A VISION FOR MINISTRY

Acts 26:19

The First Sunday after Epiphany

Have you ever prayed for something; yet, not sure you really wanted an answer? Maybe Gideon felt like this when he threw out the fleece that first night telling God to cover the wool fleece with dew while leaving the ground around it dry. And when the sun came up and Gideon saw the answer to his request, he may have thought, "Not what I wanted to see...let's try this another way. Maybe God misunderstood." Maybe Gideon did not really expect God to answer at all. If such was the case, it certainly was not the first such prayer prayed, nor was it the last.

We know it was not the last because we have prayed our share of prayers not really sure if we wanted an answer or response from God. Last year during and after the Parish Gatherings I told many of you who came that I was praying that this time of listening would enable me to sense God's vision for the ministry of our church. It was something I truly prayed about, but I am not sure I really expected an answer. I know the Bible talks about people experiencing visions. Ezekiel had among others, the vision of the valley of dry bones. (Ezekiel 37) Joshua had a vision enabling him to see the commander of the army of the Lord. (Joshua 5:13ff.) And, of course, it was said by the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28) and spoken of again on the Day of Pentecost that "

> ...young men shall see visions,...
> and old men shall dream dreams." (Acts 2:17)

Since I am not a young man any longer, I should be allowed to have my dreams but the visions of God should be left to younger men. Nonetheless, I spent time last summer praying for some vision of God for the ministry of our church.

What I prayed about, but did not really expect to happen, happened. Actually, there is some discomfort and uneasiness experienced when talking about it, yet, obedience to God requires that very thing. Unlike the Biblical folks who saw visions, I never found myself losing an awareness of the reality around me and having my field of sight filled with strange and mysterious images and symbols. Instead the vision for ministry which I want to share with you came from three sources. First, it came from what I came to understand and accept as the voice of our church as it was spoken through the eight Parish Gatherings of last Spring. It was a voice that sounded a sense of urgency as it kept declaring that we were a church in the midst of great opportunity, an opportunity to which we must respond. Secondly, It came from scripture. A verse like Isaiah 43:19 became a constant companion. It is a verse which causes us to hear God saying,

> I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth,
> do you not perceive it?

It came from a paraphrase of Acts 22:10. Those words of the Apostle Paul became a word on our hearts as we asked the question,

> Lord, what do you want me to do?

And then, there was that Word from I Corinthians 12:7 where the Word of God speaks about spiritual gifts saying to us,

To each is given the manifestation of the
Spirit for the common good.

And, thirdly, the vision for ministry came from Erwin McManus' book, *An Unstoppable Force.* It caused me to think differently about my ministry and what God is calling the church to be. One place which really spoke to me was a chapter in which he spoke about going back to zero in our ministry. What does it mean to go back to zero? He put it this way, "...for those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ, going back to zero means putting aside all our assumptions and allowing the Scriptures to speak to us afresh."

In the midst of the struggle with these things being spoken, a vision for ministry began to come alive within my own spirit. Toward the end of last year I began sharing with you what I have come to understand and accept for myself as a personal vision statement for my ministry here. The vision statement is,

"The Richmond Hill United Methodist Church is a Jesus centered community driven and shaped in its movement into the world by Spirit given gifts for ministry."

This vision statement is an image I have come to embrace as a Word which gives direction for the days to come. It is a statement which takes us back to zero. If anyone here has assumptions about how ministry in the church must be done, it is surely me. All my life I have been immersed in the life of the church. I lived in its parsonages, learned its language, and wore its robes. I have given leadership to one sure fire program after another for over thirty years. During the last months it has been strongly impressed upon me that the Holy Spirit can truly be trusted to give leadership to the church. What I have come to understand is how easy it is for us to say, "We depend on the Holy Spirit to guide the church, " even as we go about doing things according to our plans, agendas, and assumptions. We have prayers at the beginning of meetings and ask for God to direct even though we have an agenda in front of us and our ideas about what must happen. The truth is our church structure does not really create room for the Holy Spirit to work. We have everything planned. We try to anticipate all the possible contingencies. We are so guided by logic and common sense and reason that there is little room for a risk taking Holy Spirit who tells us to depend on Him even though He expresses a rather unpredictable and surprising nature.

This vision of a church **"driven and shaped in its movement into the world by Spirit given gifts for ministry" c**ompels us to lay the controlling mindset down so that we can see what He would choose to do among us. The question worthy of our struggle is, "How do we get from a church too dependent on human effort, human leadership, and human agendas to a church that is dependent on the Holy Spirit to do what He promises to do in the Scripture?" Or, to put it another way, "How do we get back to zero?" I am convinced that God really does want to do a new thing with us. He wants us to be a Jesus centered community. He wants our ministry to be shaped by the Holy Spirit instead of being shaped by the way ministry has always been done around here. We cannot embrace the new things of God if we are too attached to the things of the past. We cannot allow the Spirit to be in control to drive and shape us in our movement into

the world if we will not turn loose of our assumptions and expectations.

The truly frightening thing abut embracing the new thing God wants to do is that we are not nearly as comfortable with an unknown which is gradually being revealed to us as we are with the certainty of the way we have always done things and thought about things. The 13th chapter of Numbers tells the exciting story of the twelve Hebrew spies sent to spy out the Promised Land. When they returned ten of the twelve spies declared that the Land was indeed one of milk and honey, but they also declared the inhabitants of the land to be like giants who could not be overcome. They said,

> We are not able to overcome this people, for they
> are stronger than we. (Numbers 13:31)

However, two of the twelve said a different word. Caleb and Joshua saw the richness of the land and the formidable foes, but they said,

> Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are
> well able to overcome it. (Numbers 13:30)

When the people heard the conflicting reports, they did two things. They forgot what God said to Moses when the twelve were sent out. We find that word in verse one of chapter thirteen.

> The Lord said to Moses, "Send men to spy out the land of
> Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites...

Conquering the land was not the issue. It had been promised to them, but they allowed their fear to keep them away from embracing the promise. And so doing the second thing was easily done. When they heard the conflicting reports, they chose the thing that made the most sense. They chose the majority report. They made the mistake of depending on consensus instead of the will of God.

Have you ever had deep down in your heart a conviction that God has something better for this church? Have you ever wondered if it is not true that He has a larger ministry for us, one that will open the doors of this church to larger numbers of people who need to experience the grace and love and forgiveness of God? Have you ever felt that the systems and structures which have brought us to this place will not be able to take us where God wants us to be? Have you ever wondered what the church would be like if it depended on the Holy Spirit instead of a set of man made assumptions about how ministry should be done? I know I have. I know I find myself wanting that church to come into being in the present moment. I have come to believe that if we listen carefully to the Holy Spirit and if we position ourselves so that He has room to work, we will begin to get an inner sense that something new, something that is of God, is springing forth at this very moment. We do not know exactly what shape this new thing is going to take, but it is in the wind and it is coming to those who will be bold enough, full of faith enough to take inordinate risks with God. I pray that we are those people.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on January 7, 2007.