

Still Be My Vision

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Before I begin my message to you this morning, I would like to establish the legitimacy of allowing the laity to preach on those rare occasions when the minister is absent from the pulpit. Think about it. You come to church week after week in stifling heat and in bitter cold – and there is Seth - even on Christmas Day and even in his pajamas! But once in a while the minister needs to be away from us both for other commitments and for his peace of mind and to help balance his ministry. On those occasions your Deacons have two distinct choices – they can turn to what we call “supply” – other ministers who are available to preach here one time because they are retired or between churches or otherwise available. Or they can reach into our own congregation and ask a member of the Church to format the service and preach to our friends, our neighbors and most critical of all our relatives! In the Congregational church there is long and established precedent for lay preaching which began in my own family. In 1620, the Pilgrims landed without their Pastor who stayed behind in Holland to shepherd the flock who remained in Leyden when the first hundred ventured out to the New World in the *Mayflower*. William Brewster, my grandfather twelve generations back, held a position of authority among the believers known as the “Saints” . His title was Ruling Elder and his opinion carried great weight and authority but he was NOT a cleric, he was a lay person who preached faithfully until the first minister arrived at Plymouth in 1621.

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From then until now, our church has allowed and even encouraged preaching by lay persons. Three of us here this morning – David Pier, Martha Majunka and myself have performed this function several times over the years and always try to engage you in ways that will help expand your experience as the gathered people of God.

So let me take you back to our most recent hymn today; “Be Thou My Vision”. This is a favorite hymn of mine because it expresses absolute and complete trust in God without all the complications of life that surround us. It shouts out directly to God that He is our wisdom; our word and that through Him comes eternal victory. Although this hymn is not based directly on a Psalm, it is a song of love for God and His Word. The verses take me directly back to the Great Commandment found in Matthew 22 at verse 34; “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

I love these words and I am content in them. But I am a Congregationalist, so my ancestors have given to me one of the most important differences between “us” and “them” meaning the difference between the Congregational Way and the ways of many other denominations. Congregationalists are encouraged to study, to question and to interpret the Scriptures in the Bible and especially the teachings of Jesus. What I learn and understand from a passage in Mark or Ecclesiastes may differ from what you learn or understand from the same passage. But in the traditions of the Congregational Way, that is OK. It can lead to healthy discussion and greater insight emerging from the group.

Now friends – pay heed – I am about to make one of those transitions that you have to follow to understand the connection. And that is: if we sing out to God that we have the Vision and we know the Great Commandment then why do we periodically engage in an exercise that we call visioning or more specifically “focus forward”. Every three to five years some members of this church lead us into a process of self-examination designed to help us function better as a gathered people and to assure ourselves that we are following the tenets of our faith. So – why do we vision and what does it mean? Is it manipulation by some who feel they know better than you what this gathered body of believers should emphasize in practicing our particular brand of faith? Or is it caring enough about the purpose of our mission and our polity to seek clarity through group analysis and consensus building? Let me leave the answer open for your own interpretation and share some of what makes ME feel that visioning can be a positive process if it is inclusive and grounded in the Congregational Way.

Our last foray into focusing forward occurred in July of 2011. The report of that session talks about “rebranding”, which always makes me feel as if I am discussing either laundry detergent or a breakfast cereal. It then discusses “it” as a term which can tell you whether a church has special characteristics showing the work of the Spirit among its people. I was a bit put off by the term “it” because having “it” to me always referred to a disease when you did not want to explain exactly what the affliction involved. But I soon overcame those early prejudices and moved on to the substance of the report. The report lists things that this church does well and challenges members to improve upon things that we do not do as well. To me the core of this visioning from four years ago came in an analysis of our covenant.

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This covenant is particularly dear to me because it was drafted by my aunt Ruth Grafton with help from my mother, Inez Harden, more than twenty-five years ago. At that time, the Diaconate was seeking a covenant to replace the Kansas City Statement, which had been used as a covenant in this Church since it was written in 1913. Our Deacons wanted a covenant which embodied the essence of the Kansas City Statement but which was shorter and easier to comprehend and retain.

The 2011 focus forward session broke our covenant into its individual phrases and gave each phrase an action ending as follows: (If you pick up the laminated sheet in your pew and look at our covenant it will be easier for you to follow this analysis.)

We covenant with God and with one another – COMMITMENT TO

To seek God's will as taught in the Holy Scriptures – LEARN IT

To walk together in the ways of the Lord – LIVE IT

To proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people –TELL IT

And to depend upon the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth – TRUST IT

I was so impressed by this interpretation of our covenant and the challenges that it provides for all of us that I have read it again and again. Our covenant is so simple and so simply drafted by two of Elder Brewster's descendants but so beautifully interpreted by our focus forward group in 2011. That interpretation shows how profound our simple covenant really is. I am emphasizing it today to explore with you both the positive and negative aspects of visioning.

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The positive is, of course, the hard thinking that created such an interesting and challenging interpretation of our covenant. The negative is our own failure to share that interpretation in ways that would help the whole congregation to seize that interpretation, to discuss it and to try harder to remember it and to live it!

That is not to say that there is no other good material resulting from the visioning session of 2011. There is. I always enjoy the way some of the language of general business organizational visioning creeps into our focusing forward. And trust me, I have heard it all before. I served on the Planning Committee of what is now Pen Bay Health Care in the 1990s and chaired the Rockland Comprehensive Planning Committee for seven years. When I was a City Councilor, we set goals and visions almost all of my twelve years. I have participated in visioning and planning for the Rockland Public Library, Public Landing, the Rockland Lobster Festival, Rockland's Downtown, the Maine Lighthouse Museum, the Harbor Trail, our National Historic Districts, the Rockland Historical Society and more. I rattle off this list to you because; over the years I have observed one common theme in most of these planning endeavors – A FAILURE TO FOLLOW THROUGH; a failure to seize upon the results of good group discussions and turn those results into items of action. Not always and not completely, but each experience of mine has seen too much phraseology and not enough subsequent action.

Currently your Congregational Council members have been thinking and talking about whether or not we are what could be called a “retirement” church because of the age and activities of our members. Our minister, Seth wrote to us about this concept in his pastoral letter to us last Christmas. I have been pondering that concept ever since – but have you?

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I have never been a person who follows the latest fad or catch word, but Seth went far beyond that and raised a very compelling point to us that we must consider as a gathered church. Not in a small group of church leaders. Such a group can begin the conversation, but if we are to understand where we may be headed as an active gathered body of Christian believers then we must engage as a whole congregation. This may be a time when visioning or focusing forward can really help the Rockland Congregational Church survive the dismal future of organized churches in Maine. But we will have to change from the usual focus or visioning group to engage both the Minister and the Congregation in learning what we can do with our limited assets and abilities to keep the Rockland Congregational Church a successful functioning part of our community and our world while following the mission laid down for us by Jesus.

There are already ongoing positive aspects of our church life to consider. For an aging congregation, we are very involved within and very active outside our church building. We participate in AIO, Hospitality House and other multi-church undertakings and activities. Our building is heavily used by community groups and organizations for the purposes that we have always intended. We are a diverse group of gathered believers who strive to follow the meaning of our covenant. Beyond that, we begin to separate into groups. Some are zealous for progress into a modern model as a “progressive” church. Some are saddened by the statistics that show declining church attendance and membership with Maine leading the states in becoming “unchurched”. Some just keep on cooking, meeting, volunteering and attending and do not worry about where their next identity will come from.

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I see value in visioning, but I am a Congregationalist. So do not try to focus forward FOR me. Let each of us be part of the conversation. We are allowed to interpret what church and scripture and the teachings of Jesus mean to us. I have no go-between to God or Jesus or to how I believe that the Holy Spirit tries to work through me, but that does not prevent me from wanting to expand my understanding of these matters by discussing them with other members of the Congregation. Every week we pray for the wider world beyond our doors and beyond our city and express our hopes that peace will come, that violence will wane and that our faith will prevail. But the world we are living in and hoping for is filled with discord and despair. Mankind has still not learned to live in peace and harmony as Jesus taught us to live, because people are visioning terrible things for their nations, are focusing forward on destruction of their enemies and clinging to the ways of terror and evil. And so much of that terror and violence and hatred of today is based upon the disagreements of religious belief. I would take you away from that and back to the Great Commandment; back to loving God and your neighbor; back to that wonderful hymn called “Be Thou My Vision”.

My vision for this small church in this small corner of northern New England is to continue to be a sanctuary of gathered believers that has been giving and sharing and helping others for more than 175 years. My focus forward is to continue to make the words of that hymn ring true and allow us to sing with hope and conviction; **“Still be my Vision O Ruler of all”**

AMEN?

