

Jan 11, 2009, FCMF #1

Themes: Vision, Budgets and moving forward in Faith

“Holy Ground and Sacred Spaces”

I have to wonder if in our modern world do we actually believe such places even exist? In the beginning, in Eden, Eden was surely such a place. And in the beginning God, or was it actually “before the beginning there was God!” And it was this Divine Creator who called the light into reality and from that moment on, without fail, the darkness of night has been and will always be gently swept away by the dawn. “As sure as the sun will come out tomorrow” we say, we acknowledge that there are some things do not change- some realities that are certain!

And I must confess to you, there have been times in my life where this one reality was all that did seem certain. You see there have been times in my life where the present circumstances seemed so uncertain, so dark and so full of anxiety that little seemed reliable enough to latch onto. But I will also confess that as important as the promise of day break may have been, the certainty of God presence, the promise that God would never abandon me gave me something sure and solid enough to have an anchor in the middle of the storm. This eternal and everlasting One is also a high place upon which we can stand, taking in an amazing 360 degree panorama. A holy space useful in gaining perspective as well as offering us a glimpse of what and how God sees!

This afternoon we are having our annual congregational meeting. The primary focus of this meeting will be the annual budget. It is quite likely that some folks hate to spend time, especially a nice Sunday afternoon, talking about income and expenditures. And then add to this the potential for passionate disagreements and difficult decisions that have been caused by the precipitous decline in pledges and the deep downturn in our economy and it is understandable why few would want to attend!

I know that the past month has been a very difficult time for many of us as we have struggled with these realities. I particularly want to thank the Elders and Trustees (Ginny, Don, Susie, Katie and Eliza) who have work so hard, perhaps even lost some sleep and who agonized deeply over how best to move forward. There have been some disagreements and some emotionally charged exchanges along the way but I want to make it abundantly clear this morning that I support their leadership and believe wholeheartedly that their recommendations are motivated by only one thing and that is by what they feel is best for us all! And if the spirited discussion and disagreements continue into this afternoon I also believe that we will move forward together with renewed vigor and purpose! But before we move into that excitement, I must first add this challenge, ***Vision Must Always Trump Reality*** and budgets must always be the servant of the vision God is imparting to us!

Why? Well for one thing, in the beginning it was only God! And from a formless void and an indistinct mass of liquid and vaporized H₂O, God spoke into Eternity- the light! Similarly we could say, “Long before the beginning of FCMF, long before there were even Mennonites in Northern Colorado, God was creatively at work!” And I must add, and this is in direct contradiction to the pronouncements of dire consequences you may have heard emanating from the pastor’s office, “God’s creative juices will continue to flow into and through the FCMF regardless of what budget is chosen!” For as sure as daylight follows night, God is and God’s purposes are from everlasting to everlasting! And there is nothing we can do, or better yet, fail to do, that will change that reality!

This here is my very first Bible, and in the inside cover it says, “Presented to Stephen Martin Ramer, by Elmer Ramer; May 1, 1967.” And according to this “Authorized KJV,” Proverbs 29:18 reads, “Where there is no vision, the people perish...” This of course fits nicely my point this morning. Unfortunately the KJ Translation here is considered a very poor one. More reliable translations use words like prophecy or revelation instead of vision and rather than folk perishing, “the people” simply lose all self control or end up naked (which would have been a very grave humiliation in ancient that culture). Or we can use the RSV (that is the Ramer Standard

Version), “When we ignore God’s reality, we just might go crazy!” Regardless of the version I think we can all agree that vision is essential for any human initiative, even, perhaps our very survival. And I also believe that vision, is intrinsically connected to faith. Many of us are no familiar with the definition of faith given to us in Hebrews chapter 11 that, “... *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*” (vv 1&3 NRSV)

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for” and not some form of wishful thinking or a fairy tale hope that a Knight in shining armor will arrive to save us! My friend Jim Wallis at Sojourner’s Magazine describes faith this way (and I have to paraphrase it since I’m reconstructing it from memory), “Faith is not the absence of nor the denial of the present realities. True faith takes into account this reality and then works for and waits upon the reality to change!” Or as I might add, “Faith is not merely hoping for pie in the sky by and by. Rather faith occurs when, with Spirit’s help, we gather up the ingredients and roll out the dough and then wait, with God, for the oven timer to “ding!””

Now Mr Wallis also makes the claims that “Budgets are Moral Documents!” Usually he is referring to those budget priorities that our government makes as it cuts services to the poor in order to give tax breaks for the wealthy. And I agree but I want to stretch his point to include our own immediate context by stating that, “Budgets are also statements of faith.”

What we agree to this afternoon will reflect our priorities as well as our convictions. How we allocate our resources will also reveal that which unseen and that which we hope for! Budgets also indicate where we are headed! Now lets say that the Bible is like tour book (The Lonely Planet is my favorite) full of maps and descriptions, of this new and unknown reality we are entering. Our budget then is like our trip plan. For instance lets say we want to visit a place like, oh I don’t know... Italy, maybe visit Maria and Frank, well we may not be able to see every thing there is to see- so we must prioritize. And of course journeys often require us to make adjustments along the way. Our trip plan tells us where we are going and what are our priorities. But you know what the best part is when we are putting the plan together and as we are traveling around? The best part is that we don’t have to do it alone. One of my greatest hope for this community is that we realize that we travel best when we travel together with everyone’s input and with everyone’s enjoyment.

So where does vision come from? Well here at FCMF we do have a vision statement that is simple and yet profoundly eloquent in stating our vision (And if you look you can find it on the cover of the bulletin). It is also a huge task, an overwhelming endeavor and shall we say humanly impossible? And this brings me back to the title of today's message- It is my belief that vision comes to us when we spend time in what might be termed "Sacred Places." ***"When the Lord saw that Moses was coming closer, God called out to him from the middle of the bush, saying, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "yes, here I am." God said, Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals for you are standing on holy ground.... So Moses covered his face, because he was afraid to look at God." (Ex 3: 4-6, Good News)*** Holy ground is anywhere God catches our attention. It is also fertile ground where the Spirit will mold and change us and our reality. We are familiar with some of these places, places such as deserts, mountain tops, stables and perhaps even a church building or two.

Now I am holding in my hand something that I consider holy. Of course I am not referring to the paper but to what is written on it. On these pages are the verbatim responses to a question asked in our first ever Gift Discernment Survey conducted last November.

It was Question 1. What is most important you about the life of FCMF or why do you choose to be a part of this community? And you responded:

To be a living sign of God's reign.

Mennonite, Christ-centered, Progressive, Community

Because I feel God's love and power here, and I want to be there to soak it up... The community empowers me to continue in God's daily plan for me.

There is "real" positive energy – people really care.

Opportunity for worship. I appreciate how people value alternative family composition, pacifism, outreach, and creativity.

The sense of community and sharing. A chance to learn about religion and spirituality in a safe progressive place. Our social justice orientation.

True sense of community. Broad , participatory nature of services. Genuine concern and actions for one another, the local community, and the world. Sharing the journey. Trying to understand and seek common ground.

The Mennonite church is the only one I've ever actually wanted to attend. The welcome, the inclusiveness, the service orientation.

I love the sense that we are all sincerely and humbly striving to come closer to God, and are all supporting each other in this journey.

An inclusive fellowship centered around love, acceptance, and wisdom, drawing from the teachings of Jesus.

Spiritual nurture, sharing our lives, challenge, inspiration, opportunity for my family to grow spiritually and to have a faith community to walk with.

Music. Community.

FCMF is a good community. Many common values... Compassionate, peace and justice-minded, inclusive, nonjudgmental, searching of Christian faith and Christ's teachings, and faith into action important to me.

Our commitment to peace and social justice, out commitment to each other – to be known and loved and accepted, our connections globally...

As I read, where were you looking? Did you steel a glance at one another? Or did you feel the need to avert your gaze or “hide your face” from the one who might be offering to you their holy gift? These are holy, they are gifts planted in each of us by God and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. And now they are offered, generously and joyously, to each of us in this time and in this place. That, my Brothers and Sisters, makes this space sacred! You and me, neither of us is Holy, but with the Spirits help, as we give generously and share joyfully our gifts with one another, we can stand, like Moses- barefooted, on Holy Ground. And like him, we can step onto holy ground and into a place where we will be forever changed and a place where how we perceive reality will never be the same.

Let us be clear, today, a budget is essentially only a tool, while vision is essentially the life of the church. And if budgets serve and enable our vision then “vision also trumps budget.” I want to encourage each of you to join us for the potluck after the service and then to stay and participate in this joint act of faithfilledness. Much about this budget is still uncertain and the final choices are yet to be made. We certainly face some discouraging realities, which lead to; fears, frustrations, anger and anxieties- the kind of stuff that makes folks crazy! Pledge numbers are not what we had hoped and prayed for, leaving us little to pay me let alone any programs.

Yes, my brothers and sisters the present reality looks pretty grim and feels extremely discouraging. And yet can we still have our faith, faith in our God who has not changed and the faith that God's spirit will empower us and faith in each other. In this faith we can find comfort and receive courage and catch a new vision and watch while the reality changes? This is what is certain? My best guess is that tomorrow the dawn will again eclipse the night, and our present winter cold will one day give way to a warm spring breeze. And I also know that God, God will be there, just as God is here now and just as God was there with us in the past! And with God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, combined with our efforts and a little time reality will change!