

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 4:21-31

“A Vision for Ministry, Part 2”

Last week’s [sermon](#) was all about vision and the need for a church to have a vision.

For those of you who weren’t here, or didn’t watch or listen online, I talked about how important it is for a church to have a compelling vision of the future that unifies them, excites them, and gives them a reason to sacrifice and work hard. A good vision paints a compelling picture of the future. But at the same time, a vision needs to align with a church’s DNA and be rooted in the present. A good vision is contextual; it takes into account cultural changes. It meets the people where they are rather than where we want them to be. And if I didn’t state this strongly enough, a compelling vision doesn’t assume it knows what’s happening in the community or the culture, it does its homework. It researches what’s happening.

Last week’s sermon was based on the first half of the story we heard Art read. In the first half, Jesus’ hometown friends are gathered to hear him preach his very first sermon. They’re excited to hear what he has to say, and they murmur their approval after hearing him say that they’ll be released from the debtor’s prison the Romans have put them in, and that God has finally come to deliver them from their oppression. It was a great vision, a vision that had the power to unify them and propel them into their future . . . a better future! It wasn’t only good news for them, it was GREAT news.

But as you heard in the second half of the story, the people decided they didn’t like the vision after all, so they ran Jesus out of town, straight to a cliff in fact; but luckily, he escaped their grasp before they threw him over it.

Now why would the people do that? Why would they try to throw Jesus over a cliff after he’s cast a vision that would have benefitted them? What in the world did he say that upset them so much? In short, Jesus told them that all that good news they just heard wasn’t only for them. It was for everyone. His vision for the

future – God’s future kingdom – included everyone. Including the people they don’t like. Including the people who have done them wrong.

And so they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff because what he preached challenged their long-held beliefs about who was in and who was out; who God favored and who God didn’t favor; so even though Jesus’ message was legitimate and good news for them, it gave them a competing perspective, a perspective they didn’t want to hear.

Plus, they were scared half to death that what Jesus preached might be true, and that was too scary to consider. And not because what he preached wasn’t good news for them; but because it was good news for everyone. And that was too much; it didn’t jive with their long-held vision of who they were. The vision Jesus laid out was just too foreign, too risky, and too far outside their comfort zone. So they ran him out of town, because sometimes the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t.

And that’s what I want to talk about today.

Because we’ve all behaved like the Nazarenes – not run people over a cliff, at least I hope not! But we’ve stuck with a familiar belief or attitude or way of life, even if it’s unpleasant because it’s easier than adopting a new belief or attitude or way of life. Whether it’s a bad marriage or job, or a situation or group, we stick to the familiar even if the familiar isn’t working anymore. But why? Why do we do that?

I’ve been reading a lot lately about leadership, and change, and how to get where you want to be. Obviously, I’ve been reading this with my ear tuned to the church – and thinking about where I want the church to be in the next few years and how to get there. But this reading doesn’t only pertain to the church, it relates to any professional or personal situation you find yourself in that doesn’t seem quite right – like you know there could more, that things could be better, but you’re just not sure how to get there, and what you’ve always done to get where you want to be just doesn’t seem to be working anymore.

One of the most difficult things for people to imagine is something that is beyond our own experience. More often than not, the futures we imagine are slightly idealized versions of our pasts. When you think about the church, not only this

church but any church, we look to the past and remember when the pews and plates were full, and the Sunday School and choir was, too. So, when we look to the future, that's the future we envision. And in order to get there, we come up with a list of solutions that have worked elsewhere, or solutions that worked in the past but this time we give them a new twist that we hope will bring about a better solution this time around.

And this makes complete sense when you think about it. We take the tools we know and the experiences we've had and apply those to problems in front of us. It makes sense, and often works reasonably well. Except when we're in situations of adaptive change. In those situations, the context we're working in has changed so much that the old assumptions and rules don't apply any more. What we always did just doesn't work, no matter how many tweaks we try. A colleague of mine calls this the Wild E Coyote way of doing ministry, but it's true of any situation. You know Wild E Coyote from the Bugs Bunny cartoons. He tried every trick in the book to catch the road runner, but he never caught him. All the tweaks in the world didn't catch him.

Right now, there are a whole lot of congregations, schools, businesses, and other groups caught up in this massive cultural change and the challenge they face is to avoid doing what they've always done but do it a little bit better – because it won't work – instead they need to dream things they've never experienced before.

Take, for example, Kodak, Borders and Blockbuster. Remember them? These were big, successful companies that some of us here probably could never have imagined going out of business. But they did. Now why is that? They certainly tried their best and tweaked what they were doing – like putting a coffee shop in the bookstore or enticing customers with better late fees on their movies or improving their film – but those technical fixes never quite hit the mark. I think most experts agree that they couldn't embrace the new world of digital photography, digital books or digital home entertainment. They couldn't adapt to that huge cultural change. But while they tried every technical fix in the book, companies like Panasonic, Amazon and Netflix were embracing the change and they could adapt. Sears would be another example of a company using technical fixes when the problem requires an adaptive change.

Ronald Heifetz, whose best-selling book Leadership Without Easy Answers has become a best-seller for businesses and organizations, talks in that book about technical change and adaptive change. Technical changes requires us to do things differently, but adaptive change requires us to think differently about what we're doing and requires a change in values and beliefs as well as behavior.

When we think about problems, we usually come up with technical fixes.

Example: Imagine you go to see a cardiologist. And the doctor tells you that you have a problem. You will need heart surgery, and you have to lose 25 pounds and quit smoking. Which of those things can the doctor do for you? Well, certainly the heart surgery. And that's a technical fix. And an important one.

But losing 25 pounds and quitting smoking are adaptive challenges. Those things require a change in behavior and a change in one's mindset. You can slap a warning on a pack of cigarettes or a nicotine patch on someone's arm, but for most smokers that's not enough. Why? Because quitting smoking requires a change in behavior. The same thing with eating. I know eating healthy is the best thing for me; but I still eat food that isn't good for me because it's good. If I want to lose 25 pounds, my lifestyle has to change.

Heifetz says adaptive challenges occur "when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge." When you hold up that statement with today's story, it might make sense why the people tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. He challenged their long-held beliefs; he told them that all that Good News he just preached about would also be good news for other people, too; and his message, while relevant, offered a competing perspective.

The Nazarenes thought they could get the good news they wanted without having to change their thinking or way of life. But here's Jesus telling them it doesn't work that way. And so, because of their inability to think differently, and therefore act differently, they were filled with rage, resentful, and unable to joyously receive the grace that was extended to them. So they ran him out of town, settling for the kingdom they'd always had rather than the one Jesus proclaimed.

Friends, what is our capacity to hear the "new things" God is doing in our midst? Are we capable of hearing the Word of God as it comes to us today? Or are we

content to tweak here and there, hoping for something more, but willing to settle for what is?

I have yet to meet anyone here who wants to settle for what is, but in order to get to where we want to be, things will need to change. Tweaking won't work. This means that some things we do may need to be done radically differently, or not done at all. We may need to do a few things really well, than many things slightly well. But before we do any of that, we need to look at 3 things: who is First Presbyterian Church? What do we want to be known for? What makes sense for us? What does our community need? And where is there alignment? And then, we need to figure out how to get there – with our money, our resources – both people and capital, our time, and our energy.

I don't ask these questions lightly, and I don't ask them without hope. Indeed, I have great hope, always will, that while the word of God we hear may be a difficult one to understand and bring to fruition, it's a word we're willing to wrestle with because we're not only up for the challenge, with God's help we can meet it, too.

Amen.