

Sermon: Visioning the Future/ Acts 2:1-8,11-21

The scriptures that were read this morning probably sounded familiar. They were the scriptures that the youth used during their service two weeks ago. I think it is exciting that the PC(USA) challenged the youth to dream. They are the church leaders of tomorrow and the best way to become the best leaders for tomorrow is to start today by dreaming of what the church can be for them right now and what it can mean moving forward.

Dreaming. Visioning. This is usually what I preach about early on to coming to a new church. I like to do it before the mission study is done, but for various reasons I didn't get to it. However, I don't think it is ever too late to talk on this subject, because the church should be a dynamic, living entity. Those that aren't are dying. Those who take on the task of the dreaming and visioning find new life.

The Matthew 25 Initiative focuses on three areas: Church Vitality, Anti-racism, and Systemic Poverty. It was interesting when I was interviewing with one church, they talked of the church vitality in regard to the outreach it was doing. I'd understood church vitality as what the church did to nurture their faith, to deepen their faith, to dream and vision and perhaps even prophecy. In their work in anti-racism and systemic poverty. I am a deep believer in the need to nurture one's soul to have the strength to do the tasks needed to fight against racism and systemic poverty.

People ask why I do transitional ministry. Why do I choose to do something that keeps me moving about. It is hard in many respects - finding new doctors, a new hair dresser, settling into a new community and making new friends. Sometimes I get settled faster and other times it takes longer, but the answer to the question ultimately is that this is what God has wanted me to do for these past several years. And I think that God has helped me

in being able to come into a congregation and help them shore up in the areas they may be weak in.

However, what I find most rewarding is challenging a congregation to dream dreams and have visions; to help a congregation figure out what the next phase of their life is supposed to look like. Of course, that is not down to every detail, but seeing them gain a vision and a direction that they feel God is calling them to.

I've heard just a little bit of murmuring about anxiety over not having an installed pastor or that plans can't be made until the new pastor arrives and "We know what he or she wants to do."

I haven't felt much anxiety from this congregation, but for any who may have some because I am the installed pastor, let me just say that churches go through life cycles and the transitional time is just as important, or in my opinion, an even more important time for the church because it is in this visioning and dreaming that the church is able to more fully define itself and then identify more fully what kind of pastor they need to walk beside them as they respond to the call that they have heard through this dreaming and visioning process. This doesn't end with the mission survey, but it is just the beginning. There is still much to do by all of you, regardless of your age.

I like to use this passage from Acts. So let's take a closer look at it, particularly the second half of the passage where Peter is quoting Joel.

There are three changes that he makes from how it was written in Joel.

1. He changes the opening clause from "After these things" to "in the last days." Peter sees himself announcing a concluding, culminating era in human history. The times have

changed. And isn't that so true for us today. As I mentioned in a previous sermon, the Church is entering a new era, a post-Christian era, and it will be up to not only the national officers to interpret who we are and where we are going as a denomination in this country, but it is imperative that each local church does this as well.

If you are to stay relevant as a Christian witness in this community, how are you going to go about doing that? Dream and Vision.

2. Second, he inserts the word My before "slaves." While Joel referred to "slaves" as an explicit socioeconomic class, Peter broadens the identification of this group. They are God's slaves.

3. Peter added that "and they shall prophecy" at the end of 2:18. Peter emphasizes why God's Spirit is bestowed on "all flesh," given to young and old, to women and men, to slave and free. It is given so that they can dream dreams, have visions, and prophecy.

Peter makes these changes to Interpret the times; to indicate that something new in human history has begun. To interpret the community created by the Spirit. The Spirit has come to mark the church - every member of it - as belonging to good and as God's agent in the world. They, we, are all God's slaves. The Spirit has been poured out on all of us and that is a key point to remember.

And, finally, Peter, makes the point that they shall prophecy means that God's gift of the Spirit indicates that God is at work here, equipping people to communicate about God. The Spirit prompts them to engage in prophecy.

Now Peter isn't talking about prophecy as predicting the future. Instead, he is referring to it in terms of truth-telling. It is naming the places and ways where God intervenes or initiatives in the

world. It is a component of proclaiming the word of God and identifying God's salvation at work.

Another aspect of prophecy is. To give meaning to the crowd's experience. Peter is an interpreter of the present time and the gospel. Scripture becomes a helpful tool by which he makes sense of those things.

And, again, the dreamers and the visionaries must respond to the Spirit as they dream their dreams and have their visions and interpret them in ways that bring life to the people.

One of the best churches I saw take up this challenge was my church in Traverse City. I was there for much of 2020, during the pandemic. Dreams? Yes, they dreamed and implemented those dreams. The Poor and the Homeless in need of food? Take unneeded stimulus checks and develop a program that ties a restaurant with a nearby charity organization. Invest in these restaurants in a buy one/give one and then the coupons were given to the nearby charity organization to give out to their clients. It helped four restaurants and four charities that were located near those restaurants. It was a big help and made a difference.

They also made lunches once a week at the church and delivered them to our senior and homebound members, as well as choosing one first responder group a week to say thank you with lunches - a fire station, a police station, 'EMS workers, hospital workers. It's amazing how everyone involved was blessed through this ministry of meals and brought some happiness in an otherwise deadly and scary time.

So, that leads me back to you. Now is your time to dream and vision and prophecy. This church needs you to, the greater church needs you to, and those lost souls out there need you to. When you have your dreams and visions share them with

committees, with Session members, with others who can join on whatever new mission a group of you or all of you are called to.

And I don't want anyone saying they are too old. It was a senior member of the church who came up with that buy one/give one that helped those restaurants and people in need. He brought the idea to the mission committee and they took it on and ran with it.

And another new member of the church asked why there wasn't a social justice committee and so he and I started the committee together and it has become a vital part of the ministry of that church as they have become active in school board meetings, active in ministry to the Native Americans in their area.

And, finally, doing all this helps to define who you are and where you feel God is leading you. Because ultimately it is your church, your church family. We pastors join for a time, 7 years, 2 years, whatever it may be, we will eventually leave and you will remain to seek out God's will for you.

I will say one last thing about the importance of dreaming and visioning and prophesying during this time, because the more you can identify where God is calling you the better it is for the Pastor Nominating Committee. They will then have a clearer picture of what kind of pastor they are looking for, what qualities, what gifts, and if their vision is generally the same as the church.

My first transitional position was as an associate for pastoral care and mission. The Senior Pastor was, in my opinion, an amazing pastor. He was warm and kind, had a great sense of humor, and was just the best preacher I have ever had the privilege of working with an knowing.

He had come about a year before I did. I was there for twenty months and cried when I left. It was so hard to leave a wonderful congregation and a great colleague in ministry. However, about a

year and a half after I left, he also left the church. I was so shocked by this. I couldn't understand what could have possibly have happened because I'd been there for reviews of Al and they had all been wonderful reviews. Everyone loved him.

A number of years later I was in a class for transitional pastors and the instructor turned out to be the person who had become the transitional pastor at this church after Al left. I asked him what had happened and he said that they church saw themselves going in one direction and Al wanted them to go in a different direction. I'm sure both directions were good, but it wasn't how that congregation saw themselves and in the end Al got frustrated and left.

He said that in his opinion Al had convinced the search committee of his vision and he went thinking that the rest of the congregation would soon see how his vision was best, but they didn't.

This is a cautionary tale for the PNC, but also for this congregation. The more you can dream and vision and we can flush out those dreams and visions, then the more guidance the PNC has when interviewing prospective pastors.

And when you have a great fit, you have a pastor who will stay long, and the ministries of the church will thrive and grow.

So this is your task for the rest of the time I'm here. The Youth, the adults, the senior members of this church, the Holy Spirit was poured out on you for a reason, not just for God to bring you peace and comfort in hard times, but to help you grow in deepening your faith, and to empower you to know the heart of God for you and your congregation. So dream and vision. That's what you are especially supposed to be doing at this time. Know that God is with you. Know that you are blest. Amen.