

Old Vision, New Look
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Ephesians 1: 17-23

Today we begin a six-week series revisiting Westminster's vision. The timing seems right. Staff, elders and planning team members are in a several month exploration of Westminster's life – discussing what drew us to this community of faith; discerning how God has ministered both to and through us in our life together as a church; and viewing the challenges and opportunities on the horizon that invite us to both recall – as well as bring into sharper focus – who it is we are called to be as the Body of Christ.

Revisiting vision also fits nicely with a new calendar year – a time when we are both personally and corporately accustomed to reviewing the year past, taking stock, setting goals, establishing/refining budgets, and framing ourselves with a few new year's resolutions.

If you're anything like me, you may have a new year goal or two that have a very personal, bodily intentionality. I'll tell you mine – and it's a recurring theme for me: I plan to get back on the treadmill. And that's not a figurative expression to rejoin the proverbial rat race – it's a literal goal – to get back on the treadmill that sits idle in my basement.

In that spirit, let me share with you something I ran across this week. The Top 10 Exercises we'd be better off WITHOUT in 2012

1. Running around in circles
2. Jumping to conclusions
3. Pushing your luck
4. Spinning your wheels
5. Beating your head against the wall
6. Dragging your heels
7. Throwing your weight around
8. Climbing the walls
9. Beating your own drum
10. Passing the buck

So – what ARE the exercises for Westminster, for us as disciples of Jesus? What, who, and how is it Westminster is to be a healthy incarnation of the body of Christ at work in the world? We're revisiting our vision to answer that question; to remember who God calls us to be, to focus on the essentials of being church.

Some of you have heard me recount an experience I had some 15 years ago. I walked into the eye doctor's office for an annual checkup, and while seated in the waiting room, noticed in the rack of brochures next to me one brochure with the title: **Presbyopia**.

Now – the only words I know beginning with Presby – presby-anything – have to do with Presbyterians. So – you can imagine my interest in discovering what theological tract was in the eye doctor's office.

Much to my chagrin, upon reading the brochure I realized if I had only recalled my seminary Greek I would have remembered that “Presby” is where our Presbyterian term for the office of “elder” comes from – and its literal root meaning is “old person.” And “opia” is from the Greek word that means sight. In plain English it means: Old eyes.

How many of you have bifocals or trifocals? How many of you do this (hold out paper) because you NEED bifocals? Old eyes. Presbyopia. I went ahead and read the brochure and it nailed me. It said, “Like gray hair and wrinkles, presbyopia is a symptom caused by the natural course of aging.”

It means you just can't focus anymore, particularly on things that are close to you.

The natural course of aging in a congregation is to lose a clear focus on our core reason for being -- the things that should be closest to us. Social scientists tell us that institutions wane when their preoccupation is with the form with which they do things, and not with the purpose for which they were founded. I recall in another congregation I served years ago, we spent months of meetings, hours of discussion about a critical issue in the life of that congregation: "What color to paint the church parlor." The energy and passion that got invested in that discussion!!!! Rather than discussing how many professions of faith took place or how many people were involved in some way in meeting human need in the world, we were focused on whether the parlor should be this ugly color of green or this welcoming color of yellow. People were passionate. If you've been around church enough, you know how preoccupied we can be with the form and forget our very purpose.

So it is important, as our vision ages, to continually do a little “lens adjustment” of sorts – refreshing, sharpening our vision. Talking about our mission, our purpose over the next weeks. I hope you will be here as many Sundays as you can as we explore this together because I think it a rich time to ponder our reason why we are here.

You should know I believe the mission of the church – any and every church – is generally the same. Our core reason for being is writ large throughout Scripture

– and it is stated over and over and over again. And, it is usually pretty simple. It's not rocket science.

One of my favorite texts as to what a disciple is supposed to do and be about from the Bible is from Micah 6. In response to the question, "And what is it the Lord requires of you?" the answer is:

Do justice
Love kindness
And Walk humbly with your God.

A church revitalization consultant recently spoke at Donegal Presbytery and said every congregation's vision statement, no matter what the language, should be some version of the following:

Glorify God
Grow Disciples
Meet Human Need

It's simple. Sometimes we forget, lose sight of. We begin to major in the minors.

Ten years ago, Westminster's leaders adopted a new mission statement:

Knowing Christ, Making Christ Known

In the brochure fleshing out that statement were the following words:

Westminster's vision continues to replicate the vision of the early church, where those who knew Christ "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship and the breaking of bread and prayers. All who believed were together, and would sell their possessions and goods and distribute to all, as any had need." We are a congregation committed to worshipping regularly; growing spiritually; reaching out continually; caring effectively; and in all things, making the love of God in Christ Jesus known in the world.

A very simple statement.

In 2007, we revisited the language of our vision, and converted it from corporate language – what we do collectively as a congregation – to personal language – describing what each of us is called to do and be as disciples. I love that shift from corporate language, because the old language was Westminster will be, Westminster isn't except for you and me. You don't go to church -- you are the church; we are the church. It's not a place you go; it's what you and I are to be in the world. Instead of saying what Westminster will be, we say the following

language that is printed in your order of service, and it is what we will use as our unison affirmation in a moment following this sermon:

Our vision is **“knowing Christ, and making Christ known.”**

As such, we, as followers of Jesus Christ, commit to

Worship that glorifies God and transforms us;

Intentional, hope-filled community;

A lifetime of spiritual growth;

Joyful generosity;

And being sent to demonstrate the Kingdom of God in the world.

I love that shift from corporate to personal language because it is not what you do with your religion; it's not what this organization does. That mission is the mission of every one of our lives...to glorify God, grow as a disciple and meet human need. In all that we are and all that we do.

One of my favorite stories about the need to continue to visit and revisit and reclaim mission and vision in the life of an organization is a story I heard a long time ago as a high school kid. I won't tell the whole story because it is long, and it is rich and wonderful to tell in its fullness, but I'll give you the “Cliff Notes” version.

It is the story about a community on the coast of the sea where there are shoals offshore and periodic shipwrecks. The folks there find themselves on occasion having to rescue people who come in off ships that have been wrecked. After doing this a couple of times in this community, they realized that when it was cold they needed a place to bring these folks, needed a place to store their boats and lifesaving equipment and blankets – a place to bring people in to get them warm and get them out of the water. So they built this lifesaving station right there on the shoreline where they kept everything.

It was awhile between shipwrecks, so the folks from the community started enjoying hanging out at their little lifesaving station, having fellowship together, sharing a few meals. Eventually they enjoyed that so much that they decided to fix the place up a little bit. To make a long story short – eventually they got oriental rugs, brass scones on the wall, a nice porch addition, added a party room, and then....another shipwreck happens.

They bring in passengers from the shipwreck, soaked in seawater and gasoline and oil and bits of seaweed hanging on them, and stuff was getting on the carpet. Some of the “members” got upset at what was happening to their nice little place, so they built a little shed off the back for the lifesaving part so they didn't mess up the club.

Some folks, however, remembered they got together in the first place for the lifesaving and that they really needed to have a place for lifesaving. So they left

and started a new lifesaving station. And the story ends with “and all along the coast there were hundreds of clubs and every here and there periodically would spring up a new lifesaving station.”

I've never forgotten that our purpose is to know Christ and make Christ known. We are called to worry about those who haven't heard the GOOD NEWS a lot more than whether the parlor should be green or yellow, or that someone is getting something on the carpet.

Our essential purpose is to know this Christ and to take that message to the world because there are a lot of folks out there who are hungry, who are despairing, who are lonely or who are drowning in some form of human despair.

I chose this text from Ephesians because it has that wonderful vision – words that say the eyes of your heart will be able to see.

Paul writes: I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know Him so you may know the hope to which He has called you. To know Christ – the hope to which He has called us – and to make Him known – to share that good news with all the world.

THAT is what gets me up every morning of the week. It is because this good news is so powerful. In Jesus Christ, God lived, taught, died, and rose again for my salvation and for the salvation of the world. And every day I am amazed that I get to spend my life's energy and work sharing that good news, the best news there is. Friends, that should be the core of all of our lives, no matter what our gifts and talents are. We are to be a lifesaving station in our little corner of God's world, and wherever God chooses to send us.

Over the coming weeks, we will continue to revisit who and what we are called to be as the body of Christ. My prayer is that we will continue to be energized in our following as His disciples.

Amen.