

Living into our 'Mission Statement'

(Through the lens of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's

"Letter from Birmingham Jail")

"Where there is no vision, the people perish..." Proverbs 29:18a - KJV

Proverbs 29:18a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today we're going to reflect upon the vision and mission of the church – it's very purpose and relevance in society. That refers both to the larger universal Church, and this particular church known as College Hill Presbyterian. To do this, I'll begin from a specific historical perspective, sharing some quotes written 60 years ago this year from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on this day before his nationally recognized holiday.

Dr. King penned these words while being held in a small jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, following his arrest after he and many other black men and women, including youth, were arrested for participating in nonviolent demonstrations against segregation back in April, 1963. Known as the "**Letter from Birmingham Jail**", King wrote **this primarily in response to a letter he read printed in the local newspaper. That letter was entitled, "A Call for Unity"**, signed by eight white Alabama clergymen, agreeing with King that social injustices existed.

Those clergymen, however, went on to argue **the demonstrations were "unwise and untimely"**, and that justice issues should be fought solely in the courts, not the streets. **They believed that King and his movement should be patient and simply wait until things worked themselves out through the legal system.** They also criticized King for even attending the demonstrations for equality since he lived in Georgia. **King's reply included the now famous words, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."**

King followed this with these words, "We are caught in an inescapable **network of mutuality**, tied to a single garment of destiny. **"Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly**... Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds." After the clergymen questioned the legality of the demonstrations, King went on to explain the response to just and unjust laws. He wrote, **"One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."** He continued, **"Segregation undermines human personality, ergo, is unjust.** Furthermore, I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law."

Directly addressing the "wait and see" position taken by the moderate white clergy, King expressed his frustration by responding with words that moderates (and yes, progressives) still need to hear today. He wrote that **white moderates, including clergymen, posed a challenge comparable to that of white supremacists: "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute**

misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection." King asserted that the white church needed to take a principled stand or risk being "dismissed as an irrelevant social club." His criticism of the response by sympathetic white congregations rings just as true today. For he wrote:

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment...

The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. **If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.** I meet young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour.

That remains both our challenge and opportunity today. Therefore, how does Dr. King's timeless vision for the role of the church in an often-unjust society find points of connection with the vision and mission of our own community of faith? **College Hill is entering into its 111th year of ministry** here in the Kendall Whittier and TU neighborhood of Tulsa. We are the second oldest Presbyterian congregation in this city. If we were to come up with just one phrase to partially explain the effectiveness of this congregation's ministry over all these years, it would most likely be the **dedication to an understanding of our vision and mission.**

It's a fact that some churches just seem to have a stronger guiding vision than others. And **those congregations whose ministry has the greatest impact on the lives of its members and its community are those with a solid and clear vision of:**

- **who they are**
- **what they hope to accomplish**
- **where they believe God is leading them into the future**

The author of the wisdom literature found in the book of Proverbs states in 29:18a, **"Where there is no vision, the people perish"** (KJV). Given that, I'd like to further explore this concept of vision and mission, especially in the context of this congregation. First,

it's crucial to note that the Hebrew word used for **“vision” in the context of this Old Testament passage refers not to the vision or foresight of the people, but rather to the vision that God has for the people.** Another way to say this is that it's not specifically our vision, per se, that keeps us from perishing, but rather the vision we discern is given to us by God.

Our task, then, as a community of faith, and especially that of the ruling elders and pastor on the Session, is to **intentionally focus on the work that is necessary to discern God's vision for us in the context of our own time and place.** This is a continually ongoing task, and it involves constant reflection upon and openness to change and adaptation. This is something College Hill has done quite effectively over the decades, and most certainly as we have had to pivot time and time again during the Covid-19 pandemic. But as we are all aware, mainline religious denominationalism is in decline, with experts predicting that trajectory to continue and increase.

One of the largest groups of folks either leaving organized religion, or not interested in the first place, are progressives at the liberal end of the theological and political spectrums. That doesn't bode well for us, since that's basically our demographic. All hope is not lost, however, nor should it be. Saying that, it may be a call for each of us to be more intentional about inviting and welcoming others into our community of faith.

We may indeed be experiencing a new reality that **a church cannot survive and thrive on mere vision alone. Rather, it requires its leaders and all its members to take the subsequent action that is necessary to carry out that vision – to turn vision into reality.** That is why each of you, as members and friends of this community of faith, must recognize that you have an important part to play in contributing to our ministry efforts. I encourage all of you, then, to volunteer or connect with one of our ministry teams in one way or another.

If you haven't noticed, our *Mission Statement* is printed in our worship bulletin each and every Sunday, in our monthly Newsletter, and in most all the mass church emails that are sent out. There are three bullet points to our ***Mission Statement***, and they include:

- ***Build an inclusive community of faith.***
- ***Receive and openly share the love of God.***
- ***Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.***

That's not the typically bland, over-generalized mission statement found in perhaps a majority of churches. Take note, for instance, of the importance of each of the verbs in our statement: build, receive, share, reach out. The first of our three bullet points, again, is: **“Build an inclusive community of faith.”** The verb **‘build’** indicates that this is something that doesn't just magically happen on its own, but rather something that we must work hard at in order to achieve. The use of the word **‘inclusive’** involves such things as accepting others, building diversity, agreeing to disagree, and **looking honestly at where we are and are not in terms of just how inclusive we really are.**

It's helpful to recognize that **as a congregation we cannot be all things to all people**, that in reality some folks may not be comfortable with any number of things, such as our style of worship, or our decidedly progressive theological and social perspectives. So, while it's important that we accept other people wherever they find themselves in their own journey of faith, we also are **not afraid to acknowledge our own**

identity as a congregation, one with a particular vision and mission. That's just being honest and not a bad thing.

The second bullet point is: **“Receive and openly share the love of God.”** Any congregation knows that they are called to share the love of God with others. So why and how is our statement different? It's basically impossible to share some you haven't already experienced. In other words, **we cannot effectively share the love of God if we haven't first realized that we have already received the love of God** – that each one of us is a beloved child of God. And **the word “share” indicates an approach that is not overly aggressive, coercive, or manipulative**, something often found in the approach of other traditions.

The final bullet point states, **“Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.”** **“Reach out”** itself implies action. It also implies an open hand, not a clenched fist. The phrase **“peace and justice,”** one that we have heard and used for years, recognizes a long-standing focus of this congregation, with its **emphasis on equal rights, equity, and fairness extended to all** people. This phrase also indicates a particular approach to ministry that involves **advocacy**, and even the element of being an **activist**.

This is nicely balanced, however, with the use of the word **“compassionate.”** **For we are all aware that not all advocates of peace and justice do so compassionately.** Hence, sometimes the message gets lost in the style of its presentation. Compassion, therefore, must be involved in our approach to others, especially in the issues that we hold dear to our hearts, and of which we know others are not in agreement. Our *Mission Statement* recognizes the **tension that is inherently involved between the focus and the approach to our mission and ministry work.**

In all these things, let us remember Dr. King's criticism of the well-intentioned supportive churches that turn out to simply be lukewarm in their response to injustice and unjust laws, those churches who take solace in maintaining the status quo – those churches that become social clubs focusing primarily on themselves and not those outside the church, especially those in need and those who face marginalization, even oppression.

Working together this year, let us refocus our efforts of discerning God's vision for us as College Hill, and then, by God's grace, work to be an even more healthy, effective, and relevant community of faith.

Amen.

Wikipedia, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”