

Vision Quest

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

November 17, 2019

Isaiah 65:17-25 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Some time midweek, you will receive an envelope with a letter and a stewardship pledge card. You have been hearing over the past several weeks about our stewardship vision – worship, music and arts, children and youth, today outreach and social witness. You have also received financial information that lets you know how important each pledge is, how important each dollar is. I hope this week that you will prayerfully consider your response next Sunday, and with a spirit of generosity and gratitude offer your pledge card.

I am still living into new ways of doing things around here, and I appreciate the encouragement to increase your pledge by 1%. However, if you're able to do more than that, that would certainly be OK! And if you've never been in the game, perhaps this is the year. We will celebrate all of this after worship next Sunday with a modified breakfast because the kitchen is not quite fully operational. Bring your appetites, your pledge cards, and more so your sense of gratitude for this congregation's ministry and all that is has been and will be.

The Stewardship Committee wisely and creatively is focusing on the theme of *vision*. You know that whenever anyone asks you for money – an alma mater, a political candidate or cause, a museum or hospital or orchestra – that if there's not a good case to be made, you are less likely to give, and you are certainly less likely to give enthusiastically. Fund raisers call them "case statements," as in "you must have a compelling case statement." People want to give to something successful, however success is defined. And more than that, they want to give to something that *aligns* – that is also good fundraising talk – that aligns with their vision, their values, their beliefs.

In the church, we try to disassociate the notion of stewardship with fundraising, that stewardship is about much more than money, about how we are called to care for all of the gifts that God has given us, including financial resources. And that is correct. Stewardship, pledging and giving as an act of faith, is not fundraising. But some of the principles still apply, the notion of vision, a compelling case statement, alignment with values.

And here is good news. We have the vision. It has been given to us as a gift. We have a compelling case statement, that gets rehearsed day by day, season by season and lifetime by lifetime. And when we are discerning and bold and open to the Spirit, there is profound alignment, beautiful alignment.

In conversations like these, I often hear something to the effect that a church is not a business. And we are not. But we do business-like things. We have a budget. We have personnel. We

have capital resources. There are vast differences, of course, and I hope that the ways we make decisions, let alone the decisions we make, reflect the values of our vision. But still I believe that we have much to learn from business, even as I believe that business has much to learn from the church.

I have been in countless church and church adjacent meetings where I've wondered to myself, and every so often wondered aloud, why we are doing what we are doing. Good businesses are good at asking that question. The "why" question allows for focus. The "how" question allows for intentionality.

*Vision*, simply stated, is where a business or an organization, or a church, wants to be in the future. *Mission* talks about how they will get there. The vision never wavers. It is a constant north star and plumb line.

- Mission can adapt to the moment, to the circumstance and context. Vision inspires.
- Mission informs. Vision is about hopes and dreams.
- Vision is short and sweet. Mission drills down.

I hope that all you MBA's and corporate types aren't ready to scream at this point, that I am getting this about right. Both vision and mission consider the future – vision talks about where you want to be and mission talks about how you will get there.

Here's an example. Tesla's mission is "to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy." Its vision is to "create the most compelling car company of the 21st century by driving the world's transition to electric vehicles."

Patagonia's mission is "to build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis." Its vision speaks of "a love of wild and beautiful places demands participation in the fight to save them, and to help reverse the steep decline in the overall environmental health of our planet."

Guess what company's mission is "to offer a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them.?" Ikea. Though I often think their mission is to instill a low level of frustration in people like me as we labor to assemble their oddly named products." Ikeas's vision? "To create a better everyday life for the many people."

You get the point. A clear and compelling vision, an aspirational vision, that leads to a clear and compelling mission plan to get us there.

And here, again, is good news, very good news. We have the vision. And we have the mission. And rather than relying on ourselves to discern them, to develop them from some version of a strategic planning process, we have received them as a gift. Our task is to receive them, to

discern them, to nurture and cultivate them, to live into them. But not to invent them. Rather, to discover and re-discover them. They come to us in various ways in the Bible, and the tradition of our theology, the tradition of this congregation, established in 1853 and re-established every time we gather, every new generation, is to re-discover, to re-commit. That, ultimately, is what stewardship is about, committing to this vision through our mission with time and energy and skill and, yes, money.

This morning the vision and its attendant mission – the future and the now – come to us from the prophet Isaiah. We have been talking about the exile all fall, the exile of the Israelite people from their land. Now they are returning. And it is hard. Think about rebuilding a life, an economy, a culture, a religion. Discouragement is so easy. Even though captivity was horrific, it was stable, and after decades, lives were being lived. So coming back is difficult. Hope is needed. A vision is needed, a roadmap, a blueprint, of how to get there.

One is received, as a gift, a gift from God who over generations has been Israel's fortress and protector, in good times and bad, in season and out of season. The words are familiar, often read at funerals because of their future-looking hope, but encountered this morning for the very same reason. Have hope, Israel. Have hope, Chestnut Hill Church! I will give you both a vision and a mission.

"I am about to create new heavens and a new earth." New heavens *and* new earth – that's the vision. This is not only a wondrous, far off future God is promising, but a new reality now. Now. And here. The mission will have a spiritual component – that newness will bring with it joy, absolute joy, a rare commodity for a people in exile. Joy. That means joy is our mission as well.

And we experience it, and work to cultivate it – especially as we gather in community, first to worship and then in other ways, our youth, our choir, at Dinner Church, around a poker table (of all things) or at a ball game or a Habitat worksite. We encounter joy, God's joy, God's mission. God will delight in God's people. God does not want us to suffer – any of us, any of God's beloved children.

Joy leads to the second a part of the mission, where joy must overflow from church community to the broader community. Infants will live long lives and old people full lives. That means our mission is to care – whether children in our preschool or senior adults in our Center on the Hill, or any person, any person, who hungers for food, who hungers for companionship, who hungers for health care, who hungers for justice. No weeping. No cries of distress. No gun violence. No racism. No poverty. We will live in our own houses. We shall enjoy the fruits of our labor. Our work will matter. Joy that leads to justice and justice that leads to joy.

All of is culminating in that vision of "newness," a peaceable kingdom, "lions and lambs." Those are our marching orders, as we work with God to usher in a new heaven and a new earth.

Corinne Carvalho reminds us that this is not a far-off dream, but a real vision. "That ideal world is being created 'new' every day," she writes. "God's creative work turns the profane world of

the city into holy space, God's territory. Every day, God recreates this cosmos: a world of harmony, prosperity and joy."

To help us focus on the stewardship question at hand, Carvalho writes; "The picture of prosperity in Isaiah is not one of personal wealth. It is a picture of communal harmony. The blessings are not demonstrated by the wealth of the elite...God's blessings are seen when the poorest and most at risk among us live to a ripe old age."

Alan Brehm writes that "the Bible insists that what God will do at the end of all things will be consistent with what God has always done: Create a world full of beauty; assure a wayward people again and again of the love that will never change; set people free from everything that binds them."

So yes, stewardship is absolutely about so much more than how we share our financial resources to support the mission of the church. But it must include that, I believe, not simply as a way to keep this place going, though that matters. Stewardship is our investment in this vision, and the mission that flows from it. And while we're not the only place where the vision is articulated and the mission unfolds, we are *a* place, and we are *the* place, the community, where God has called you, and me, all of us together.

A new heaven and a new earth, where God delights in us. That's the vision. Can you imagine it? Our mission is to live into that promise for us, and for all of God's children, every one of God's children, until the thin line between heaven and earth is no more, and all will know the pure and beautiful joy of God's creation. Amen.