

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

Visions of Salvation

Pentecost Sunday - June 5, 2011

**Psalm 104:24-34 & Acts 2:1-21
(Hymns –281, 277, 283 [438], 401)**

The story of Pentecost has always been one of the most moving passages for me in the Scriptures' account of God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. It touches on so many of the central themes of the Gospel: the intimate relationship God desires with humanity; the redemptive power God uses to restore that relationship; the diverse and tight community that arises from that redemption; and the mixed reaction God's salvation gets in the situation.

Let's consider some of these themes a bit more carefully.

God desires to give humanity – in the quote Peter uses from Joel, "everyone" – the freedom of an intimate relationship with him in which true contentment and joy arise from blessing others.

This is what it means to flourish and God wants us all to flourish.

Thomas Keating, a master of contemplative prayer, says the happiness is intimacy with God and that is the kind of happiness God wants for us. Because God desires human to have such happiness, such contentment and joy, such freedom for praise and service, he has given it to them as a gift in Jesus Christ.

What we do with that freedom, and the happiness, contentment, and joy that flows from it, is the key issue.

Earlier this year, when the session spent a day together reviewing with Maurice and Emmanuel the privileges of serving Christ as ruling elders, we took time to carefully consider the kind of service we wanted to render to this congregation.

We've presented the conclusions we reached in our conversations before,
but they bear repeating
and I think it's a process worth following
in our personal lives, in our families, with colleagues at work,
and in our community service.

We looked at our vision, mission, and imperatives for this year.
We generated words and phrases to use
by asking ourselves what we valued most
about what God has saved and freed us to do
for this congregation.

Our vision, as a session, is a church blessed with gifts
to do the work of Jesus Christ
with joy and contentment.

Our mission, as a session, is to serve together
to make wise decisions
that further the work of Jesus Christ at Brentwood Presbyterian Church.

Our strategic imperatives, the 'must dos' this year, are to:

1. make the fact that we exist better known;
2. articulate the benefits offered by Brentwood Presbyterian Church;
3. realize a fuller utilization of the building; and
4. identify and implement specific ways of increasing our membership

In this process, a vision gives voice to what happens for the greater good;
a mission gives voice to what we will do to contribute to that; and
strategic imperatives give voice to the initial steps we will take
to realize our vision through our mission.

In many ways, this process simply replicates
the way the early church spread in the power of the Holy Spirit
as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.

The vision was the kingdom of God as Jesus taught and modeled it.
The mission was the proclamation and embodiment of the visions and dreams
of God's saving presence in and with everyone.

The strategic imperatives were building communities
throughout the world where:

1. the Gospel message is proclaimed;
2. the keys to flourishing in Christ are taught;
3. the rituals that remind us of our freedom in Christ are experienced;
4. the support of the community of Christ is enjoyed; and
5. the service enabled by God's Spirit is offered to the world.

These visions of salvation are all possible, indeed, are all realized because of the gift of God's Spirit at Pentecost, the fulfillment of Christ's promise to send a comforter, advocate, and teacher to empower the church to be his body in the world.

This vision of God's Spirit empowering us as the body of Christ is crucial to understanding how God saves us and for what purpose.

The verses we read this morning from Psalm 104 helps clarify and perhaps reframe our understanding of what's going on here.

God's breath, God's *ruah* or Spirit,
animates and cares for all living things.
That's the affirmation and conviction expressed in the Psalm.
It stresses the constant activity of the creator of all things.
All life is God's gift.
The renewal of life in all its forms lies entirely in God's hands
And depends entirely on his continuing grace,
which he has promised and delivered to us in Jesus Christ.
The world, then, is not so much a thing as an event.
The energy that makes up everything we encounter
depends for its ongoing existence,
for its flourishing,
on the constant activity of God's saving grace
through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The church is called and empowered to witness
to these visions of salvation,
to these ways of flourishing in the freedom, contentment, and joy
that come through intimacy with God
in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit.

Pentecost makes all of this clearer for us.
It reminds and refreshes us in the depths of our souls
of what the vision of our freedom in Christ enables for us and requires of us.
It pictures for us the rich diversity of the people gathered by God's grace
to be his partners in this salvation of his beloved creation.

Look around you. That's what we are all about here at Brentwood.