

“Vision, Purpose, and Mission”

Rev. David Gregory

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Epiphany 5



Let your light shine ...

First reading

Matthew 5:13-16

New Revised Standard Version

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Second reading

from A Potential CCC Vision Statement

Community Congregational Church is a place where anyone wrestling with the big questions of life can belong in loving multi-generational community. We offer practices and programs that embody contemplative spirituality artful co-creation, and grounded actions toward peace and justice for our environment and for all of humanity. We are a healing presence in the world.

What are we talking about when we talk about church? “Church” is a word that we’re actually using less and less these days. We’re more likely to speak of ourselves as a spiritual community. Granted, our name, Community Congregational Church, gives us some leeway here. We might describe ourselves as a congregation, as a church, or as a community.

“Church” is a word with deep meaning in the New Testament, and it is a translation of the Greek word, *ecclesia*, meaning the “called-out ones.” But as with most of the biblical words we use, there are unintended connotations that can muddy the waters.

What are *you* talking about when you use the word “church?” I first met Tripp Hanson eleven years ago this week. Not long after that, he visited a Sunday service in the church I was serving at that time. You will probably find this unsurprising, but after that service, he had a few questions for me. One of them went something like this: “Why did the liturgist read that awful psalm about retribution falling upon the enemies of God? I know you don’t believe that stuff.” He may also have cited a phrase from my sermon, some piece

of theology or a biblical theme that I considered self-evident to all humanity, and said, “But, what does that mean?” A little later on, he might have asked, “Why does church have to be so heady? Why can’t it be more of an experience?” I must not have been too offended, because eventually I married him. And lest you think this is all one-sided, over the years I have challenged his life and work with questions that are probably just as pointed. That’s actually what makes a relationship work. As the Hebrew poet has suggested, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”

I have been in church pretty much my entire life, and as much as I know in my head that fewer and fewer people can point to a history like that, I still can operate as if I think that the whole world knows what I’m talking about. When I speak of mainline Protestant and reformed tradition, you all know what I mean, right? When I speak of the first Council of Nicaea in the year 325 or the Great Schism of 1054, or the German monk named Martin Luther who set in motion the Great Reformation five hundred years ago, this is your polite dinner conversation, right?

Let’s just set aside all the historical and ecclesiastical nerdiness, and talk about Jesus for a change. Jesus is pretty refreshing here, actually, because he really didn’t have anything at all to do with church. He was born Jewish, and he died Jewish, and we should never blame him for anything that has happened since.

But what he said to his friends was this:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

These two metaphors of salt and light are taken from the Sermon on the Mount, a collection of sayings that I happen to think ought to form the central manifesto of what has come to be known as the Christian Church. Salt provides a preservative force in the world, and light keeps us from stumbling in the darkness, so if we want to know why we’re here in this room twenty-one centuries later, I guess this would be the place to start.

Lately, I’ve been throwing around these vision statements, and I want to make it clear that my purpose in doing this is less about word-smithing, and more about getting us to think clearly about why we’re here, about what we do, and about what our desired future is. And maybe it’s time to go a little deeper with it and get clear on three things: our purpose, our mission, and our vision.

Our *purpose* answers the question, “Why are we here?” and these ideas from Jesus about salt and light could give us some insight as we attempt to answer that question. Our *mission* answers the question, “What do we do?” This could be the place where we talk all about our practices and programs and all the ways we occupy our time on this hill and out in the world. Our *vision* answers the question, “What is our desired future?” What do we want this place to be, next week, next year, and even when we’re gone?

In about three months we will be electing officers and Board members who will provide leadership in the coming year, and I would like to propose that we make it our goal to get super, super, super clear about these three questions (“Why are we here? What do we do? What is our desired future?”) so that the

officers and leaders, the clergy and the supporting staff, the voting members and friends, the people who have been here for decades, and those who enter our doors for the first time on any given week can easily articulate what we mean when we talk about this “church.” Our answers to these questions can also help us discern how best we can use our resources wisely and confidently in this world.

We spend a lot of time here trying to figure out our processes so that we can trust them, and trust one another as we follow them. Our church Covenant exists as the foundational commitment that we make together. On that commitment are built the bylaws and our established procedures by which we try to run the place. These procedures are not perfect. They have fluidity; they are evolving. They provide a snapshot of where we are in this place and time. And with the Covenant as our foundation we can take the further step of coalescing around a *purpose*, a *mission*, and a *vision*, and (to quote last week’s reading from Ephesians) we might then find ourselves “moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful” as mature adults, “fully developed within and without, fully alive” with Divine and Holy Spirit.

It has often been said that the Community Congregational Church is one of Marin’s best kept secrets: tucked away on the top of a hill; not really visible until you’ve arrived; filled with gems of wisdom collected by generations of spiritual seekers; a haven of contemplation and artistic expression. No one who has ever been part of this community has ever seen anything else quite like it, before or since. This place is a true gift. But this gift is not just for us; it is for others—others who might venture in the doors; others who might enter our virtual doors; others whom we’ve not yet met; people with children, people with energy, people with problems, happy people, sad people, people in need of healing, people who can offer healing. All kinds of people. And just as in the first century, we can get all bright and salty and change the world around us for the better. In a world filled with bad news, we can become purveyors of *good news*, which is all that the gospel really is. All we need to do is to get crystal clear and then *go for it!*

