

“Got Vision?”

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
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Did I ever tell you I used to be a cartoonist? When I lived in Japan in the early 90's, I had a cartoon strip in an English-language newspaper. I'm telling you this because over the summer I found myself doodling some cartoons again. I think it coincided with the sudden death of Tulsa World cartoonist Doug Marlette, who died in an auto accident a few months ago. I greatly miss his comic strip preacher Rev. Will B. Dunn from Kudzu.

I started drawing a cartoon for this month's church newsletter on the theme of vision, but I couldn't get it done in time. The cartoon I was working on had a huge crowd of people walking like zombies toward a group of tall billboards. The billboards displayed products like cigarettes and beer and soda pop. What the people couldn't see, as they walked transfixed by the billboards and their starry promises, was that the billboards were set on the edge of a cliff. These sleepwalking people were falling over the edge one after the other, seemingly unaware of what they were doing. In the foreground of the drawing was a white church with a tall pointed steeple. My cartoon character could be seen hanging firmly by one arm off the top of the steeple, staring through a pair of binoculars over the tops of the billboards, watching what was happening. The caption read: “Got vision?”

The point being, if we don't know who we are and what's important to us, and we don't have a vision of what we want to do with our lives, and if we don't teach our children to have such vision, there are many influences out there that would be glad to steer us in the direction of the visions *they* want for our lives. I can't remember exactly how many thousands of advertisements they say each American sees every day and every week of our lives, but it's a lot. And these advertisements are created with the expressed intention of getting us to think or feel that what they're selling is what we need.

And if you think about it, here we are, living in one of the richest, most powerful nations, in a day and age when we have more knowledge, more information, and more options than any people have ever had in the history of humanity. And what do we find the vast majority of people doing with their unrivaled freedom and possibility and their one precious life? Too many are working long hours in unsatisfying jobs to pay off debt they've accumulated buying things that they don't really need. Others are spending their time watching reality shows on TV. Or getting obsessed about Britney Spears or Paris Hilton's latest crisis. Now, I'm not saying there's

anything wrong with a little materialism comfort, or watching a bit of mindless TV or taking an occasional glance at a People magazine. But when the values presented by these things become central to people's lives there is something *seriously* wrong.

How is it that so many people in the wealthiest, most well educated and most free nation in the world are wasting away their lives and opportunities on meaningless and material things? In part, it comes down to a lack of vision. Without a sense of who we are and what we want and what is important to us, we are at the whims of others.

The other night, when I heard our guest story-teller Dan Lemonnier talking about his mother, I was reminded of a man I knew when I lived in New York, named Jim. Jim was a short little man in his late 70s. I remember he wore hearing aids in both ears. His back was stiff and he was a little hunched over when he walked. But Jim was one of the most joyful, passionate men I've ever met. When I told him I wanted to become a minister, he questioned me, "Is that really what you want to do?"

I was a little taken aback, but I said, "Yes, I've given it a lot of thought." He said "Good! Then you should do it. Don't do what I did. I always wanted to be a teacher, but my parents made me think that that was an inferior career. They told me I could not make enough money being a teacher to support a family. So I followed their idea of who I should be and became an engineer and I was miserable in my job for almost 30 years. It wasn't until I was 50," he explained, "that I decided to finally become a teacher. And that was the best decision I've ever made."

It was clear to me that Jim had found his life's passion in teaching. And being around him, and hearing his stories, I knew that he must have inspired many students to see and believe in their own passions. Jim may have been a short little man with short little arms – I doubt his arms were even long enough to reach the top of the blackboard – but I tell you, they were long enough to reach into the next generation.

When you and I live in such a way that our reach extends beyond our own life, and positively touches the future, we know we have made a life worth living.

The reason I drew my cartoon character hanging from a church steeple is to show that we must cultivate our inner-life, what we call the spiritual aspects of who we are, if we are going to rise above the trends and powerful forces that constantly try to lure us away from what is central and most important. One thing that church does is give us a weekly reference point. It reminds us of what we truly value, while also challenging us to think beyond conventional wisdom and the norms of culture and society. There are a lot of very seductive forces constantly singing us back

to sleep. And cultivating our spirit is about being awake. The problem is, that spirituality and religion can be just as misleading as other forces. People get lulled to sleep by religion at least as often as they get lulled to sleep by culture.

One purpose of the parables, and one of the reasons Jesus used parables, was that they are meant to shock us out of our routines and make us think in new ways. And so this month as we talk about vision, we also talk about the parable of the mustard seed from the Christian Bible.

In the parable, when Jesus is asked, “With what shall we compare the Kingdom of God?” he compares it to a tiny mustard seed. It’s hard for us today to imagine how radical that was. In Jesus’ time the notion of the Kingdom of God on Earth was thought to be a new era of power and triumph and righteousness in which there would be universal peace and justice, and God’s chosen people would be at the head of all the nations. This idea of the Kingdom of God, or Kingdom of Heaven on Earth as it is also called, was a vision that was central to the Jewish religion and identity in its time.

However, by the era when Jesus lived, the glory days of Israel’s national power were over. Since the reign of the great kings like David and Solomon, Israel’s power and prestige had been in major decline. The Israelites had been conquered many times and their nation occupied. But there was still a sense that one day a great Jewish king would arrive in a blaze of glory and usher in the Kingdom of God on Earth. According to Catholic Priest and theologian Thomas Keating, in order to understand why the parable of the mustard seed was so subversive when Jesus told it, one needs to know that a common symbol in Jesus’ time, for the Kingdom of God was the great Cedar of Lebanon. Keating tells us:

“Cedars of Lebanon were like the enormous redwood trees of California. The kingdom of God as a nation would be the greatest of all nations just as the great cedar of Lebanon was the greatest of all trees.”

However, Jesus proposed in his parable that the Kingdom of God is really like a mustard seed – described as the smallest and most insignificant of all seeds – that someone took and sowed in his garden. A mustard seed produces a common, fast-spreading plant, which only grows to about four feet in height. Basically, it’s an ordinary bush that grows like a weed. So, with this parable, Jesus is ridiculing the image of the Kingdom of God as a giant towering Cedar of Lebanon. Instead he is proposing the Kingdom of God as something as small and common as a mustard seed.

Keep in mind that the Israelites’ expectation of the Kingdom of God was that it would come as a final triumph of God in history, and would be ushered in by a long-awaited messiah in an

apocalyptic fury. In other words, the Kingdom was a vision of something that would come at some point in the future. But through his parable, Jesus offers us a radically different vision of the Kingdom of God. His is not one that comes in the future as a towering reign of power. Instead, Jesus teaches of a kingdom that is in the here-and-now. It is a holy kingdom that is made manifest in small everyday things. In other words, he tells us that we do not have to wait for an apocalyptic deliverance. That we should not spend our lives waiting for a great messiah to come and usher in a time of justice and peace, but rather we need to do some planting every day in our own gardens in our own lives if such a time will ever come.

According to Father Keating,

“[This parable] suggests that God's greatest works are not done on a grandiose level. The kingdom is in everyday life with its ups and downs, and above all, in its insignificance. The kingdom of God [even] manifests itself in modest changes in our attitudes and in little improvements in our behavior that no one may notice. These are the mighty works of God, not great external accomplishments. *To what shall I liken the kingdom of God?* Jesus asked. The kingdom is manifested in ordinary daily life and how we live it. If we can [accept such a vision], then we can enjoy the kingdom here and now, without having to wait for an apocalypse or someone to deliver us from our difficulties.”

And these are the words of a well-known Catholic priest!

Just like the teachings of Father Keating, ours is a religion that takes this life seriously. A religion that focuses on what you and I can do, here and now. Every time we choose kindness, every time we choose to love, every time we choose hope and generosity, we are building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. And if you can catch *that* vision – welcome home!

Amen.