

Rev. Dr. Rebecca L. Kiser
Wrong Relationship with...Purpose
3/14/2 Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday

I want to talk to our church family about the upcoming Visioning Process that starts next Sunday after worship, and continues the following week. This is such an important step for us that I want everyone to know that your input is vital, every one of you. Every voice counts! One of our beliefs is stated in the doctrine called “The Priesthood of the Believer,” which means that every one of us who are following Christ have been called to ministry, every one of us is called to serve, to spread the good news; and every one of us is gifted in special ways for this work. It means that every one of us counts. We honor that each person is important in the Capital-C Church of Jesus Christ in both our gifts and our beliefs.

And each of us is fully a member of this congregation, whether we have formally joined or not. If we worship here regularly, or work in our service projects, or attend our fellowships; or if we are homebound right now but still participate as we are able - then we are part of this group’s life. And each voice is a person to whom, and through whom, the Holy Spirit can speak.

So far in our Interim process, we have looked at who we are right now - we had a good participation in our survey, and learned our ages, our work status, where we live, what we think works well in our church and what we think could be improved or needs to be added. We found out about our housing, our giving, and some of our basic viewpoints. We have now also looked at our community, through the Drive and Pray and our 2 Virtual Potlucks with speakers about the area and its peoples around us. The Drive and Pray didn’t get the participation I hoped for, but several of you DID drive the three-mile circle around our building here, and saw the poorer houses, the blogger houses, the new houses and the old houses. The two Virtual Potluck speakers did tell us some needs in our area, and some demographic info about the people in our area. Principal Marcy Baker told us about the Jamesville Elementary School and the needs of children there. Resource Presbyter Karen Chamis showed us that within 3 miles of our facility are couples with young children and the group called “Millennials” which are the young 20-30 somethings. So we see needs and we see potentialities.

This next step in the process, where we are now, asks us to do some discernment about how to go forward in the next years. Rev. Chamis was both blunt and right when she said that these next years are crucial for whether our church thrives or fades. And she also rightly (and

bluntly) told us it is more of God to focus outward on service than to focus inward on institutional survival. As Christ gave his life for our salvation, taking up his cross and dieing, so are we called to give ourselves in continuing the ministry and work of Christ reaching out to the world with the Good News. We, like Christ, are to take up our cross and follow - and as we heard in the words of Scripture last week, when we seek to save our life, we ultimately lose it. It is in giving up our life that we find it.

This is a great challenge to our congregation, or any congregation. Especially in this day and age when many congregations are ageing, with only a few young families and children who participate. We are typical of many congregations in our country, and suffering in the same ways. We are fortunate that we can still maintain our budget and call a full-time pastor. Many of us said in our survey that one thing we love about our church is that people have been here over their lifetimes - friendships go back 30, 40 or more years. We need to realize that while a blessing to those of us who have enjoyed long and caring relationships, it makes it hard for new people to make their way in.

My heart was full after Rev Chamis' talk - several folks told me the same. The good news is that we're not alone in being in this boat; the challenge is to reach out in a new way to our community. This is a large task, when many of us are retired and thinking it's time to sit back and carry on like before. I've had people in every congregation I've served tell me that they've done their bit, and it's time for the younger folks to take over - the trouble is, there aren't many younger people.

Now I'm at the retirement age myself, and I find that I'm falling behind in knowing all the things of these younger generations - I'm falling behind in technology, in the tv and movie characters I identify with; I'm not up on what's cool, or what themes and purposes drive younger generations. There's this tendency to pull in as we get older - pull in what we're involved in after we don't have our jobs challenging us to stay up with things anymore; we pull in our energy investment in things outside our own sphere. We remember pretty far back about how things used to be, when we DID know what was going on, when we understood the world we were emerging into; and we learned how to cope in that world, how to do church in that world, what worked in that world. In many ways our world shrinks after we retire and get older - we have the places we go and the things we do and things we understand. All the while the new generations

are recreating and reforming all kinds of ways and lifestyles around us - but it doesn't really affect us like it used to.

And yet we're the ones who need to reach out in Jesus' name now, reach out to people who are of a different generation than ours and in an era that's different from what we grew up in. Not that all human needs have changed - basic needs of worth and purpose and understanding are still there. But communicating those things has changed - life hasn't stood still. It feels kind of like asking us to go back to work and learn a new job! It feels like what I felt a year ago now when I headed home because of the pandemic closing everything down, and I was freaking out asking how in the world were we going to worship now??? How in the world can we do this???

Yes, we coped and learned; and if we're not really back to "normal," whatever that is, we're more comfortable with things now than a year ago, that's for sure!!! Look how we learned to zoom and facebook! I've learned more about sound boards and speakers, we've gone outside, we've gone on Zoom and Facebook - not without some complaining, of course, but we've done it. We coped with the crisis of the pandemic changing our lives... Surely we can cope with trying some new ways to be church! We are still creative and inventive, and the Spirit of God is speaking. It's a new challenge. The important thing is that we have to begin to reach out more than we've done in a great while. We're fortunate to have some younger families that are still working, and some with younger children - and I hope these families will be involved in our visioning, as they may well be the teachers of us older folks.

This familiar passage we read today shows us what Jesus is looking for from disciples and what we need to aim at as Christ-followers. This passage emphasizes actions that reach out towards others - feeding the hungry, providing water for the thirsty, clothing the needy, visiting the imprisoned,and just all around DOING SOMETHING to address the suffering of people around us, meeting the needs of people that Jesus died for. There is an aspect of following Christ that calls for introspection and examination of our living - yet the outcome of this deciding to follow Jesus is that we forget about ourselves, and spend ourselves in doing the works of Jesus for others who haven't heard the word Jesus brought. There's a journey inward; and there's also a journey outward. My teacher Matt Fox used to say that the mystic and the prophet are two sides of the same coin; that the end result of our inner journey is to begin to transform the world.

The issue before us is whether we are serving God as Jesus called us to; the issue is not whether our church grows, or whether our budget balances, or whether we have a wonderful place to come and feel good - No, the issue is that our eyes need to turn outwards, along with our feet, our hearts, our hands, and our minds.

If we drive less than 3 miles in any direction from here, we will find poverty; we will find struggling couples and singles; we will find children who are seeking security. We have a prison within that radius. We have massive, impersonal apartment complexes within that radius. And even those who seem to have “enough” still need the love of God and to find an eternal purpose in following Jesus. We don’t know what goes on in lives - illnesses, losses, being laid off, worry, marital trouble, sick kids, finding themselves... We need a vision of what direction God is asking us to go, what God wants us to address, because need is certainly there.

So as we approach this coming visioning process, I am asking each one worshipping here today to devote this coming week to asking God’s Spirit to lay on our hearts the concerns and needs of our neighborhood and its people - and to listen to what the Spirit whispers in our inner heart. I am asking us to pray that God increases our desire to serve; and to open our hearts and minds to the creative winds of the Spirit blowing through us. I am asking us to pray for courage to speak what God whispers to us, and insight to figure out how to move into that vision.

Next Sunday afternoon, we will take a look at some things that have already been stated in our surveys & house meetings, and brainstorm ideas where anything God has spoken to us is okay to say aloud. If we’ve prepared in prayer and willingness, this will be an authentic experience of listening for the Spirit and following; in trimming our sails so they can be filled with the wind of God. This whole process is important for our Pastor Nominating Committee as they search for our next pastor - because these visions have to come from within the congregation - the pastor just walks with us. We’re looking for the Spirit’s guidance for an unfolding plan for the next several years and beyond. Let’s pray with sincere hope for God to speak and guide. AMEN.