

Life Giving Trees Psalms 1; John 15

There is an old story about three **bricklayers** that helps illustrate what it looks like when people receive motivation from taking ownership of a vision. Vision is what we see, but it is also the way in which we see. These three bricklayers were working beside each other. Someone came up to the first one and asked, "What are you doing?"

"What's it look like I am doing?" he replied sarcastically, "I am laying bricks!"

The inquirer asked the next guy what he was doing. He said, "Can't you see what I am doing? I am building a wall."

Then the last bricklayer was asked what he was doing. He exclaimed, "I am building a great cathedral for God!" Perspective is key. Vision is what we see, but it is also the way in which we see. It's looking at the small & big picture.

"Record the vision and inscribe it on tablets, that a herald may run with it. For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay. (**Habakkuk 2:2-3**)

The New Testament version of this is: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (**Phil. 3:14**)

For us here at North Star we have recorded our purpose and vision statement that is in our bulletin insert and on the counter at the back of the church. I believe that when we write things down, we make it real.

A **golfer's** errant shot ended up hitting an anthill. He squared up, took a big swing – and missed. Thousands of innocent ants were killed. The hacker reset, took another swing – and missed again. Another wave of ants was destroyed. Panic stricken insets scurried everywhere. One ant finally took charge. "Follow me," he cried with authority.

Another ant yelled, "But where are we going?"

The first ant pointed to the golf ball sitting in front of them. "There. If we don't get on the ball, we're all going to die!"

Proverbs [29:18] offers a brief, but profound, indictment: "Where there is *no* vision, the people perish. But he that keeps the law, happy is he." Another translation says it this way. "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained, but happy is he who keeps the law."

This verse is used a lot in sermons, studies and conversations about vision. As we can see with these two translations, it's easy to be sure what the author was meaning. We do know that despite the masculine language – it's imperative the women also keep God's laws. Regardless, the notion of God's vision undergirds virtually everything recorded in Holy Scripture. And it's tied to Biblical law. We know the Bible's value system helps us live happier lives when we follow it. So vision is important.

Jesse Jackson is an American civil rights activist, Baptist minister, and politician. In his memoirs, he recalls his first day in grade six. "I'll ever forget it, he writes. "My teacher was Miz Shelton, and she began writing these long words on the blackboard we couldn't understand, never even heard of before. We all looked around and started whispering to each other, "She got the wrong class. She thinks we the grade eight class."

Somebody finally called out, "Uh, Miz Shelton? Those are eighth grade words. We only the sixth grade here."

She turned around. "I know what grade you are. I work here. And you'll learn every one of these words, and a lot more like them, before this year is over. I will not teach down to you. One of you little brats just might be mayor or governor, or even president, some day, and I'm gonna make sure you'll be ready." And she turned back and went right on writing.

At that time, Jesse Jackson remembers, her proposition prompted no glow of possibility in him. “Aim to be governor? Even aim to be mayor, when in Greenville, South Carolina then, there wasn’t a single African American on the Board of Education, in the police department, the fire department? And aim to be president?!”

Before any great accomplishment is possible, someone must be able to “catch the vision, dream the dream. A great vision can emerge from anywhere. Often people in our lives plant ideas and possibilities and dreams. But vision must first be perceived, then fully discerned, and once detected and recognized, then tested and faithfully developed. Once ripened and acquired, that vision must be lived out and expressed with a sense of urgency in order to reveal our Creator’s will.

Holy Scripture tells us, “For we are God’s own handiwork, His workmanship, recreated in Christ Jesus, born anew, that we may do those good works which God predestined, planned before hand, for us taking paths which He prepared ahead of time, that we should walk in them, living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us to live.” (**Eph 2:10**)

A paraphrase of **Hebrews 12:1** tells us, “We are each called, every person, family, work place, and every congregation, to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

The prophet **Joel** promises that God, “will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men and women will see visions.” (**2:28**) So part of our life’s work is to tune into our Creator and learn how to answer our Savior’s call on our lives.

By now, you have probably figured out we are focused on vision today. So I have a question – what are we doing in our church life and daily lives, work lives and family lives to live out the Almighty’s vision for each of us? Take some time this week to work on the questions in the

sermon outline. What do we do formally and informally to carry out God’s call? Then compare notes and share it with someone. Be clear about what we are doing now and what we did in the past and what maybe we could do. What we do, is how we live our vision. Then compare it with our vision statement.

Let’s read our vision and purpose statements. Ladies please read the odd numbers and men the even numbers. I’ll read the main statements.

Our purpose statement begins with, “Like a tree planted by a life-giving stream.” This phrase comes from the first of the psalms. A summary of the first two verses goes: “Blessed is the man and woman who delights and meditates in God’s laws and does not walk, stand or sit with the wicked, sinners, and mockers.” Then verse three gives us this rich powerful image of life, lushness, health, fruitfulness and prosperity, because of water that feeds our lives.

We find the same themes throughout the Bible but **Jeremiah chapter 17, verses 7-9**, has the closest version, with a few different ways of expressing it. “But blessed is the woman and man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is Him. They will be like a tree planted by the waters that send out its roots toward the stream. It does not fear when the heat comes, and its leaves are always green. It will not worry in a year of drought or cease producing fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure - who can understand it?”

In the psalm version we find the words delight and meditate on God’s laws. In Jeremiah we find the words, trust and confidence and don’t fear or worry. And the description of the way of the wicked in Jeremiah is different, saying “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”

So it seems logical that the next phrase in our purpose statement says the persons at North Star are rooted and growing in God’s grace, healing and hope in Jesus Christ. When we reflect on this it means we put ourselves in

places to be nourished – to get living water. Like in small groups and Sunday School. We send out our roots toward the stream so our leaves are always green and we produce fruit.

This is then followed by a statement of commitment to living a Christ centered faith that shapes who we are. It's good to remind ourselves of what the church in the past has laid out as our purpose, why we are here, what we do, and how we are to live – for today.

The New Testament version of being planted by streams of life giving water is the vine and the branches example that Jesus gives us in John. Here is some of what he says. "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener." "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." Then Jesus ends this sermon by telling us we are sent the Holy Spirit – the spirit of truth, who will testify to us about Jesus and in turn, we are expected to testify about Jesus.

So this is wonderful that North Star's purpose statement is a clear commitment of what we are about as individuals, families and as a church. There is no hedging here. Being like trees, near water, with the expectation to be rooted and grow, with Almighty God, the church and the church community, gives us a Christ centered faith that shapes who we are. So the statement is about action as well as being.

But I suspect the focus of the purpose statement as it was being written, was more about being, – who we are as a congregation and a people, who we want to become. Doing is necessary. But it needs to be based on who we are – our being. As followers of Jesus we take in faith and also respond to how we are reshaped with Christ as we go through life. With Psalm One as the background image and resource, we are clearly saying we want to live in certain ways and not in other ways. We want to live as

people of grace, healing and hope. The psalm contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked. This is a statement of what kind of characters we want to be, and not want to be.

We could stretch it to say it's like Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, which takes us beyond the Ten Commandments. Because the Mount sermon talks about attitudes more than a list of do not's. Our two statements are about character. Both who we are and who we want to become. We choose not to be stuck. We haven't arrived. We keep growing, learning, changing, confessing & asking forgiveness when necessary, because we keep feeding on living water, in order to become strong trees, so our being grows, into Christ's image.

The statement of vision is mostly Anabaptist action oriented. Because of who we are, and what we want to become, we do at least these eleven actions that we listed. But these actions, sharing our faith, regularly worship, integrate and welcome all kinds of people, focus on the Bible, concentrate of the spiritual disciplines like prayer, tithe, and so on, all help us become rooted and grow in our Savior Jesus Christ. They are actions that help us grow in our Christian character, who we are as people.

But in what ways could we update this statement because of who we are today and in contrast to what our culture values today?

And is there a way of summarizing all these statements and values into one brief, catchy, memorable phrase? Traditional statements are valuable. But times change, and so do we. Are there some actions we should emphasize more and some new values we should put in writing to respond both to the Good News and to the world today? What is our unique calling right now?

To end I'd like to share some statements that express the value of having statements like we have. First, Vision speaks about what we aspire toward, a goalpost which give us direction. All congregations share central

gospel imperatives, but each congregation is unique, subject to God's special calling in its time and place.

Second, Congregational statements are useful only to the extent that they are regularly translated into action.

Third, these kinds of statements become resources for unifying new life and ministry for congregations.

Fourth, purpose and vision statement, help and guide our decision making.

Lastly, vision and mission and purpose and goals act like a magnet, drawing people together, and are a compass pointing the direction. They are testimonies of who we are.

Romans 12:1-2 is another text that describes and summarizes our desire and our goal for why we exist and who we are and what we do so we are life giving trees. "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

Let's continue to be life giving trees!