

## **“A Vision of Hope”**

Philippians 3:10-14

Proverbs 29:18

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First in a series of seven sermons

**I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

**Where there is no vision, the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18)**

Well, folks, the honeymoon is over. It's been six months, and it's been a pretty good start. We are married now. Now the **real work** of pastor and congregation begins. We're past the "getting to know you" stage. It's probably about time for the "getting on each others' nerves" stage. And so now God's real work is at hand.

Now that the honeymoon is winding down, it's the perfect time for a serious conversation. Of course it is a different sort of conversation, in that, I am doing all the talking, at least for the moment. But it is my prayer that my talking will set off a long dialogue. A dialogue between all of us about God's future vision for Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church.

To that end, I will be preaching a series of seven sermons this summer. They'll be based in part on the work of Stanley Ott in his book, The Twelve Dynamic Shifts for Transforming Your Church. Dr. Ott's work will be the jumping off point for our Leaders' Retreat in a couple of weeks. I hope this and the sermon series will spark a lot of new ideas, energy, and action in the coming year. Along with the rest of your church Staff, your Session and Committee chairpersons, I invite your comments and ideas. Call me. Email me. Drop me a note. Most important, pray for the future vision of our church as together we seek God's will in our small piece of God's kingdom.

“Where there is no vision, the people (and, I would add, the church) perish.” This is the wisdom that comes to us from the book of

Proverbs. It may seem a harsh and strong statement of reality; and indeed, it is. Vision is not for the weak-kneed. Vision is not for sissies. Vision is not for the complacent. Vision is for life. Vision is key to thriving as human beings, and vision is key to thriving as a church. This is because vision, as we are talking about it today, is about hope.

St. Paul writes about a vision for the future from a very bleak present place, indeed. He is in jail. He is far away from his congregation at Philippi. He is no doubt mistreated, hungry, uncomfortable, and disabused for his faith. And yet, in spite of all this, he writes a hopeful vision. It is a vision that even today sends chills up and down our spines, as we ourselves strain toward the exciting future God has in store for us. Paul writes of pressing toward the goal. In his eloquent rhetoric, he does not define the goal, other than it involves the will of Christ. Our task, as followers of Jesus Christ here, is to first seek God's vision and second, to clarify the goals that will help us move toward that vision in our communal life.

As many of you know, Vaclav Havel was the first president of the Czech Republic. Before that he was a writer and dramatist. Beginning in the 1960s, his work began to focus on the politics of Czechoslovakia. In 1977, his involvement with the human rights movement led to his imprisonment. Havel was motivated by a different vision than the one that seized St. Paul. But like Paul, Havel knew firsthand what it meant to be imprisoned. In spite of this, Havel writes about hopeful vision:

"The kind of hope I often think about . . . [is] a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either, we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope is an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."<sup>1</sup>

Why is it so critical we explore these questions of hope and vision now in our congregation? It is critical, because it is vision which drives us forward into the future God has planned for us. Vision propels us.

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<sup>1</sup> Vaclav Havel, adapted from Disturbing the Peace, originally written in 1986.

Without vision, we languish. We remain stuck where we are, or worse, we remain stuck in the past.

Over twelve years ago many here believed God was calling three churches to become a unified, new church. Without a vision, Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church would never have been born. Without a vision, there would have been no new building, no renovations, no unique new congregation. Without vision, the hard work of compromising and creating something new never would have happened.

The season of that particular vision is now past. We are it. We are that church! We are about to celebrate ten years as that church. I guess we aren't so new any more! And it is time to seek the **next vision** God has planned for us. As St. Paul urges us, we are to forget what is behind and strive toward what lies ahead. This forgetting involves some degree of letting go. It doesn't mean we forget the past completely, but what it does mean is we cannot be bound by the past.

Stanley Ott, who is the pastor of a thriving Presbyterian church in Pennsylvania, emphasizes the concept of blessing the past and adding for the future. He urges us to move forward to God's future by envisioning together how God may be ready to work to transform our church. To increase the depth and the breadth of our faith and our ministries.

Ott says, "vitality has nothing to do with size. It has everything to do with life and ministry. The critical measure of vitality is the growth of discipleship and the sensitivity to which people's needs are addressed."

In this visioning process, we are not just left to our own devices. Ott suggests several principles in our search, principles which make a lot of sense to me and I think will make a lot of sense to you:

He says the vision of the church should:

1. Be Spirit-driven and biblically-based.
2. Be directed toward nurturing deeper discipleship, and caring for real needs.
3. Seek a balance between in-reach and out-reach ministries.
4. And it should be reflective.<sup>2</sup> (In other words, we should examine what we've done.)

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<sup>2</sup> G. Stanley Ott, Twelve Dynamic Shifts for the Transformational Church

It goes without saying that vision takes work and energy. Paul knew this. It is no accident that Paul chose to use the metaphor of a foot race to describe the Christian life---striving towards God's future. Practice, preparation, and perseverance are absolutely essential. Blood, sweat and tears are needed. And so it is with us. But we need not fear! Because this kind of power does not come just from us. We tap into God's power and God's vision, and this will set us free to run like the wind!

Over the coming weeks and months might we all shift from our present hopes for our church's future to a high expectation that **God has a vital future** for our church?

Over the coming weeks and months, might we all ask God to renew our faith, transform our church, and help us build the spiritual lives of many others?

Jonathan Swift said, "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible." Might we all press on toward the goal God has set for us, imagining our future, seeing what is possible, seeking what the invisible God has yet to reveal?