

Our Vision: To Invite Openly and Accept All Persons

Luke 15:1-10

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September 12, 2010

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon:
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope
 where there is darkness, light
 and where there is sadness, joy.
 O Divine Master,
 grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood, as to understand;
 to be loved, as to love;
 for it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 Amen.

The Prayer of St. Francis is a generous prayer. It is all about the other person: "Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love." And it is an intentional prayer: "Make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love."

Generous and intentional—these words describe the first part of our vision.

In three sermons we will look at the vision statement that our Church Council adopted this spring. There are three parts: "The vision of St. John's United Methodist Church is to
 1.) invite openly and accept all persons,
 2.) commit ourselves to social justice, outreach and interfaith cooperation, and
 3.) grow spiritually as individuals and as a community through education and worship."
 Today I'd like to speak about the first part: "to invite openly and accept all persons."

I think everyone here would say we are a friendly church, that we are happy to receive all visitors and new members into our church family. But how truly generous and intentional are we in our hospitality and welcome? Do we go out of our way to receive the stranger, the person we do not know, "the other?"

Our vision is "to invite openly and accept all persons." This is a very inclusive statement. Behind it is the motto "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors" of The United Methodist Church. We claim to be open to all people. By adopting this new vision here at St. John's, we are opening our door a little wider than many other churches across our country. We are saying that *all* are welcome here; that is, gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and "straight" individuals are welcome here. Young and old are welcome here. People with

disabilities are welcome here. People who dress in old clothes are welcome here. People who come from different cultures are welcome here. People who do not speak much English are welcome here. People who walk to church and people who drive to church in a Mercedes are welcome here. People who have never stepped into a church are welcome here. It's a wide welcome. It's a generous welcome.

That means our welcome is generous enough that we would give up our seat for a visitor. (That's a radical idea!) We would linger and make conversation in order to make a person feel comfortable. We might even offer an invitation to lunch to a visitor. We might even help a person find a job or a babysitter. In other words, we would be willing to go out of our way for such a person. And we would do this intentionally because that's what it means to have the heart of Christ.

This kind of generous and intentional welcome means treating a person like family.

When our children, Eric, Sepp, and Leslie, were 10, 4, and 6 months old, we had a summer vacation in Flagstaff, AZ, where Jim's family used to have a cabin that backed up to a national forest. It was a wonderful place to be together as a family. The big activity was always to build a "fort" in the woods. These "forts" were sort of lean-to structures, made of fallen wood—they were marvelous for playing and hiding out.

Well, one day, I was at the cabin with Leslie who was the baby, while Jim and the boys were creating a fort in the forest. They were having a great time going off and coming back, lugging wood and piling it up, then going off again. And *then* all of a sudden little Sepp realized he couldn't find his way back to the fort. Somehow he had walked off too far into the woods, and lost his sense of direction. He was lost! He became frightened and didn't know what to do. A long time went by—at least it seemed very long—and then from a distance, Sepp heard his big brother Eric calling to him, calling out his name; Sepp responded and the boys ran together with tears of joy. 16 years later our oldest, Eric, died. This is the story—the *one* story Sepp told about his brother Eric, as we were planning Eric's memorial service. Sepp remembered that his brother Eric found him in the woods when he was lost.

We all cried tears of joy when Eric brought Sepp back to the fort and to the cabin. We rejoiced.

"Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost," says the shepherd, who left the 99 to find the 1 lost sheep. "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost," says the woman who lost a silver coin, looked everywhere, and then found it (Luke 15:6,9).

Of course! Of course, we would go out of our way to find anything dear to us that was lost. We all can think of times we lost something and then found it—What a relief! What a joy!

The more precious the sheep, the coin, or the child, the more we will stop everything and search until we find the lost. I think of the families in Chile, waiting for the miners to be rescued, and how there will be rejoicing when their loved ones are safe.

The parables of the lost sheep and lost coin tell of God's love for us. We are so precious to God that God will seek us out and find us.

And this generous, intentional love is the very love we are to imitate. It is the very love we are to embody in our church. This is the first part of our vision, to "invite openly and accept all persons." God doesn't discriminate and nor should we. Everyone is precious in God's sight.

Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, the leaders of the Temple establishment when he told these parables. The passage starts with this interesting sentence: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]" (Luke 15:1). And the Pharisees didn't like it. They were the "in" crowd. There was something about Jesus that conveyed a welcome to *all*, even those who were not in the "in" crowd. He "invited openly and accepted all people"—even the tax collectors who were despised because they worked for the Romans who occupied Palestine. Even these, Jesus welcomed. It would be like our inviting in people of the *other* political party, or people of another culture. And he welcomed even the sinners—how did the people know they were sinners? Perhaps they were condemned criminals. —It would be like our inviting in people who had been arrested, who had D.U.I.s or drug addiction, or people whose houses had foreclosed, or people who had declared bankruptcy or gone deeply into debt. It would be like welcoming to church people who didn't have a green card and therefore didn't have a driver's license. Our vision says "all persons." "All persons" means *all persons*.

This is a high calling. Usually human beings tend to care for their own, but not for "all persons." Usually United Methodists tend to care for their own, but not for "all persons." To "invite openly and accept all persons" means caring about others as much as we care about ourselves. "Do unto others as we do unto ourselves."

This is the Christian orientation. Actually, the Golden Rule is at the basis of all the major world religions. We know this rule in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Most of the secular culture around us goes against the teachings of Jesus. Most of our secular values are about getting what we want out of life.

I read the book, *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert when it came out. And I just saw the movie a couple of weeks ago. I have a problem with this book. The movie was entertaining, but, true to the book, it portrayed a very self-centered pursuit of happiness. (Probably not too many men saw this film, right?) It's the story of a woman, played by Julia Roberts, who goes to Italy to eat, to India to pray, and to Bali to fall in love—eat, pray, love. She is looking for what is missing in her life, after a divorce, a broken love affair, and an emptiness in her career. She is on a quest. It is a story of a quest that results in personal self-indulgence! Who wouldn't want to have enough money to take off for 18 months and do anything you please in exotic foreign countries? Who wouldn't want to be able to eat Italian pizza and pastries to your heart's desire—and stay thin like Julia Roberts? There is one redeeming scene where Julia Roberts actually tries to help another person, the single mother she

meets in Bali, who has no place to live. So Julia Roberts emails her friends back home and raises money for the woman and her daughter to buy a small house to live in. It's a nice touch, but still no real self-sacrifice on Julia Roberts' part. Her time in each foreign culture gives her new experiences—perhaps a few lessons in life—but mostly, she is free as a bird and does whatever she pleases. The *movie* ends in the hope of a new committed love relationship, whereas the *book* makes you think it was just another fling. The character in this story lacks depth.

On the other end of the spectrum, St. Francis knew about depth. He was the Italian rich kid who gave up a life of leisure to serve poor people. St. Francis lived a life of sacrifice and generous love. His life doesn't make a very sexy movie, but it's a life of depth.

How can we imitate the life of St. Francis or the heart of Christ? We can look beyond ourselves. We can orient our lives to the people who have yet to know that they are loved and accepted by God unconditionally.

When we say the Prayer of St. Francis, we state our intention not to be consoled, but to console; not to be understood, but to understand; and not to be loved, but to love. This is a generous intention. I pray that our vision will be fulfilled as we learn to invite openly and accept all persons into our church family.