

# *The Vision of St. Andrew*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

November 8, 2009

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*Ephesians 4:11-16 (NRSV)*

<sup>11</sup>The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

<sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

*Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV) – Jesus' last words in Matthew's Gospel*

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

*Mark 10:42-45 (NRSV)*

<sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

## *Our Vision: To grow, to reach, and to serve for Christ*

Casting a vision for a church, as for any organization or individual, is a bit like using a GPS navigation system in a car. Most of time we ride around zoomed in on the map so we can find the right street. But sometimes, we need to zoom out so we can see where we are really headed and to make sure it is in the right direction.

If we zoom all the way out from our day to day lives, we can see that we are headed for the restoration of all God's creation, for a time when God's reign, the kingdom of God, is embraced in every corner of the globe, a time when the marriage of heaven and earth is fully consummated.

If we at St. Andrew begin then to zoom in again, looking to see where we should be headed in the next 20 years, 10 years, five years, even 2010 . . . we still have to remember that God has larger purposes at work. As we await the final merger of heaven and earth, what can we do, now and ten years from now, to build for the kingdom of God? What can we do to help renew creation and to restore relationship?

There are three key questions we ought to be asking ourselves.

First, are we helping those who are already part of this fellowship to *grow* in their relationship with Jesus Christ and one another? Further, are we helping God to grow us corporately, as a community of believers?

Second, are we helping to *reach* others for Christ? As Paul writes,

“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10:14-15).

And finally, the third leg in this three-legged stool, are we *servicing* not only the body of Christ, but the larger world around us? Are we providing homes for the homeless, food for the hungry, healing for the sick?

As we seek to live out God’s vision, our own vision must be far-sighted and clear-headed. It must dare us to demand more from ourselves, to be generous and resolute, to remain faithful to God in *all* things. It is a challenge we must embrace.

The three Scripture passages for today focus on *growing*, *reaching*, and *servicing* for Christ. Here is a closer look at each.

### *Growing*

Who wants to be called a baby? When I was in elementary school, those were fighting words. But that is pretty much how Paul sees the Christians in Ephesus. He pulls the punch just a bit by saying “*we* must no longer be children, tossed to and fro” but the sharp point still hits home. To the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote, “And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as a spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as *infants in Christ*. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh” (1 Cor.3:1-3). No punches pulled there.

Is Paul *trying* to be insulting? I don’t know whether Paul was going for a little shock value or not, but his point was well taken. These Christians were infants in the faith, Christian novices, fresh enlistees in the body of Christ. When we read Paul’s letters in the New Testament we have to remember that they are largely letters written to small, emerging communities of faith that he himself had founded only a few years before. He is their “senior pastor,” writing to his churches to provide guidance, to settle disputes, to teach, to encourage, and to otherwise help these new colonies of God’s re-born people to grow toward Christian maturity.

Just try to imagine the journey that lay ahead of these Christians. There were no churches for them to grow up in. No parents or grandparents to turn to. No theological libraries or Bible Academies. No Bibles. Only this strange Good News about a God who gets himself crucified by the Romans. They were asked to give up their belief in the existence of many gods and embrace the Jewish claim that there was only one God. Their embrace of Christ often meant ostracism from their families and friends, for already there were nasty rumors about these followers of Christ, including gruesome whispers of their gathering to eat Jesus’ body and to drink his blood.

They had as much to “unlearn” as to learn, as they grew into ever-truer disciples of Christ. In this, we are like them, for nearly all of us carry around unquestioned but misleading assumptions about the Christian proclamation. We think we understand and then are surprised by how much we have to learn and “unlearn.”

John Wesley understood this. Though he never earned much respect as a systematic theologian, that was never his goal. Wesley pursued what he called “practical divinity,” by which he meant a practical theology. Eugene Peterson calls this “spiritual theology” - the attention we give to keeping what we believe about God (theology) in organic

connection with the way we live with God (spirituality).”<sup>1</sup> And it is the path to spiritual maturity.

### *Reaching*

A command both simple and direct: Jesus tells his disciples to go to “all nations,” – yes, everyone, everywhere – making disciples of Jesus, baptizing them, and teaching them the path to obedience. The Christian church has always understood this commission to be our own; and it is not limited to the New Testament. Israel understood that they were the people of God, chosen by God to be his agents, to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom the whole world would be blessed. (See Genesis 12:1-3, Isaiah 2:2-4, and Isaiah 42:6 for example).

We know we are to be the light to the world but we are often unsure as to how to go about it! Sometimes we think it means we have to pull people out of their homes or stand on street corners passing out tracts. Sure, we ought to invite our neighbors to church with us and share the Good News with strangers, but the Biblical understanding of reaching out, of being the light to the world, extends to every part of our lives. We reach when we worship, when we learn, when we love, when we care, when we serve, when we work, when we play – every part of our life is to be a reaching out and a witness to others.

Let me give you one example. We often don’t think of our own worship as an act of evangelism or reaching out. But, when a person who is not a churchgoer visits our worship service, they are looking for three things. They want to feel the presence of God. They want to see the Christian church living out its faith – kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. Finally, they want to see the relevance of the faith for their lives.<sup>2</sup> Every Sunday, each of us, as a member of the St. Andrew community, is an important witness to the reality of Christ’s love and invitation to all persons. Just as sports heroes are unavoidably role models for our youth, we are always, in all times, and in all places, witnesses to the living reality and glory of Christ’s sacrificial love.

Peter understood this when he wrote to Christians suffering for their faith, “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles<sup>3</sup> to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Peter 2:11-12). Paul understood this when he wrote to the troubled church in Corinth, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1). Paul calls us to imitate Christ in all we do so that the glory of God will be visible to all and that all will be saved.

Again, what does it mean to be the light to the world? It means that we are to lift Jesus up for all the world to see, so that all the world might be drawn to him, enabling all the world to see his saving love. Because Jesus announced and inaugurated the arrival of God’s kingdom, we live in the “bright interval”<sup>4</sup> between Easter and the final, great

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<sup>1</sup>from Eugene Peterson’s thought- and life-provoking book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eerdmann’s Publishing, 2005, p.4. This book is the first volume in his multi-volume work on what Peterson calls “a conversation in spiritual theology.” Peterson is always worth reading . . . slowly.

<sup>2</sup> This is from the survey and focus group research of George Barna.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the “alien” status of Christians, see *Resident Aliens*, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, 1989, Abingdon Press. They offer a challenging vision of what it means to be a Christian community.

<sup>4</sup> from N. T. Wright. *The Challenge of Jesus*. 1999. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press

consummation of the story, the renewal of all creation and the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1) The early Christians found great joy because they understood that they lived not in the last days but in the first days of a new age! We live in such days as well and we should find such joy, a joy that will shine for all to see, drawing them into the community of God’s servant people!!

### *Serving*

Jesus calls us to be “servants of all” (Mark 9:35). Again – simple and direct. Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Corinthians 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn’t it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster<sup>5</sup> helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the “big” project or “big” deal; true service doesn’t discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God’s approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service “delights” in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not! Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community. The New Testament witness reminds us time and again that we are called to be servants of God, servants called to build up the covenant community in which we live and to be a witness to those who live outside the covenant.

Though we are 2000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. When the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help out, serving the young Christian church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are all to serve others. The Book of Joshua tells how the Hebrews conquered the Promised Land – or, more correctly, how God conquered it for them. At the end of the book, Joshua brings to God’s people words of covenant renewal. “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness . . . if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (from Joshua 24:14-15).

When we join the Methodist Church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving as a Stephen’s minister, or doing mission work, or building for Habitat for Humanity . . . there is no end to the opportunities. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Donald Whitney says it well, “Disciplined service to God is work, hard and costly labor sometimes, but it will endure for all eternity.”<sup>6</sup> We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God.

*Our Vision: To grow, to reach, and to serve for Christ*

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<sup>5</sup> Foster, Richard. 1978. *The Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco: Harper. If you haven’t ever read Foster’s book, I highly recommend it. There are good reasons why it has been a best-seller for 25 years.

<sup>6</sup> Whitney, Donald. 1991. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress. p. 121

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Paul tells us not to be like children, blown here and there, ever susceptible to con-men (the Greek is a reference to a dice game). I couldn't help but think of books like *The DaVinci Code* (yes, to this day many people think it is a novel built upon a foundation of solid scholarship) and most televangelists ("get your check in and get your blessing"). What can we do to guard against such snake oil? A church member recently wrote me and said that she had come to believe that "We all need to be amateur theologians." What do you think she means? What would be involved in becoming an amateur theologian? Perhaps this would seem less intimidating if we remember that "amateur" is from the French word for "lover."
  
2. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). John Wesley was never afraid of making others angry with him – for what he said, whom he said it to, or what he did. Wesley took the Gospel to the poorest, the neediest, and the outcasts of polite society. Late in his life, Wesley worried that he had become respectable! In contrast, many of us can hardly make ourselves say the "J" word in public, say grace in a restaurant, or even invite a friend to church with us. Why are we so timid? Are we afraid of offending or seeming "intolerant?" Are we embarrassed? Are we afraid of being made outcasts? Are we afraid that we are too ignorant about our faith to answer the most basic questions that might be posed to us?
  
3. The biblical notions of love for God and neighbor are built on concrete notions of love as sacrifice and action. Love is caring. Love is serving. hus, the obvious, and oftentimes difficult, question is "How are we serving God and neighbor?" What did we do yesterday? Today? What will we do tomorrow? Where are our priorities? Do we tithe? What are the barriers to our serving God will all our efforts and enthusiasm? How do we overcome these barriers? How do we find the joy in service?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Monday, Ephesians 4:17-24</b> Off with the old, on with the new!	<b>Tuesday, Isaiah 42:5-6 &amp; 49:6</b> Israel (the people of God) is to be the light to the world.
<b>Wednesday, Acts 10</b> The conversion of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion; God, through Peter, has reached out to the Gentiles, bringing them into the family of God	<b>Thursday, Matthew 20:20-28</b> Service as greatness
<b>Friday, John 13:1-20</b> Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.	<b>Weekly Prayer List</b>

# Encounter

*a time for fellowship, worship, and learning*  
every Wednesday evening at 6:45 in Wesley Hall

## >>>This Wednesday (Nov 11): Mark 14<<<

Jesus shares a last meal with his closest disciples, before heading to the Garden of Gethsemane for prayer . . . and betrayal. Why has it come to this? Isn't there another way?

### *A few faq's*

Do I need to be there each week to make sense of the lesson?

- No. Though we will be in a book of the Bible, each week's sermon/lesson will stand on its own. We know that many people will come to **Encounter** when they've had to miss church on the weekend. In fact, we hope you will make that your regular practice.

Are the lessons be posted on-line?

- Yes. Each week, the audio will be posted along with the weekend's sermons at [www.standrewumc.org/worship/sermononline](http://www.standrewumc.org/worship/sermononline).

## ***Head for the Hills! 2012 is coming!***

**A three-part series in Scott's class at 11:00 in Festival Hall**

Movies, Discovery Channel, the History Channel. All of a sudden it seems that talk of the world ending in 2012 is everywhere. So . . . it is time again for some biblical truth about prophecy and the end times.

Nov 8 – *The History of the Future*

Nov 15 – *Apocalypse Then*

## Sermon Notes

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