

“Mission and Vision”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Habakkuk 2:1-3

¹ I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what God will answer concerning my complaint.

² Then the LORD answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

³ For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.

Philippians 4:8-9

⁸ Finally, friends, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

What words would best describe First church? Are they exciting and energized? Spiritual? Traditional? Comfortable? No church can be what it needs to be if we're not willing to change. Martin Luther learned this. This month marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Luther had to be excommunicated from his beloved Roman Catholic Church before the seeds of reform could take root.

John Wesley also learned this. Wesley, founder of Methodism, never wanted to start a new church. He was an Anglican priest until the day he died. Still, he too learned that a church that refuses to change is a church that is dying. Many of you know that John Wesley preached in the streets and in fields, meeting miners or field workers where they were. What you may not realize is that he was initially horrified by the idea. He wrote in his journal after his first such experience, “Today I became vile.”

Churches in the Methodist tradition are known for our use of lay pastors. As an ordained priest, Wesley was against this as well. Then his mother Susanna wrote to him, “John, just go. Listen to this man.” He listened and conceded that God as Spirit can lead untrained people to preach as effectively as anyone.

October also marks my second quarter among you. How is the transition going? Even if I kept everything exactly as it had been, things would be different because I'm different. And though you may not have thought of it, you're different than you were three months ago.

In these three months, I've been working to get to know you, your names ... your ways, your strengths and your growing edges – both individually and as a church. I have a long way to go but I've picked up a few things.

I've found that you are mission-minded. At First Church, you're intentional about doing ministry. I too am passionate about **outreach and mission** and I applaud you in this. There are churches – not as vital as this faith community – who haven't learned the difference between charity and mission. They give money – or maybe some goods – to a cause, but they do nothing face-to-face with the ones they help. There's no ministry *with* others, only *for* them.

Hospitality is important to you. You **care** for each other, both the ones who gather here and also those who are homebound or in a care facility.

Partly because I'm coming up on the end of my first 100 days, but also because the visioning task force has begun meeting and, of course, today's sermon, I spent much of September contemplating **vision and mission**. I spent a lot of time in prayer asking God, "What do you have in store for First church. What's your promise for us?"

I really felt like I wasn't getting answers. You know what that's like – either we're not picking up the answer; we don't like it; or maybe, the answer's time hasn't come yet.

Today, I thought I'd share some reflections on my time spent down in Kansas City last week. I was at the Leadership Institute at the Church of the Resurrection. One thing I was reminded of a couple times is that God makes us each unique – not just in the ways we look but with different ways of living out our understanding of God's call in our lives and the world.

My friend Sandy used to be part of my last church, 'til she and Mike moved to Rhode Island a couple years ago. They came to Kansas City. Sandy's in the process toward become a licensed local pastor. As a woman – 50 plus – very sure of herself and outspoken, she struggles with other people's notions of what a pastor should be like – how they should dress, how they should speak.

We talked. And I assured her that the world needs her uniqueness. The church needs her to be all God leads her to be – with her tight skirts, stylishly flipped hair, and sassy way of talking. Her mission is to find ways to continue serving, wholeheartedly and with joy, being as completely who she is as a person can be. That's the task for you and me as well.

We can get caught up on differences. Some people don't like her – or my – blunt way of speaking. Some folks that a pastor shouldn't have purple hair or shaved sides, tattoos or piercings. Or they don't like those things in the people sitting in the next pew or in the supermarket. It's easy to focus on differences. It's comfortable, because it keeps us from having to accept our shared humanity. It keeps us from having to do the work of learning to be one.

One of the harder things to listen to at the Leadership Institute last week was that so many of these inspiring speakers have large churches – thousands who come to services each week. How can they help a church in northcentral Wisconsin with 400 on our rolls?

Yet one of the messages I heard after listening to speaker after speaker is that growth didn't happen just because, maybe, there was a great preacher or fabulous music. They're not all mega-churches with rock music. Some sing hymns and use liturgy, like we do.

But they all had, and have, a vision. They all – with serious prayer – have developed a sense of what it is God is calling them to do and to be. I remember when I read a book by Mike Slaughter, he talked about how, one evening, before there was any church, he stood out in this field praying.

And suddenly, in a way he hadn't ever before, he could see this campus of church buildings – the sanctuary, the family, youth and children's areas. It was all there before him – all he had to do what build it.

I didn't exactly hear this from the presenters, but I saw a picture of a warehouse, a shell of a narrow, steel eyesore in downtown Atlanta. That was the *before* picture. The *after* picture showed people doing church inside and outside their new facility – every week people worship and learning to be God's people because someone had the vision.

I sometimes think it's easier to cast a vision when you're starting from scratch. But realistically, it's hard either way. What is your vision for First UMC of Wausau?

Mark is a consultant. He told us about doing some visioning with a church about our size. When they adjourned for the evening, the chairperson left saying, "Wow! We've made progress. We're willing to change anything – except our worship!" Watching we could tell that, for Mark, this was a shake-head moment.

Yet the next morning, as people were ready to continue as they had been, one woman stood up and said, "I'm not worried about us. I'm not worried about you and me. We know Christ. We trust in God and God's love for us. I'm thinking about my daughter. I'm thinking of my grandchildren. How will they learn about Jesus? How will they know God loves them?" The atmosphere in the room changed. And so did the conversation.

Let me swing back to hospitality for a moment. For me, hospitality is about making sure every person is accepted and loved.

Part of my vision for First church is for us to become the most embracing church in the valley – loving on everybody who walks through our door, never uttering those words, "You're in my seat," accepting folks no matter what label someone may have attached to them.

My vision for our church is not for us to be a friendly church; friendly is shorthand for friendly with each other, but for us to truly affirm each person's worth as a child of God. God accepts me, and I'm one messed-up person. God accepts you, and I'm guessing you have your messed-up-ness too. And if God accepts me and you – in spite of the messes we make of our lives – then we're just naturally obliged to accept everyone else. And to love them for all we're worth.

Part of my vision that we become a bastion of weirdness, full of such a variety of unique individuals and families, all coming together to learn of God's love and hope. There's room for you in that vision, and for me, and for a whole lot of other people, who by our efforts and God's grace, will join us.

There's more to my vision, but for now, I'd say that's enough. So I'll close by saying, maybe this could be your vision too.

Amen.