paul, each of these men had a God-inspired vision of someone, somewhere, pleading with them: "Come and help us!"

You may say, "Harry, these are examples of famous missionaries. I can't identify with them. Most people don't get that kind of vision. We're just ordinary Christians." True, most of us are not called to be superstar missionaries or Christian leaders. But how many important things have been done for the kingdom of God because *ordinary Christians* have had a vision of something God wanted done.

A gem dealer was strolling the aisles of the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show when he noticed a blue-violet stone the size and shape of a potato. He looked it over, then, as calmly as possible, asked the vendor, "You want \$15 for this?" The seller, realizing the rock wasn't as pretty as others in the bin, lowered the price to \$10. This stone was later certified as a 1,905 carat natural star sapphire, about 800 carats larger than the previous largest stone of its kind. Guess how much it was appraised for: \$2.28 million! We may look at ourselves and think, "I'm just an old stone that looks like a potato. What can God do with me?" Or, God may place in our heart a desire to do something- some practical work, some ordinary ministry - and all it looks like is an old potato, an ugly stone. But if we're willing to do it, God will bless it and multiply its value.

God gave to the Apostle Paul a vision: a man from Macedonia pleading with Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). ***A lot of congregations today have a lost sense of vision for the future.*** So then, the focus shifts to trying to *recapture the past*: let's try to get back to the way things were 20 years ago, or 40 years ago. Good luck! That will never happen! Or, the congregation's efforts are spent on *just surviving*, scraping enough money together to pay the bills and keep the ship afloat. And because of this loss of vision, churches and denominations are dying!

Most congregations got started because God gave some people a vision of a work that needed to be done, people who needed to be reached. Do you know how Community UMC got started? From what I can gather, this church began as a vision of people at Covenant EUB and Otterbein EUB churches in Lancaster, and some people on the Board of Missions of the EUB conference. This was a growing area in the 1950's, and they felt the need of a church here. Those two churches (Covenant and Otterbein) purchased land for \$4000. The Board of Missions commissioned a pastor, Rev. Robert Miller, to take at least 2 days a week from the work at his church to come here and help plant a church. A home on Reese Avenue was purchased to be a parsonage and meeting place for the new church. It began with a Sunday School in the summer of 1956. That September, three Sunday worship services were planned. The first Sunday there were 79 people. The second Sunday, 102. The next week the EUB conference was in session, and they voted to establish a church here called Community Evangelical United Brethren Church. The church grew rapidly, and the rest is history!

See, it was because somebody cared to have a church presence here, some people at Covenant and Otterbein and on the Missions Board had a vision of winning people to Christ in this neighborhood, that this church got started!

Churches are born when God places a vision in someone's heart. But what happens? Often as that founding generation passes on, the next generation loses the passion for that original vision. People start to do things from year to year out of habit, because that's what was always done. Congregation easily becomes self-centered, self-serving. Time and energy are spent doing things the people *already in the church* like to do, instead of what will reach a new generation outside the church with the message of Jesus. When this happens, churches stagnate, and decline. The only hope is for a *new vision* to be cast for that congregation, for the people to be gripped by a *sense* of what God is calling that church to do in the present!

One of the primary jobs of the pastor is to cast a vision for the church. A lot of people think the job of the pastor is just to take care of the flock. That's part of a pastor's role: to be a shepherd. There are times when you need pastor, and I want to be available when that happens. But every church needs a pastor who is a ***leader, a vision caster*** - who can sense where God is leading the church, and then communicate that vision clearly to the congregation.

And every pastor needs a ***group to work with***, to help those in the congregation understand and follow that directive from God. We have a Visioning Team here. There are seven of us, meeting every 3-4 weeks. We are looking at other churches that are growing and thriving and reaching people for Jesus, and trying to figure out what we can learn through them. And we are praying for God to show us what He wants us to do.

God gives Paul a vision for some people God wanted to reach with the gospel, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Notice a couple of things here. First, ***the vision was from God***. See, the issue is not, what do I want for Community UMC? It's not, what do *you* want our church to be doing? But rather it's what *God* wants for Community UMC. Who are the people, specifically, that God wants us to serve and reach?

Then take note that ***Paul acted on that vision***. "When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them" (Acts 16:10). Notice, it says they "immediately" headed for Macedonia! Paul could have delayed and not left right away. He could have doubted the vision. He could have followed his own reasoning and decided to go somewhere else that seemed more logical or more convenient. But he went at once!

Usually, if we go where God is leading us, it will mean making some changes, doing some things differently! ***Often God's vision for a congregation is far more ambitious and expansive than our human plans and inclinations!***

Number 23. For about 10 weeks the number 23 has been included in our church bulletin. Sometimes it was placed in the margin. Sometimes it was just there amid the announcements. Once it was placed on a song sheet insert written upside down. *And not one person has asked why it's there!* About 3-4 weeks ago, I started putting little circles with the number 23 inside around the church building. *No one has said a word about it!*

Why are we doing this? During Lent, some of you bought the book *Draw the Circle*. It's a 40 day prayer challenge. That book has renewed my prayer life. The author, Mark Batterson, challenges us to pray big, to circle things in prayer so big that it will take a miracle to bring it about. Pray something that only God can do!

Batterson says this about praying for things that seem impossible: "Why do we mistakenly think God is offended by our prayers for the impossible? The truth is that God is offended by anything less. God is offended when we ask Him to do things we can do ourselves. It's the impossible prayers that honor God because they reveal our faith and allow God to reveal His glory..."

He says, "There are times when you need to do whatever it takes...you need to do something crazy, something risky, something different." He goes on to write that when you tell people the crazy thing you've prayed for, then it's on God's shoulders to answer, not yours: "When we pray, we relieve ourselves of responsibility. We let go and let God...the answer isn't up to us. It's not our job to answer; it's our job to ask."

Two times during Lent I invited those reading the book to come and talk about what they were reading, and to share how we all are doing with the 40 day prayer challenge. To be honest, only a couple people came each time. But the second time, I said we're going to pray and ask God for a specific number of new people to get connected to Community UMC. As we prayed, I had a number in mind. But when we were done praying, one of the persons said, "Somehow, the number 23 came to mind. Twenty-three new people by Christmas. Twenty-three by December 25." This was more than my number, but I felt God leading us and trusted that God had placed that number on this person's mind and heart.

It sounds crazy, doesn't it. Twenty-three new faces by Christmas! It's hard for me to say that's our goal! What if we don't reach it? Will I be embarrassed, or what! But we've asked; now it's up to God to answer! And I do know this: God wants this church to grow, God wants people to find Christ and be saved much more than we do!

Now, my guess is, some of you thinking something like this: Harry, we're an older congregation. All this talk about reaching out, visioning for the future, would be great - if we were younger! Let's think about this a minute. I realize many of us are up in years. Some of us may not be in the best of health. It takes all you've got just to get here on Sunday morning. I understand. I appreciate your faithfulness to this church. Maybe you limited physically in what can do. But you can have a *heart* that longs for this church to thrive again. You can have *heart* for this church to reach lost people. You can pray. And maybe you can be open to the fact that there might be something else you can do!

Then there are some of you, perhaps, who've never moved beyond the place where your commitment and your understanding of "church" is simply to come here on Sunday morning. You "go to church" on Sunday, and that's the end of your obligation. You're not thinking at all about "vision" or "reaching out". Frankly, if this is where you are at, it's kind of sad. Isn't that kind of selfish: Just give me a good worship service to come to? Church is just about me, receiving, getting something?

Others of you may be thinking: Well, I've done my part. I've served many years. Don't ask me to do more. Now that's a problem – if you think you're too old to serve. All you want now is for the church to serve you. That's not an "age" problem, that's an "attitude" problem. I'm not a young man. But I'm not willing to be just the kind of pastor who will kind of hold your hand and soothe you while this church slowly dies. As I said when I first came here, I don't have many years left, and I don't want to waste what little time I have left being a hospice chaplain for a dying congregation. I know a pastor, Menno Good. He retired before I did. I saw him a few years ago. I had heard that he was serving a church in retirement. We talked about his

congregation. He said that the church had been about ready to close, but it had turned around. And now they are in a new construction program! I said to him, "Well, praise the Lord!"

God isn't done with this church yet, unless you, as a congregation, choose to have it be that way by your lack of vision for the future! "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18).

The amazing woman, Helen Keller, once said, "What would be worse than being born blind? To have sight without vision."

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