

***Who's Vision is it anyway?***  
Annual Visioning Sunday  
October 2, 2016

**Call to Worship:**

*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*  
Matthew 28:16-20 (NIV)

**Scripture Reading:**

*This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon... It said:*

*<sup>4</sup> This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." <sup>8</sup> Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. <sup>9</sup> They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.*

*<sup>10</sup> This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."*  
Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11 (NIV)

This morning we are taking a break from our series on the *Fruit of the Spirit* because it is visioning Sunday, the Sunday we set aside each year to try and discern God's vision for us as a church over the next year. The church business year began on Sept. 1st but we need to have a little extra time to get all the finances together from the previous year. And although we do need money to exist, and as part of the stewardship we would like to thank you for your generosity in giving over the past year, the church isn't a business. The church is not like any other institution we find here on earth, though we often try to operate it like it is. One of the ways we do that is through developing mission, purpose and vision statements. I must admit, I find this one of the hardest parts of leading a church. There seems to be so much pressure to get it right. After all it says in Proverbs 29:18 (KJV): *Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.*

That sounds pretty serious! But who's vision is it really, and who is supposed to set the vision? Perhaps we get a better answer to that question by looking at that verse in some of the other versions of the Bible:

*Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint; but blessed is the one who heeds wisdom's instruction.* Proverbs 29:18 (NIV)

*Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint [people get discouraged], but blessed is he who keeps the law.* Proverbs 29:18 (ESV)

*When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild. But whoever obeys the law is joyful.* Proverbs 29:18 (NLT)

*If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed.* Proverbs 29:18 (*The Message*)

You see, it's really not our vision. It is God's vision. God has already set forth His vision for us in His Word. God is continually at work in the world today and our primary purpose in life, both as individuals and as a church, is to discern how He is working in our lives and to join Him in that which He is already doing.

That great passage from Jeremiah 29 which many of us are quite familiar with:

<sup>11</sup> *For I know the plans **I have for you**," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* But it's also important that we understand the context that we find that verse in. God's people at the time, the Israelites, had been sent into exile to Babylon because of their disobedience. God speaks through His primary prophet at the time, Jeremiah. He tells them that after 70 years in exile He will come to them as promised and that He will lead them back to a prosperous land, one where they will find hope and a future. But he says in the meantime, settle down there; *"Build houses and settle down... Marry and have sons and daughters... Increase in number there; do not decrease... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it."*

The Israelites' 70 years in exile can be seen as a metaphor of our entire life here on earth. Two times in the disciple Peter's first letter (1 Peter 1:1, 1 Peter 2:11) he refers to Christians here on earth as a people living in exile, "strangers in the world," "people trying to live a godly life in a pagan society." Several times in the New Testament we are told that we are to live in this world, but not be of this world.

God gave His people a clear vision for how He wants us to live – beginning back in the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments. In the New Testament He gives us a clear vision as well, especially in Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. He gives us the clearest vision in Jesus himself. Then it says we are supposed to imitate Him.

*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the **image** of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* Romans 8:29

As we're learning in our series on the *Fruit of the Spirit*, it is not something we can do on our own. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in believer's lives.

*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his **image** with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

2 Corinthians 3:18

Jesus called his original disciples not only to believe in Him but to follow Him, to be imitators of Him. They were with Him, almost day in and day out, for three years. They listened to His teaching, they observed His character, they watched what He did. And then at the end of His time here on earth, after He had completed everything that God His Father had sent Him here to do, including His death on the cross to atone for all mankind's sins, and after His resurrection and just before His ascending to return to heaven, He gives his disciples their primary purpose or mission statement, otherwise known as *The Great Commission*: *Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. .. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* Matthew 28:16-20 (NIV)

Jesus doesn't tell them to go out and just make believers, He tells them to go out and make disciples. And that includes themselves just as it has included all who have claimed to be Christians ever since. So, what really is a disciple?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a disciples as "someone who accepts and assists in spreading the teachings of another." That might be part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, but I would suggest it is a lot more than that as well.

*The Peacemakers* Sunday school class is finishing a book by Dallas Willard entitled Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ and he suggests that maybe instead of the word "disciple" we should use the word "apprentice," though in our day the concept of apprenticeships have gone out of style as well. But an apprentice is someone who learns a job or skill by working for a period of time alongside another person who is very good at that job or skill. And eventually, over time, the apprentice him/herself, becomes almost as good as the one he or she was working under, often called a "master."

That is what Jesus is telling His original disciples, "Alright you have been my apprentices now for three years, you have lived with me, you have seen what I do, you have seen how I have acted, you have listened to my teachings, now it's your turn." It's a pretty intimidating assignment. But Jesus promised them they would not be alone. Both He and the Holy Spirit will be with them as they go along.

The original disciples really didn't have much of a choice. They could either continue on the journey or they could go back. The representative disciple Peter's response to Jesus' question, "do you too want to leave me and go back?," probably about halfway through their journey, fits pretty well. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

So, if someone were to ask you what your primary purpose here on earth is, what would you say? How would you identify yourself? Might it be as a mother or a father, perhaps a grandparent? Many of us would identify ourselves by our job – teacher, doctor, engineer, farmer, nurse, counselor, manager, business owner, pastor. How many would first identify yourself as a Christian? That should tell us where our priorities are? And even then, I would suggest that identifying oneself as a Christian might not be enough. Identifying oneself as a Christian is rather passive. All's one is saying is that he or she is a believer in Jesus. But now if one was to identify him or herself as a follower of Jesus, or perhaps a disciple of Jesus, or even better an apprentice of Jesus that might tell us more. You see how we identify ourselves often identifies that which is most important in our lives. Our primary role in life is that which affects all the others.

Not only is that true when it comes to us as individual Christians, it is also true when it comes to the church. What is the primary role of the church? I would make the claim that we find it right there in Matthew 28, verses 19:20 – “go and make disciples of all people (as many people as you can – from all different walks of life), baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything which I have commanded.”

Hence our primary purpose statement:

“To glorify God by loving Him; by loving others; by becoming [better] disciples of Jesus Christ [ourselves] and making disciples of others.”

I don't know about the rest of you, but very rarely does God speak to me as clear as I would like Him to, at least audibly. That has never been God's primary method of communicating to His people. In O.T. times he did speak through a select group of people – Abraham, Moses, the prophets, etc. - but today his primary way of speaking to us is through His Word and the events that are going on in our lives. Using those two things – it's up to us as a church, God's people, a body of Christ here on earth, to try and discern where He is leading us. More often than not He is already at work. So a pretty good way to discern where He might be leading us in the year ahead is to look back and see where He has led us in the past year or two.

Two things in particular stand out:

1. Our local outreach in the community of West Liberty at *The Grove*
2. Missional Discipleship Groups

But God is not only speaking to us in the events that have seemed successful, He is also speaking to us in the events and activities that have been more challenging. What might those be?

1. Two worship services –

We now have worshiped pretty consistently with two worship services for almost fourteen years. How do I know that? Because at the end of this year, I will have been here fourteen years, and the decision to hire me as the first full-time associate pastor was part of the decision that was already made to go to two services. I benefitted greatly from the decision but I was not in on the decision making process. In fact many who were in on the decision making process are no longer here. That's not to say that at the time it was a good decision or bad decision. In fact I would say

at the time it was a good decision. It came on the heels of a building project which attracted many new people. “Build it and they will come,” is often true of new church buildings as much as it is new sports stadiums. And it was a time in which many people seemed sensitive to the seeker movement, that if we would just invite enough people, some will come. But it is fourteen years later and things change – in our culture, our community, and in the church. Perhaps it’s time to re-evaluate the purpose of our two service model. But I want to caution us on re-evaluating it. It can’t be about us, nor our personal preferences. If we are going to re-evaluate it, it has to be done with the ultimate goal of what does God want?

Recently I came across this wonderful quote in one of my many readings:

“Christian worship should always be vibrant, joyful, heart-expanding, and mind enlarging.” Ian Hamilton, “A New Covenant Command,” *Banner of Truth*, Oct. 2016

Is our worship vibrant, joyful, heart-expanding and mind enlarging? And an even more important question, who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that is taking place?

## 2. Conflict in the larger Mennonite Church USA and by extension Ohio Conference –

Again, I would suggest that it might not be a bad thing. Perhaps it’s God’s way of speaking to us to identify where we stand theologically and to re-evaluate our affiliations as a congregation. Not everything a church does is always good. Churches are made up of human beings, fallible and finite human beings, and churches are susceptible to the same sinful things as individuals.

The longer that we are here on earth, the more things we accumulate. Most churches – whether they be individual churches or denominations start out with very good intentions. They often focus on that which is most important. But as the years go by they pick up more and more non-essentials, to the point that we lose focus on what is important. Many people today are joining non-denominational churches because they don’t want all the excess baggage which comes with denominational or traditional churches. My response to that is, “just wait.”

I was trying to think about what to compare it to and the one thing that kept on coming back to me is barnacles on boats. A barnacle is a type of shell fish that attaches itself to rocks and the bottoms of boats underwater, so more-often-than-not we don’t see them. But they can have a debilitating effect on water-craft. They cause serious damage to boats and especially large ships made out of metal and steel. They cause the people in charge to focus on things that they shouldn’t have to focus on. They are a serious distraction. They seriously slow the ships down. They increase the cost to operate them. How much you ask? Well, the United States Navy estimates that barnacles accumulating on the bottoms of their ships increase the Navy’s petroleum bill by about \$250 million annually.

It’s no different the longer a church exists. We pick up a lot of non-essentials along the way. Non-essentials which distract us from our primary mission, they weigh us down, they slow us down, and it comes at a great cost. Maybe it’s time we shed the excess baggage, the barnacles.

What if we went back to the basics? What were the basics when the Mennonite church started some 500 years ago? I have been able to come up with five core elements of the early Mennonite Church, not saying these were the only ones, but they were pretty important:

1. First and foremost they were disciples of Jesus and they tried to follow Jesus in everything they did. Discipleship was an essential. Their peace, non-violence, non-resistance position was not just something that the earliest Mennonites came up with, they truly believed that was the teaching position of Jesus and that he lived it out in his life, all the way to his death on the cross.
2. They believed that true Christians, true disciples of Jesus had to have a “born again” experience. They took to heart Jesus’ words in John 3:3 *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again,”* as much as his words in John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world . . .*

They might not have known exactly how it happened (how much is man’s part and how much is God’s part), or for many even when it happened, but they were certain that the new birth, the change that it brings forth in a person, should be evident to all.

“This can never fail; where there is true Christian faith, there is also dying to sin, a new creature, true repentance, a sincere, regenerated Christian. One does no longer live according to the lusts of sin but according to the will of Him who purchased us with His blood, drew us by His Spirit and regenerated us by His Word, namely Jesus Christ.”  
Menno Simons

3. Strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture -  
Strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture, a more literal interpretation of Scripture and obedience to the Word (whether it made sense by human standards or not).

4. Importance of the Family Unit and Home Life -  
They saw the traditional family unit as one of the foundations of the Christian faith. Many of the original Mennonite women were persecuted and martyred right along with their husbands.

5. True Community -  
They tried to live out the life of the church as described in Acts 2:42-47

Five core elements which led them to proclaiming the entire gospel, both in their words and in their actions, in Spirit and in truth - Salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and a life of following Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Over the years we have picked up a lot of barnacles – whether it be dress, musical preferences (going all the way back to no-instruments, a capella, four part harmony through today’s contemporary praise music), separation from the world, social justice, pacifism, legalism, and on and on and on. What might be the barnacles in our own lives and in the life of the congregation today? What are the things that are weighing us down, the things that are causing us not to focus on that which is most important – going out and being witnesses of Jesus Christ, of sharing the Good News, of becoming better disciples ourselves and making more disciples?

