

“Igniting...the Vision”

My freshman year of college I took one of the English classes that everybody had to take. There were a couple of hundred people in the class and the day of the final exam I overslept. It was a two hour test. I had studied for the test, I was ready for the test, but I was 30 minutes late getting there. When I walked in the professor gave me the exam and said, “You’ll never finish this in time. You’ve got 90 minutes left for this 2 hour test, and when time is up, you had better turn it in.”

After 90 minutes he called time and everybody had to turn in their tests. I kept on working, because I knew the stuff and I didn’t want to flunk. 10 minutes after he called time I walked up to put my test on top of the stack of 200 others. The professor said, “Now way. I’m not going to accept that. It’s late.”

So I said him, “Do you know who I am?” He got all sarcastic and said, “No I don’t.” So I asked him again, “Do you know who I am?” He said, “I don’t know who you are and I don’t care.” I looked at him and said, “Good!” I lifted half the stack of exams, stuck mine in the middle, and walked out. OK, that didn’t really happen to me! But it’s a cool story.

But today we’re starting a series about who we are as a congregation and what we believe God’s called us to do, and be, and become. We’ll be talking about vision and mission, and about our future and your part in that. It’s a series inviting all of us to participate in fueling our vision and mission through a capital stewardship campaign. Today I want to focus on our vision, who we are and who we can become.

Now, who we are is rooted very simply, very directly in Jesus. Our vision of why we exist comes from him. Take a look at this passage of scripture. **“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him” (Matthew 4:18-22).** This passage of scripture defines what Saint Paul’s has been trying to do for about 120 years. It defines what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ—to be fishers of people.

There are a couple of things I want you to notice right up front in this passage. Jesus is starting this movement that’s going to be spreading the good news of the kingdom of God around the world, but notice who he picks to do that. You’d think he’d go looking for the top of the graduating class from Jerusalem Seminary. But Jesus doesn’t do that. He’s walking along the Sea of Galilee and the first followers he calls are fisherman.

They would have been hard working, blue collar men. They would have had very minimal education. Every day, six days a week they fished. That was their life. Jesus looks at them says, “Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of people.” This points out a characteristic of God throughout the Bible, and that’s that God chooses the ordinary and through them he will do the extraordinary. God chooses the people that nobody would vote most likely to succeed, to be the ones that God will do his greatest work through.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said, **“Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth...He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are” (1 Corinthians 1:26-28).**

That’s how God operates. He takes the ordinary and does something extraordinary through them. He chose me. And he chose you. Not because of your good looks, not because of your success. But because God works through ordinary people.

Now, notice a couple of things about how he called the disciples. Keep in mind that these are fisherman. I’ve watched the show *The Deadliest Catch* a few times. The men on that show are pretty rough. Rough language, rough lifestyle, drink too much, who knows what else. And I’d venture a guess that fisherman back in Jesus’ day were not much different. A pretty rough crowd. Rough language, rough lifestyle, drink too much, who knows what else.

Jesus doesn’t go up to them and say them, “OK Peter, Andrew, James, John, if you’ll stop cussing and drinking, you can come and follow me.” He didn’t say that. He doesn’t say to them, “I want you to come work with me, but first tell me, what’s your theology of the Trinity? Tell me your understanding of predestination. Do

you see scripture as inspired or inerrant?" He doesn't ask them any of those questions. He just says, "Follow me." Now don't get me wrong. Theology and lifestyle are important, but Jesus took people where they were and showed us that the most foundational part of becoming a disciple is simply choosing to follow him. It's that simple! And that's what Saint Paul's has been trying to convey to people. We've been trying to invite people who weren't followers of Jesus to find out who he is and then to follow him.

Now, the disciples when they follow him, they actually got to literally follow him. They followed him where he went; they did the things he did; they listened to him teach. How do we follow Jesus when we don't have him around us physically, bodily present, to show us what to do? Well, we read the Book, right? This is why we want every single one of you to have a Bible. And I tell you every single week to open it up every day or almost every day and read the stories of Jesus so that you know what it means to follow him. Following him happens when you get together with your friends in a small group and you talk about the scriptures, and you talk about your faith, and you learn from each other. Following him happens when you come to worship and as you listen to the word you hear God speaking to you and you understand. Following him happens when you pray and you invite the Holy Spirit to lead you. Following him happens when you serve people like he did. These are the things we do today as we become followers of Jesus.

Following Jesus means to wake up in the morning and say, "What do you want me to do today? How do I live my life today? Where would you have me go, what would you have me do?" That's what it means to call Jesus, "Lord." You give him authority in your life.

I made that decision when I was 12 and for the last 32 years I've been trying to live that out. I do it very imperfectly and make tons of mistakes. But in the process of trying to follow it has affected every part of who I am. How I spend my time, how I use my abilities, how I treat my family, how I treat strangers, how I spend my money, how I treat the earth. Following Jesus has affected everything in my life—everything! And in him I have found life, and hope, and joy, and truth. That's what Jesus is calling us to when he calls us to be his followers. If you haven't already chosen to follow him, every day he's inviting you, "Come follow me."

Notice what happens next in this story. Jesus invites them to follow him, then he tells them what their mission will be. He says, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." Now they were fishing with nets. But most of you who fish don't do it with a net, you fish with a rod and reel. What do you do when you catch a fish that way? You reel it in, you bop it on the head and then you filet it and then you eat it! When you put it that way it doesn't sound like a good vision for a church or a Christian for that matter!

Let's look at fishing for people a different way. One of my favorite things is going canoeing on a river. Now, I don't like to fish, but along the river, every so often you find small pools. Some of the pools are pretty big, some are small. And in almost all of them you'll find fish of different sizes that get trapped in those pools when the water goes down. Every once in a while you'll find a pretty good sized fish in one of the small pools. They'll be in there in just a few inches of water their gills flaring trying to breath. That fish can exist in there for a while but eventually it will die because there's no food, not enough oxygen, and they're easy prey for predators. The fish just can't survive. When I see that I want to get the fish and put it back into the river. I'm kind of sissy and don't really like to hold fish, but I'll try, because living in that pool, with that stale, sometimes scummy, water, is not really living.

The Biblical picture of life without Christ is like being a fish living in one of those pools. And if that's all we know, that's normal. We don't even know what we're missing--the freshness, the life, the richness of the river. Without Christ sometimes people don't even know the hope, the joy, the unconditional love that they're missing out on. What Jesus is calling us to do when he asks us to be fishers of people is to go down and find the fish that are living in those shallow pools and catch them and release them into the river where they can swim the way they were meant to swim, where they can experience what they were meant to experience when they were created by God—love, hope, adventure. That's what fishing for people should look like.

Now, it's important to recognize that all of us are called to be fishers of people, not just a few of us, not just pastors. You are called to fish for people. This is what our church has been doing for over 100 years. Finding people who don't have faith, or people who have turned away from faith, and be a place where it's safe

to come. A place where they can taste and experience what it means to be a follower of Christ and find the life that he offers. That's what our mission has been and we've done a pretty good job of that—we could always do better, but we've done a pretty good job of that.

We've gone from 200 in worship to 900 in the last 15 years. We have about 1,000 members, we average over 500 on Wednesday Night Live. In the last 10 years over half the people who joined were either new Christians, or had been inactive in their faith prior to connecting here. We've grown by 350% in the last 15 years! Our goal is not to be a big church. It's to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. What do the next 10 or 15 years hold? That is exciting to think about! If we got here with 200 people, where can we go with 900 people as God is guiding us?

It's awesome to look back, but it's even more important and exciting to look forward. We're all being invited to ignite the next 10, 15, 20 years. Ignite our future, ignite our passion for this future, and ignite our generosity in seeing it unfold. Lots of potential, but also lots of challenges.

Let's talk about some of the challenges. One is that what worked in the last 20 years, may not work in the next 20 years. The landscape of our country has changed in the last 20 years. The Pugh Forum for Religion and Public Life issued a report last year. They reported that in 1990 86% of the U.S. population identified themselves as Christians. Last year, 76% of the U.S. population identified themselves as Christians. That's a decline of 30 million people. In young adults it's an even bigger drop. In 1990 13% of young adults said, "I'm atheist or agnostic, or not religious at all." Today 26% of young adults say that. That number has doubled in the last 20 years. Today 40% of young adults are not active in a church.

That points to some serious issues, especially if you have children or grandchildren and you hope they will grow up to be men and women of faith. How are we going to reach people in the emerging generations? If we're fishing for people we're meant to be the bait that draws them in, right? One of my biggest roles as a pastor is to be the best bait I can be. I want to be the best tastiest worm on the hook, so people come and see. So changes in our society will dictate that we do ministry differently in the next 15 years as we try to reach out and go fishing for people who are non-religious and nominally religious. One question we have to constantly confront is how willing we are to change.

The first computer I ever owned was a Commodore 64. It is the single best-selling computer in history. I got mine in 1983 and it finally died in 1989. I replaced it with a Commodore 128 which I have right here. No hard drive, a 5.25" external floppy drive. 128 kilobytes of memory. This was the bomb! I did all my papers on this thing. I finally upgraded to a used Commodore Amiga 1000—which I still have. It wasn't until 1995, when I came to Saint Paul's, that I bought my first PC (a Gateway 2000 laptop) which I still have at home in a closet. Commodore had a huge market share and it just stopped innovating and died, went bankrupt. Commodore wasn't willing to change even though it was leader at one point in the computer market. The companies that filled the void, like Dell, and of course Apple, have sought to innovate and move with the culture.

The question I have for you is, "Are we willing to embrace change?" Because if we don't, we won't have a future. You can go into any city and find churches where their stained glass windows are boarded up and they are shut down. They used to be leading churches, but at some point they stopped being willing to embrace change and do what it takes to reach new generations of people for Jesus Christ. Are you going to be willing to embrace change, to utilize new technologies, to reach people in new ways, to do church in totally new ways than we ever thought of doing it before? Because that's what it's going to take to reach tomorrow's generations.

If we don't embrace change, 20 years from now we'll be totally irrelevant. We will be the Commodore 64 of the church world. And we will have failed to reach new generations of people. The mission doesn't change, but how we go about doing it has to.

This is where it gets exciting. And one thing I invite you to do today is to share some of your ideas about reaching people. On the front of your program is a post-it-note. Here's what I want you to do. Take that note and write down what ideas you have about how we could lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ in the next 10 years. How we can reach new people in the future, how we can pursue our vision in the future. New ideas of how we might use technology or do ministry in the future to reach emerging generations. Write those things down then pull that off and put it on the wall around the cross out in the lobby. We'll cull the best

ideas of those and see if we can't begin to incorporate them into our vision for the next 5 or 10 or 15 or 20 years. We want you to dream, to envision what's possible here as we try to live out this amazing mission of fishing for people.

The Salvage Yard, which reaches anywhere between 100 and 250 on any given weekend started as an idea to reach more people for Jesus Christ. Putting worship services on our website so people can watch them anywhere, any time if they miss church, was an idea to reach more people for Jesus Christ.

We have this amazing phenomenon happening at Saint Paul's right now. We have a growing number of active older adults **and** a growing number of young adults and singles. How do we make sure we're providing places for all of them to connect to each other, to God, and in serving the world? How many more people could we reach for Christ? It's exciting to think about.

Our task is to be fishers of people. Not just the staff of the church, not just the pastors. But when you walk out the doors of this place you're going fishing. What does it look like for you to go fishing? It's not about confronting people and scaring them with the threat of hell or making them feel bad about their lives. The way Jesus did it was that he took people where they were, he loved them and he offered them healing, and hope, and then he invited them to follow him.

What does it look like to go fishing for people? Today at the 9:30 service there is going to be a baptism. All baptisms are special, but there's something about this one that really has grabbed my heart. River is an 11 year old boy. He's had some really hard knocks in life, but he is an amazing kid. He's gotten connected here at Saint Paul's through the Big Brothers program. His big brother is Nick Capra. Nick became a Christian here at Saint Paul's about 5 years ago. Nick heard Jesus invite him to follow him and he did. Nick heard Jesus call him to go fishing, and he has. Not in any artificial way, but by simply being in relationship with people. Nick has been bringing River to church with him for a while now on Wednesday nights, and River asked Nick if he could be baptized. He's asked several times so Nick talked to River and River's mom about it. I sat down last week with River and Nick and we talked about it. River is great to talk to. He asks great questions, he knows what he wants to do with his life. Nick has been teaching him the 3 most important things in life are God, Family and School. I have a lot of hope for River and believe that we'll see great things from him. Nick is one of River's heroes because Nick has invested his heart and life in this boy.

I've told Nick, that I want to be like him when I grow up. To have his heart, his love, his faith. He's fishing for people because he doesn't want anybody to go through life not having a chance to get to know Jesus. That's our vision as a church.

As you probably know, we're starting a capital campaign called *Ignite* here at Saint Paul's and over the next few weeks we'll continue to give you information about it. Why are we doing a capital campaign? To help us get ready for the future. To eliminate the debt we have on the buildings so we're freed up to reach further, to lead more people to an active faith in Jesus Christ, to do even more fishing for people. So we can do more with older adults, and do more with young adults and singles, and do more in organizing small groups, do more in helping people in need, and sending people into mission.

This isn't about pressuring you to give money; some don't have any to give. But I want to challenge all of us to simply begin praying, "Lord, what do you want to do through me?" What people have given in the past has gotten Saint Paul's to this point. What we give, over and above our normal giving to this campaign will get us ready for the next 5, 10, 15, 20 years.

What we do here matters. In fact, I asked for you to tell me what Saint Paul's has meant to you a while back. I gave out cards like this. I've got almost 200 of them here. Here's what a few of you said...

What we do here matters. Let's get ready for the future, let's go fishing people. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in this message.