

Preaching Like Paul, Visioning Like John

Acts 16:9-15 Revelation 21:22-22:5

**Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
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There is a fascinating picture book by David McCauley called *Castle*. It is a masterful representation of all the effort, technology and motivation that went into the building of castles in the British Isles of Medieval times. Unlike my image of a castle as I was growing up, which was simply the luxurious housing of nobility in the romantic times of knights and the golden age of kings and queens, McCauley tells us that castles served primarily a military purpose. They were, in fact, the height of military technology in their day. They were designed to be an impenetrable fortress, placed in a strategic location, often providing a secure home base for foreign troops in occupied territory.

Have you noticed that they stopped building castles? They became out of vogue - not because royalty no longer sought luxurious quarters, but because advancing military technology made castles obsolete.

Castles may have become obsolete, but other military weaponry that served the same purpose replaced them. Castles were a way of providing security, and when they were no longer secure enough, then other strategies and technologies had to be developed to provide security.

When true security comes to this earth, our sign will be that the castles, canons, nuclear weapons and missile defense systems will all be obsolete. When we no longer feel the need for our security systems, when the swords are finally and for all time beaten into plows, that will be the sign that the people are truly secure.

Mr. McCauley produced another book titled *Cathedral*. Perhaps cathedrals do not serve all the same functions that they once did in Medieval society, but the one central function remains constant: that is the worship of God. Unlike castles, cathedrals are still being built today. The worship of God is not obsolete.

However, even if David McCauley did not have the audacity to suggest that Cathedrals may someday be obsolete, a more ancient writer has done just that. His name was John, and he had a revelation - a vision of God's future:

"And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God... And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb."

I never thought I would find myself drawing parallels between churches and weapons systems, but both would seem to be items on the road to obsolescence. When we have learned to dwell together with at least a grudging realization that justice and trust must replace domination and fear, we will set our weapons aside. When the love of God

is written on the hearts of every living being, and songs of praise lift spontaneously from every street and pasture, then all the land will be a holy place of worship, and we will no longer feel the need to build altars.

In the New Jerusalem there is no need for a Temple or a steeple or an altar because every place is a holy altar, and every hour is the worship hour. Every moment is God's moment.

One of the New Testament words meaning "to worship" is a verb that is also translated "to serve." And so we talk about having a service of worship. To worship God is to serve God, and to serve God is to worship God, and neither our worship nor our service ends with a benediction on Sunday morning.

In the New Jerusalem there is no need for a Temple or a Church steeple to stand as a sign that God's people have a gathering place. All in the New Jerusalem are consciously children of God, and every home and street corner where people gather is a gathering place for worship.

The Church has only two reasons for existence: to worship God and to spread God's love. The Church looks forward to the day when it will be put out of business as a mission agency. Our mission is to joyfully share God's love. Our vision is of a world where God's love is obvious, available to all, and is spread all around. When the Christian lifestyle is no longer distinguishable, not because Christians have adopted the ways of the world, but because the whole world loves as God loves - as we have seen in the life of Jesus - then we will not need the Church... - but until that day, the Church has work to do.

Some churches are tempted to disband early. They decide that their church is big enough, it is friendly enough, it has done enough mission. The church that has decided that it is pleased enough with itself is the one that can shut its doors, and no one will miss it.

Yesterday Lynette and I took our confirmation class to downtown Los Angeles. Pastor Sandie Richards, pastor of First UMC in Los Angeles, led us on a walking tour in the heart of the city, from Olympic and Flower streets to 9th and Broadway and back again. We saw wealth and poverty, luxury redevelopments and old buildings in disrepair. There is a burgeoning population downtown, including the homeless, market rate condominiums selling at 600 square feet for half a million dollars, and nicely kept subsidized housing for families and for seniors. But despite the growing population, downtown LA is nearly devoid of churches. Basically, there is the Salvation Army and there is First United Methodist Church. When church growth experts think about planting new churches, they ignore that neighborhood. But it is too early for the city to have no temple. The church has a mission in the city.

Paul is the great missionary of the 1st century. He was the first prolific planter of churches. Even though Paul is preaching and writing decades before John has his revelation-vision on the island of Patmos, it is the same Spirit that drives his mission and it is the same basic vision that keeps him on track. Tell the good news of Jesus, spread the love of God, witness to an alternative Empire, invite people to serve a Lord greater than Caesar, and transform the world. Because, as Paul would write in his own letters, all of creation is groaning for the revealing of the children of God.

The Acts passage we read today tells of the momentous crossing from Asia Minor to Macedonia. It looks like a short hop on the map, but it is symbolic of

Christianity's leap from Asia to Europe. On our current map, it is going from Turkey to Greece.

Acts makes it clear that it is the Holy Spirit that leads Paul in this new direction. He comes to Philippi. There is no synagogue in the city, but he finds a place of prayer outside the city gate, on a riverbank. There are probably a few Jews gathering here, and some sympathetic Gentiles, interested folks seeking righteousness and meaning in their lives. Paul comes to this small gathering with the credentials of a rabbi. His obvious mastery of the Hebrew scriptures and traditions gives him an attentive audience. There is a business woman there named Lydia. She hears good news, God's love, the grace of Jesus Christ. She and her family are baptized. Then she offers her house as a place of hospitality for what will be the growing community of Christians in Philippi.

Paul was perhaps the greatest church planter of all time, but there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that Paul ever supervised a building project. Paul created communities, the purpose of which was to be leaven in the loaf for the transformation of larger communities and eventually the Roman Empire.

The preaching of Paul leads to the vision of John. Lydia hears the good news, receives the love of Christ, and then offers her resources to share the love of Christ.

Many organizations, including churches, are well served by having clear and concise mission statements. So when the United Methodist Church clarified the mission statement for our whole denomination and put it in the Book of Discipline, lots of people quickly committed it to memory: "The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." However, that is only half of the mission statement.

"The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and by exemplifying Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world." (Book of Discipline, par. 121, 2004)

Now that is harder to memorize, but the second half of the statement is crucial if we are to proclaim the full Gospel and not just half a gospel. That is to say, that the mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ ... SO THAT these disciples might go about the business of redeeming the world.

Or, as it is further clarified in par. 124 of the Discipline:

"As servants of Christ we are sent into the world to engage in the struggle for justice and reconciliation. We seek to reveal the love of God for men, women, and children of all ethnic, racial, cultural, and national backgrounds and to demonstrate the healing power of the gospel with those who suffer." (Book of Discipline, par. 124, 2004)

Since last fall we have been focusing on four aspects of that mission:

- 1) reconciling the human family,
- 2) healing the environment,
- 3) tending to the needs of children and youth within and beyond our church family, and
- 4) letting the community know that the Church cares about these issues.

We don't know exactly what Lydia heard Paul say on the riverbank outside of Philippi. We know that she got the message that she was loved by God ... that she was the recipient of God's grace through Jesus Christ. And we also know that she got the message that this was not just about her, that the love of God was on the move, and she

wanted to be part of this movement. “Paul, if you are going to change the world, you will need an base of operations here in Philippi. You can use my house.”

We have gathered today in our Culver City base of operations for the transformation of the world. Some of this we are doing in partnership with other faith communities, civic organizations and governmental entities. Though we are not the only ones seeking to make God’s love more tangible in community life, we need not be shy about inviting persons to come and join us in this mission.

The mission of the Church is not to save the church. The mission of the Church is to redeem the world. When our vision team developed our strategic map for renewal and effectiveness in ministry, we envisioned a growing congregation. But a bigger church is only tangential, an incidental detail, a by-product of the real vision. Our vision is not of a bigger church, but a transformed community. And we do not hesitate to invite everyone we know to join us, to fellowship with us, to collaborate with us, to coalition with us, to connect with us at any point of common cause along the way. We do not hesitate to proclaim the love of Jesus to everyone we meet.

John has shared with us his vision of the city of God. Through the middle of the city flows the river of the water of life, and the river flows through the Tree of life. The tree bears 12 kinds of fruit 12 times a year. There is no hunger here. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Does this describe the cities of our nation and our world? Until it does, there is work for the Church to do.

Poet C.T. Studd has written a brief verse that says alot:

*Some wish to live within the sound
Of church or chapel bell;
I want to run a rescue shop
Within a yard of hell.*

It is not time yet to stop being the Church. Let us join together to be people in mission, and to make a difference.