

Witnesses

Text: Acts 1:3-8

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Albert Einstein said, "The important thing is to not stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery each day."

During this year's confirmation class, Ryan, Jimmy, Lauren and I have encouraged the confirmands to ask questions. We took seriously the idea that the goal of the program is for them to understand the difference between conforming to the ideas of others and confirming their own belief. We encouraged them to look at what their beliefs are and where they came from. We helped them begin to recognize their own beliefs and to explore their own convictions.

Another goal is for youth to have an active faith, one that they build for themselves using all the tools at their disposal; not a passive faith, thrust upon them with no say in the matter—a faith that is easily lost and rarely missed. Although youth may be part of the program because of a parent's wish rather than their own desire, we do not want youth to merely attend, listen, and respond as they are expected to respond. To that end, we didn't provide many answers but instead offered lots of space for exploration and questions. We wanted them to speak up, debate, and discover.

We think at times they may have grown frustrated when sessions failed to provide them with the immediate information and "correct" answers. We're interested in teaching them how to build, how to test, how to bring all the gifts that God has given them (and all of us) to bear on the extraordinary work of living a life of faith. We hope that they (and we) will be open to living into God's call.

The setting of today's Scripture reading is immediately before Jesus ascends into heaven. So, as we remember that Jesus was "taken up," I have one big question: Why did he go to heaven and leave his disciples here on earth?

He makes that abundantly clear just a few verses later in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

There is a world out there drowning in sorrow, and they need to know the One who said, "Peace I give you."¹ There's a world out there drowning in hatred, and they need to know the One who said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."² There is a world out here full of starvation and poverty and misery and all kinds of suffering and sickness. They need to see in

¹ John 14:27 (NIV)

² Matthew 5:44 (NIV)

us the one who said, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”³

As followers in the way of Jesus, we have work to do. He has given us a mission:

“Be my witnesses,” he says in Acts 1:8. He said that five times! Five times: in each of the four gospels and then in the book of Acts. He gave us this mission.

In Matthew he said, “go and make disciples of all nations, teach those new disciples.”⁴

In Mark he said, “preach the gospel in all the world.”⁵

In Luke he said, “Repentance and forgiveness will be preached in his name to all.”⁶

In John he said “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”⁷

And, of course in today’s Scripture from Acts, “Be my witnesses throughout Jerusalem and Judea and all of Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”⁸

Jesus has given us a mission, and it’s very clear. Now, the question is: what’s our vision? It’s important to understand the difference between mission and vision. The mission was given to us by Jesus, “be my witnesses.” The mission does not change. It’s the same for every church, every place, in every time. The mission is the same, but the vision, on the other hand, is how God wants us to carry out the mission in this particular place at this particular time – and that does change.

This is true both for us as individuals and for us as a faith community, as a church. Our church has a history that goes way back to 1713 when it was THE “established church” of the (then) West Division of Hartford. What the people of this church did in 1713 is different than what they did in 1813. It was different still in 1913 and 2013. And it is different than what we are going to be doing in 2113. The mission then was the same as it is now: to make disciples, preach the gospel, be witnesses.

It’s our vision which changes. Our vision becomes clearer when we understand how God is calling our church to make disciples in this place, at this time. I think of Jeremiah 29:11, when God says, “I know the plans I have for you.” When we begin to understand those plans, we get a picture of the future to which God is calling us. That picture of our future is our vision.

The mission is always the same, but the way we carry it out changes. First Church is in an important moment now. We’re regathering in person after so much time worshipping only virtually, and we will continue to provide livestreaming. It is what the moment calls for. This is

³ Matthew 25:40 (NIV)

⁴ Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

⁵ Mark 16:15 (NIV)

⁶ Luke 24:47 (NIV)

⁷ John 20:21 (NIV)

⁸ Acts 1:8 (NIV)

one example of how we're already asking ourselves the questions that need to be asked. Remember the Einstein quote, "The important thing is to NOT stop questioning."

We need to keep asking ourselves, "God, what's next? What's next for First Church West Hartford? Show us YOUR vision for how you want us to carry out the mission next." So, how do we figure that out? How do we discern God's vision for us? How can we possibly hope to know the mind of God?

We can learn how to find our vision from theologian Frederick Buechner. By the way, if you've zoned out, because you were tired of hearing me talk about the church, this can actually apply to you as an individual. You can use this as an individual and it works for the church, too. I love Buechner's famous quote, which you may have heard, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger, meet." I love this so much that I have it printed out and hanging on the wall in my office next to my computer.

That does not completely answer the question, but it gives us a formula, and I'll add to it. You take your two hands. With one hand, we can get in touch with who we are. We might ask: How has God made me? What are my gifts, talents, strengths, abilities? What are the experiences which have shaped me? What gifts and resources has God put at my disposal? What do I have to offer the world? What are the things that make me, me?

With your other hand, get in touch with the needs of the world—especially the needs in our own backyard. We might ask: What's going on out there? What are the needs that tug at my heart and keep me awake at night?

The needs around us are great. Just two quick examples: one out of 3.5 of our neighbors in Hartford have an income which is below the poverty level.⁹ Food insecurity is extremely high.¹⁰ I could go on, but the point is that we do not have to look very hard to identify plenty of other needs as well.

So, the formula. It applies to us individually and as a church. With one hand, we get in touch with who we are. With the other hand, we get in touch with the needs of the world. And then we bring our hands together to prayerfully seek God. We ask God to show us the intersections between the needs of the world and what we have to offer. And our vision—or better said, God's vision for us—will emerge.

For our confirmands, who are about to be the newest members of First Church, and for all of us... we have work to do! Jesus has given us a mission, "Be my witnesses." Because we at First Church are committed to that, we'll continually pray to receive a picture of God's future as we continually ask ourselves: who is God calling us to be? and what is God calling us to do? May we bring all the gifts that God has given us to bear on the extraordinary work of living a life of faith.

Let us pray: "Lord, help us to be all that you want us to be. In Jesus' Name." Amen

⁹ (City-data.com 2020)

¹⁰ (Proto 2020)

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