

“Our Kind of Faith” / Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 / 23 February 2014

Well, it's “Vision Sunday,” that day when we're called upon to search our hearts, search our minds, for a big, inspired (and inspiring) picture of who-we're-called-to-be, both as individuals and as Bower Hill Church. It's “Vision Sunday,” and if ever a tired old world stood in need of visionaries, it is today. Everything good requires a vision to guide it: all endeavors in art, politics, music, sports, faith. Vision is not seeing things as they are, but as they are meant to be. What is our vision here today?

For good and for ill, people entertain visions of themselves, and they follow those guiding visions down through their years. Some of those visions stick; they stay with us from childhood onward. Others fade away with time. Now, I'm not talking about the grand pompadour or beehive hairdos and all those other things that went the way of turquoise jewelry and Nehru jackets. Those were momentary trends, props to be picked up and discarded along the way. But when you picture yourself in your mind's eye, when you think about how others perceive you, when you think about the things that you add to the life of the world—what is it that you see? What is your vision of you?

Think of all the people you've tried to be in the course of a lifetime! But only certain identities were true to your heart, and those are the only ones that “stuck.” About four years ago, when I was the last person left in North America who was still purchasing music on compact discs, my wife forced me to switch over to an iPod—actually an iPhone that also plays music. I've never been a great lover of technology, but the time came when she traded in our old flip-top cell phones for new fancy phones. At first I resisted, but convenience usually takes the field in the end; principles and stubbornness yield to convenience eventually. And iPhones are convenient! Now, these four years later, my phone is my computer, my road atlas, my day planner, my camera, and my alarm clock. It's a compass, and a calculator, and a stopwatch, and a timer, a camcorder. If I were a drinking man, I'm pretty sure it could open my bottles for me. I have vague and distant memories of dropping quarters into pay phones, but mostly, I can't even remember what life was like back then. Most of all, my telephone has become my stereo! I love music—many diverse kinds of music—and all my relatives know that the only thing I ever want for Christmas or my birthday is iTunes cards, which enable you to purchase music and store it away in your telephone to be played like a CD on a little set of speakers.

The fascinating part of journeying into 21<sup>st</sup> century technology is to see which bits of music from your youth survive to journey along with you, and which bits of music get discarded—outgrown like all the forgotten teddy bears, and rubber duckies, and Tonka trucks of days gone by. When you get \$100 in iTunes cards for Christmas, that's ten whole albums, and my heart goes leaping back to the music that I used to have on cassette tapes in the 80s and 90s. Now, I'll let you in on a little secret, but if you weren't young in the 80s it might not mean much to you. I thought of myself as quite the trendsetter back in those days. I was the middle child in a family of five kids. I guess I always felt a little bit invisible, and so when I got to college, I decided to change all that. I began to listen to the most cutting edge music, what we used to call “New Wave” or “alternative.” I dressed all in black, got myself some nice oval-shaped glasses, and grew one long flap of hair down over my left eye. I drew attention to myself by listening to the depressingly sad music of those British groups like The Cure, and Depeche Mode, and Ultravox—I've always loved that name. The trick back in those days, if you were fashionable, was to look a little bored and a little sad most of the time.

Now, mind you, I went to a small private college in the Midwest, a school with a curfew, and so listening to such music guaranteed me some recognition. But completely unbeknownst to most of my fellow students, I also bought recording, cassette tapes, of the great baroque masters, and I listened to those at a much lower volume when no one was around. Handel. Vivaldi. Bach. I loved the sacred music from the 1500s into the 1700s. On one hand, all that dark, troubled British pop music spoke to the person I was trying to be and project to the world, but the other kind of music spoke to my soul. It nourished my spirit. And now, all these years later, in my mid-forties, as I rebuild my musical library in digital form, I've gone back to revisit all the sad, dark music that I thought I liked so much. But none of it does anything for me, not anymore. If you look at my iPhone, you'll find almost none of it. No, in

my truest heart I never was cool, or fashionably bored, or even sad. It's not who I was then, and even less so today. But if you do sneak a look at my iPhone you'll see what those who knew me best surely always saw: that I belong in the church, for the music that I used to listen to in secret has survived. I've filled that little gadget with Flemish sung masses from the late 1400s, and the organ music of Buxtehude, and all the stately, orderly, calming music that's always spoken most directly to my spirit. Your truest self, your deepest self, doesn't really change all that much down through the years. It doesn't go away. It's driven by a vision that endures all your life long. You can stray further from it and wander nearer. You can experiment with other things. But you never can escape the person you most truly are. There are guiding visions that lead us through a lifetime.

Who have you been down through the phases of your life? More importantly, who are you called to be—what abiding self keeps coming through? You too have an abiding vision of yourself, and it has outlasted all the lesser, fleeting visions that you have entertained from time to time. What is it? Individuals live by visions, but institutions do, too. Something about your sense of yourself drew you at one point or another into the fold of this church. This place, its people, its whole ethos sounded an echo in your spirit. Our collective self as a congregation spoke to your own private vision of you. And so I ask, Who is Bower Hill Church; what's our abiding vision?

Well, it's "Vision Sunday," and fittingly enough we've just read God's ancient vision for all creation in the age-old words of the Law of Moses. We read it, too, in the gospel of Matthew, as that same vision was summarized by Jesus. So many people say, "I don't like the angry God of the Old Testament," and I admit that there are some real horrors attributed to God in the Books of Joshua and Judges. But this portion of the Mosaic Law is beautiful; it depicts a God whose vision for humanity is one of equality and justice, a vision of kindness and generosity. Did you catch all of that? It said, "When you harvest your fields and gardens, leave some behind for the poor and for the alien—which is to say the undocumented foreigner. Don't cheat people. Deal kindly with the disabled, the deaf and blind!" Look, it's not just political correctness; it's found in the very Law of Moses! "Don't give preferential treatment to the poor, but don't kowtow to the rich either; judge fairly. Don't gossip. Don't even carry hatred in your heart, and don't nurture grudges. Never profit from another's death. Love your neighbor as you love yourself." God's sweeping vision of all creation is not just saving people from hellfire, but reconciliation and kindness here in this world, in all our relationships and all our dealings with loved one and stranger. This is God's vision of our world; it was echoed by Jesus, but is this the vision that most churches live by?

Today we embark on a new journey, a capital campaign, and in order to do that, we have to take a good, hard look at ourselves. In this exciting day of renewed vigor in the life of our congregation, where do we want to go? What vision will lead us into tomorrow? And is that vision consistent with the best vision, that great, ambitious, recurring vision—the dream—that echoes through the pages of our sacred texts? It's a question worth asking in our collective life as a church, but also in your private life.

I came to this church over three years ago and strangely, for me, the honeymoon never ended. Last April, I sat in a cinderblock room in Haiti, and a handful of you sat there with me. I led Bower Hill's off site Sunday worship, in an outpost beneath the palms, while most of us worshiped here among the oaks. On that morning, in my sermon, I got a little verklempt (as you've seen me do at baptisms). We were tired. We had worked hard installing a water purification system, and our work in that village was almost done. Lives would be saved because of our efforts. Our living conditions in Haiti were primitive; travel was grueling and dangerous, and some of us had gotten sick. But I had seen firsthand the love, and the labor, and the true friendship that our church was acting out in Haiti, and so in my sermon that day, I said something that I still believe. "You people teach me more about following in the way of Jesus than I have ever taught you." The reason I am so happy here at Bower Hill Church is because you get it. The vision of Moses, the vision of Jesus, the sacred dream that echoes like a song throughout the pages of Scripture, is one of justice, of social engagement, of improving the lot of the

outcast and the stranger—you *get* that! “Preaching to the choir” is so much nicer than preaching to a wall...then banging my head against it in frustration. I went bald early in my ministry; I wonder if I wouldn't still have hair if I'd spent those years here with you. God's vision for life does not entail shows of piety. God's dream is not that we would all believe the same things and the right things. No, all God asks of us is that we live out our faith by working for fairness in the world around us. This is the vision that must lead us into the future. But take heart! It's the vision on which we're built.

Now, bear with me; a short backward glance will give us perspective on tomorrow. When this church's pastor joined the civil rights movement and marched on Selma, it split this church in half. The half who left said that churches have no business getting involved in social issues, that our department is the afterlife, not this one. Fine. That's a very old and widespread vision of church, and we do not condemn people who hold that view. But the half who stayed were the ones who shared the vision of a socially-engaged faith. When the township was putting up roadblocks to prevent a Jewish congregation from building a temple on Bower Hill Road, we welcomed them to worship in our building. In the most tense days of the 1960s, when racial conflict tore this country apart, we enacted a membership exchange with an African American church in the Hill. They worshiped here, and we worshiped there. We hired one of the first female pastors in Pittsburgh. You know the historic litany. It's the past, but it lives on in who we are.

When Bower Hill Church began to fall into decline, folks around here lost their confidence. They began to question their own identity, like the episode of “The Brady Bunch” where Peter Brady decides that there's nothing special about him, and he ought to start talking like Humphrey Bogart... “Pork chopsh and appleshaush.” Some said that only Sister Act could save this church, that you would only grow again if you learned to play the electric guitar. “Drums! Repetitive choruses! That's what people want!” And so you tried that, to no avail. They said, “Try mega-church tactics! Rick Warren! *The Purpose Driven Life!*” That didn't work here either. Small groups didn't work. Verse-by-verse Bible preaching didn't do the trick. Trends! Fads, like my sad techno-pop music in the 80s! But notice that this church only blossomed again when you returned to yourselves, when you reclaimed the unique, half-forgotten music that has always been dearest to your heart, your vision for all these many years: social outreach.

Our truest selves, our deepest identities, never go away. They are God-given, and they flow from our vision of life. And now, in these past three years, I have seen you host a forum on gun violence, support groups that oppose the death penalty, worship alongside Jews and Catholics, welcome homeless families into your building for food, and friendship, and shelter. I have seen you dig and tend a garden to feed the poor something healthier and better than canned soup. I've seen you welcome the outcast, the overlooked, to come and speak their truths to you in adult education classes—people who would not even get a hearing in most churches. I've seen the red dust of Haiti caked on your sweaty, tired faces. This is who you are! When churches use the language of “social justice,” this is what is meant. It's not political; it's biblical. I don't mean to flatter anyone, and God knows there is room for a lot of improvement, but your guiding vision is not unlike that glorious vision in the Law of Moses and on the lips of Jesus.

The world very much needs our kind of faith. There are as many Selmas out there today as there were in 1963—perhaps more—and our calling still is to march on them! People of faith must engage in the life of this world. Where injustice reigns, where some profit from the blood of their neighbor, where people deal falsely, or revile the disabled, as Leviticus says, where people chase after failed visions, the empty gospel of greed and power, you and I will be there. It's who we are. Our responsibility is to ensure that tolerant, non-judgmental, socially-engaged Christianity is alive and well here in the South Hills of Pittsburgh for decades to come. This is our role, and it is our vision. My job has never been to impose on this church the vision that I have for it. My job has always been to find this congregation's pulse, figure out its unique identity and calling—discover your vision for yourselves—then help you live into it. Everything we do here must be guided by our vision. Our

building must be a tool for it. Our programs must be a reflection of it. Our mission projects are the very incarnation of it. And our vision must not stray from that great divine dream laid out in our sacred book.

This is what our capital campaign is about. It's not a fundraiser; it's about living into the vision that has been ours from the beginning, the vision on which we were created, the vision that leads us into the future. It's about ensuring that generations yet to come will benefit from our kind of faith. The guiding vision is that we fulfill love's demands by loving our neighbors. It's that simple. What visions do you live by? What old enduring vision will lead you into the years ahead? Amen.