

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, September 9, 2007

Text: Acts 17:1-9 Ephesians 4:7-16 NRSV

Goal: To inspire the congregation to become a part of our church's vision.

Central thought: Duke Memorial United Methodist Church is Christ-centered and shares God's Good News.

"A Vision for Duke Memorial United Methodist Church"

Opening prayer: O God, help us to hear and receive your words of truth for us today, so that we can fulfill your vision for our church. Amen.

CENTERED ON CHRIST

Almost 2,000 years ago, on his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul and his colleague, Silas, arrived in the city of Thessalonica. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was the home of a significant naval base. This cosmopolitan city had a variety of idols and allegiances and a strong Jewish synagogue. Into this environment Paul proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.

This may have been the first time that the people of Thessalonica had heard about Jesus. Some Jews in the synagogue and some devout Greeks believed Paul's teaching. However, a group of jealous Jews and ruffians in the city formed a mob against Paul and Silas. One of their leaders shouted to the city authorities, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also." (17:6)

Jesus Christ, through Paul and Silas and other Christians, was changing the world. They were turning the world upside down in a good way. What did the mob

charge them with doing? “They say that there is another king named Jesus.” (17:7) When people worship and obey King Jesus, their lives are transformed. Our lives are transformed. That is our mission.

We follow Jesus as our King. We put Jesus first in our lives. We love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. When Jesus is our King, Jesus is at the center of our church.

Years ago I would see bumper stickers with the message, “Jesus is the Answer.” So what is the question? More recently I’ve noticed bumper stickers that proclaim, “Jesus Saves.” So, from what does Jesus save us? The answer is important.

From sin, death, demonic social conditions. Jesus can save us from each of these. Jesus is the answer to all of these human problems – in scripture, in theology, in human experience. Jesus saves us from sin. Salvation is forgiveness, healing and union with God. Jesus saves us from death. Salvation is life forever with God. Jesus saves and heals human communities: families, churches, neighborhoods, countries. Whatever our individual or communal presenting problems – sin, confusion, illness, loneliness, isolation, poverty, violence, drugs, death – God can save us through Christ.

A key part of the vision of our church is that Christ is at the center. Our mission is to share Christ from the heart of Durham. Duke Memorial United Methodist Church is Christ-centered and shares God’s Good News.

Today we focus on our church’s vision for the future and our mission. Bishop Scott Jones of the Kansas Area is the brother of Duke Divinity School Dean Greg Jones. Bishop Jones recently said, “United Methodism lives by its mission. When we are clear about our mission, we thrive. When we are confused about our mission, or when we adopt a partial mission in place of the whole gospel, we die.”

I think the same holds true for the local church.

EVANGELISM AND WORSHIP

Part of the vision of our church is to invite other people to join us. We accept people where they are. We encourage people to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We seek to obey the Great Commission of our Lord, when he said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The heart of faith sharing is one person giving another person a vision of what it's like to be in love with God. It involves being in love with God, being part of a church you love, and caring about other people who do not know that faith.

One Sunday John Ed Mathison, the pastor of Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, placed an “Are You Inviting” chart in the bulletin. He asked the congregation to write in names under 9 different categories of people in the community with whom they cross paths. He then asked the congregation to invite those people to attend Frazer Memorial.

Earlier that week a couple, Carl and Burma Rutherford, had moved to Montgomery from Florida. On their first Sunday in Montgomery, they were watching the Frazer Memorial worship service on T.V. They listened as Dr. Mathison encouraged his congregation to invite others. Carl turned to Burma and said, “I’ll bet somebody writes our name down and invites us.” Burma laughed and said, “Oh, come on. Nobody even knows that we’ve moved here.”

That Sunday afternoon a member of Frazer knocked on their front door. He explained that he lived across the street a couple of doors down, and he wanted to invite them to Frazer next Sunday. Carl yelled to Burma, “Burma, come here! You won’t believe what’s happening.” Carl and Burma Rutherford visited Frazer the very next Sunday. They became members several months later. They are a part of that

congregation today because someone cared enough to seek them out and invite them.

We know that God loves us. Part of our vision is to respond to God through dynamic, hopeful worship. We praise and thank God for his love. We seek to provide a channel, a setting, an experience, so that there is a meeting between God and God's people. Where something is happening. Where there is a connection. That is what makes it dynamic.

We also seek to respond to God through hopeful worship. No doom and gloom here! Almighty God has created us in his own image. God has redeemed us from sin and death through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit sustains and empowers us every day. An encounter with the living God in worship gives us hope for our lives.

GROWING SPIRITUALLY AND BEARING WITNESS

I believe that living as a Christian is the very best way to live. I want to teach other people how to live that way. We live in a culture that is materialistic, me-centered, information-saturated, and high-tech, yet it is also spiritually-seeking.

I have a dream for Sunday School and Soul Café and all of our spiritual formation opportunities. See it with me. Here is a picture: Children, faces eager with excitement, run to the outstretched arms of their teachers. Youth, laughing and joking, catch up on the latest news. Adults, affectionately greeting each other, inquire about mutual concerns. Guests are immediately identified. They are introduced and taken to warm and welcoming classes.

A lesson is presented that is biblical and relevant and engaging. It helps the participants, whether they are children, youth or adults, live as disciples of Jesus today.

Nancy Ammerman is a veteran sociologist. In an essay published in the book, *Wrestling with the Text: Young Adult Perspectives on Scripture*, she writes about the

importance of teaching the Bible to children. “When we commit something to memory, it sinks deep and often resurfaces in surprising ways to meet new situations. Biblical fragments (‘knit together in my mother’s womb,’ ‘her price is far above rubies,’ ‘plans for your welfare and not for harm’) happily can grow with us, providing both a touchstone to the past and points of connection to new people and new meanings. We stuff our memories with so many things (lyrics to Sesame Street songs and Santa’s reindeer), why worry about adding the names of the apostles and the words of Psalm 23 to the mix?”

People of every age can benefit from Bible study in a group setting. About 30 years ago I was a student at Louisburg College. I was involved with the Christian Life Council. During that time there was a popular television program titled, “The Mod Squad.” Some people on campus would call our group “The God Squad.” They would see a group of us walking across campus, and they would say, “There goes the God Squad.” As a part of “the God Squad,” I helped to plan spiritual life retreats and Bible studies. The Bible studies in which I participated were very meaningful to me. Various dormitory residence directors were the leaders. As I was discerning God’s call upon my life, it was very helpful to study the Bible with a group that was always asking, “What does this mean for our lives today?”

The goal is spiritual formation and transformation. The apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the Ephesians: “(The gifts God gave) were to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. . . Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12-13, 15)

The goal is spiritual maturity: a knowledge of who Jesus is and how we can

follow him.

Another part of the vision of our church is “to bear witness to Christ’s love.” Christ has done so much for us. We bear witness to that in our daily lives. This is the second part of Jesus’ Great Commandment – to love your neighbor as yourself.

C. S. Lewis writes in his book, *The Weight of Glory*, that agape, unselfish love, enables us to “love what is not naturally lovable: lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior, and the sneering.” We are able to love this way when we allow God’s love to enter our hearts and our actions. Lives can be changed as a result.

Brian McLaren was driving home one day. He turned on the radio and caught the news. More violence. More bad news about global warming. More political division and rancorous name-calling. More stories of people abusing people sexually, children with guns, crooked politicians, corrupt business executives.

He thought to himself, “What can change this vicious cycle of viciousness?” He switched the radio off as he drove along in silence. He remembered the famous quote from the 19th century British statesman Edmund Burke: “All that the forces of evil need to win in this world is for enough good people to do nothing.”

He thought: “Somebody should start an organization that would mobilize people – recruit them, train them, support them – so they could be good people who do something so that the forces of evil don’t win in this world. This organization would need to accept people just as they are, infuse them with hope, give them a vision of a better world, give them a vision for themselves becoming agents of making that better world a reality. It would need to both practice and preach. Why hasn’t somebody started an organization like that?”

Of course, about a quarter mile down the road he realized that somebody had done just that. It had cost him everything to do so. His name was Jesus.

You and I have the chance to be a part of this organization.

One of my visions for this church is for more people to experience Christ through this church. I yearn for more people worshipping God here, more people studying God's Word in classes and retreats, more people offering themselves in service and mission to others in Durham and around the world, and more people speaking out for justice and on behalf of the vulnerable.

I envision more people learning the stories of the faith and growing in their understanding and experience of forgiveness, compassion and love, and that more people feel the sustaining presence of Christ through times of joy, grief, decision, and hardship. I pray for more people to develop the qualities of prayerfulness, service, kindness, gentleness, and generosity, and that more people live with hope and joy.

This is the vision of our church. Our mission is sharing Christ from the heart of Durham. Today I invite you to embrace this mission and vision and to work toward it.

Closing prayer: Dear God, you give us dreams, visions and hopes. You have a dream for Duke Memorial United Methodist Church that you have revealed to us. Empower us to fulfill this mission, so that your name might be glorified and the lives of many people might be transformed and blessed. We pray in the name of your Son, our King, Jesus. Amen.