

Claiming God's Vision
Jeremiah 31:28-31; Luke 18:1-8
October 21, 2007

In the mid-eighteen hundreds, a traveling Methodist preacher known as Brother Van rode on horseback throughout northern Montana asking for gifts with which to build a hospital in the city of Havre. A two-story wooden building was erected with eight patient rooms and modest areas for labs and surgery. It was outgrown almost before it was finished, but it was not replaced until 1937 with a brick and glass structure equipped with modern technology.

In 1938 a young woman who lived deep in the Bear's Paw mountains southeast of Havre was about to give birth to her second child. The midwife quickly realized that the child was turned wrong and would be a breach birth, resulting in almost certain death upon delivery. She raced to the school to borrow the teacher's car and drove the young mother seventy miles over dirt roads to reach the new hospital in Havre. After hours of agonizing labor the child was born and nursed to health by the medical staff.ⁱ

That child became a United Methodist pastor in our conference, thanks to the devotion of Brother Van and others who had invested in the lives of others whom they would never know. That United Methodist pastor was a counselor at a church camp attended by a young girl in middle school, who now is the United Methodist pastor serving this congregation. Brother Van's vision of a hospital gave the gift of life to Fred; Fred's vision of youth inspired to a life of faith and service is being realized in my life today.

Most of us can tell stories of people who had an impact on our lives. Those who influence us usually do so because they have a sense of purpose beyond themselves. They have a larger vision which inspires and motivates them to make a difference. Perhaps the grandest visionary of them all is God. Scriptures give us a glimpse of the life of shalom and justice that God desires for humanity and all of creation. Scientists have helped us understand the systemic nature of life, in which the actions of one creature impact the lives of others. We are aware that each of our actions contributes, for good or ill, to the lives and well-being of others. When we claim God's vision for our lives and for our world, we are more likely to direct our energies toward making a positive impact.

The persistent widow in Jesus' parable reminds us that lives of active, prayerful, justice-seeking faith are still needed in an unjust world. We are not told the specifics of this woman's experience of injustice. We do know that widows were among the most vulnerable members of society in the ancient world. Upon the death of a husband, his inheritance was not transferred to his widow. Instead his estate was given to his sons or brothers. Widows were dependent upon

extended family for their daily sustenance; they were not empowered to be self-sufficient. This widow was driven to seek justice because she claimed God's vision for herself and her society. She refused to be complacent and fall into apathetic acceptance of the status quo. She knew that things could be different and so she devoted her prayers and her actions to making a difference.

The widow was persistent in casting her vision, the vision of God. She waited around the halls of justice to catch the judge as he came off the elevator. She left messages on his answering machine, not threatening messages, but reminders of her cause. She had so fully claimed the vision God had for her life that she devoted her time, energy, and efforts to achieving its fulfillment.

God has a vision for your life, as well. The Body of Christ is here to help us discern God's call upon our lives. Our ministry is devoted to helping us pay attention to God's presence in our midst, to listen to the direction God gives, and to empower us for action in the world. Sometimes life throws us curveballs that get in the way of God's vision. The community of faith is here to support us through life's challenges, to encourage us to not lose heart, but to persevere. The church of Jesus Christ is the presence of Christ in the world today, beckoning all toward God's broader view for all creation. The fellowship of Jesus' disciples is here to offer accountability on the journey of faith, prodding us to direct our energies into healthy choices.

This is the season in the life of our congregation in which we are asked to prayerfully consider how God is calling us to serve and share of our resources of time, talent, and treasure. We give of ourselves because we have experienced the blessings of God in our lives and want to offer thanks. We serve because we want to be a part of something larger, and there is no grander vision than God's dream of a realm of peace and justice. The church is in the business of claiming that vision for our individual lives and for the life of the world.

Dan West was a Church of the Brethren relief worker in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. He was someone who claimed God's vision for his life and for the world. Dan's assignment was handing out cups of powdered milk to hungry children on both sides of the conflict. But the milk ran out before the line did. As a farmer, Dan's response was practical. "Wouldn't it be better," he reasoned, "to supply families with an ongoing source of nutritious milk so parents could feed their children themselves without having to depend on powdered milk from abroad? These children don't need a cup, they need a cow."

Back home in Indiana, Dan's friends agreed. "I'll give a calf, if someone else will raise her," one said. Dan and his friends formed Heifers for Relief, dedicated to ending hunger permanently by providing families with livestock and training so that they "could be spared the indignity of depending on others to feed their children."

In 1944, the first shipment of 17 heifers left York, Pennsylvania for Puerto Rico, headed for families whose malnourished children had never even tasted milk. Heifers are young cows that haven't yet given birth – making them perfect not only for supplying a continued source of milk, but also for supplying a continued source of support. Each family receiving a heifer agrees to “pass on the gift” and donate the female offspring to another family, so that the gift of food is never-ending.

Dan's vision of a cow, rather than a cup, has caught on and has continued for over 60 years. Since 1944, Heifer has helped 8.5 million people in more than 125 countries.ⁱⁱ In this way Dan and many others participate in God's vision of a world of justice where all children are fed. Thanks to your generosity, Lafayette UMC purchased an ark of animals worth \$5,000 last year; a beautiful plaque recognizing that gift is on the wall in the Fireside Room.

The story is told of the Christians who built the Cathedral Church in Seville, Spain. Before they began construction in 1401, they wrote a resolution and signed it as a statement of their dream and vision in building that church. The resolution reads: “Let us build here a church so great that those who come after us will think us mad ever to have dreamed of it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What kind of church are we building here? What is God's vision for our ministry together? How are we called to contribute our time, talent, and treasure toward making the vision of God for our life and ministry a reality?

We are called to claim God's vision for our time and our place in history. This congregation has a long and respected tradition of growing faith-filled disciples of Jesus Christ. Building on that firm foundation, we are poised for even deeper spiritual growth in the years ahead. We have an opportunity to make an investment in God's vision for ourselves, for our community, and for our world.

Let us build a ministry so great that those who come after us will think us drunk with the Holy Spirit to have dreamed of it!

ⁱ Rev. Fred Baker, Letter to Rio Linda Community United Methodist Church.

ⁱⁱ Heifer International, heifer.org, and Homiletics Online, retrieved October 19, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rev. James A. Harnish, Homiletics Online, retrieved October 19, 2007.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA