

“Vision Day 2005”

Wow! It’s been a while since I’ve been up here! Are these lights brighter than they were before?

First of all, I want to thank Pastor Mark for preaching while I took a break these past three weeks. He did an awesome job, didn’t he?! Mark’s leadership is going to take us to some amazing places in the months and years ahead, building on the past and looking to the future. Thank you Mark.

I want to tell you a little bit about what I did on my three week break. I slept a little later on most mornings. I didn’t work out for three weeks. I slowed down. I **did** in fact live out Mark’s sermon from last week. I stopped. I looked. I listened. I highly recommend it. I went on my annual canoe trip with my dad and brother (our yearly time to act like the juveniles that we really are). I went to a leadership conference up in Kansas City and stayed with my dad and his wife there—it was great to be with them. The conference was amazing. I got to hear from leaders in the church—some of my spiritual heroes like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren. And I got to hear from leaders in the business world like Colleen Barrett the president of Southwest Airlines. It was fantastic. In fact, I want to take a bunch of you with me next year. Whenever I go to a conference I come back and the staff have this frightened look in their eyes. This look of, “Oh no, what’s he going to do now?! What ideas is he bringing back now?!” I only hope that I can be in some small way an inspiration to you, like the people I heard were an inspiration to me.

So I went to that conference. I bought Janet a car for her birthday. She turns 40 next month. We kind of had to get a new car, but when I say it’s for her birthday I get points. It’s red. It’s got a spoiler on it! Aren’t I good boy?

Then I went to spend some time with my mom and her husband. If you haven’t spent some time with your parents lately, do it. Just do it. Very valuable time.

Every Sunday I went to a different church in the area including Pathways—the church we helped to start a few years ago. In three weeks I worshipped in 5 churches of 4 different denominations. In fact, between worshipping at other churches and worshipping here, and listening to sermons on CD in my car, I heard 13 sermons, I read 6 other messages. I read parts of 4 books. I fine-tuned our strategic vision for the next 12 months. And that’s what I want to share with you. Our vision.

You see, today I want to start a tradition. I want to start the tradition of taking one Sunday every year to remind all of us what it means to be a part of a church—what it means to be a part of **this** church, because being a part of a church should mean something. It had **better** mean something! So today I want to remind us who we are, what we believe God put us on this planet to do, and hopefully implant some inspiration in all of us.

But before I do that, I need to tell you who you’re listening to. I don’t know if you’re like me or not, but when I’m listening to somebody talk, I want to know who I’m listening to. Does anybody else ever do that when you’re at a conference or watching somebody speak on TV? Do you ask, “Who are you to speak with authority to me?” It’s good question. So let me tell you who you’re listening to today.

Growing up for me was kind of rough. I had a great family, parents who loved me, and a big brother who looked out for me. We went to church every Sunday and all that, but my growing up years were hard. You see, I was one of those kids that you didn’t want your kids around. I was hyperactive, attention-deficit, destructive, and angry. I had no conscience and was proud that I could vandalize and destroy and not feel a bit bad about it. I struggled in school. Most of my teachers dreaded having me as a student, I was so wild and out of control.

Like I said, I was raised in church, but I didn’t buy it. I didn’t believe it. My goal, if there was a God, was to stay under his radar and out of his reach. By the way, if that’s you, good luck with that!

Anyway, one summer I went to church camp, Camp Galilee. I went to get away from my parents, little did I know that they sent me there to get me away from them! And it was there that something happened. All that I’d heard about God, and this person Jesus, all the things that I’d been around in church as a kid, suddenly made sense. Jesus went from being a fairy tale character, to the reality of God. He went from being an outsider to jumping into my life. And my life changed. I began to think differently, act differently, see people differently.

A couple years later at that same camp I experienced another amazing thing. That was when God showed up again and asked me, called me, to be a minister. I would have bet big money that God did NOT want me working for him. But one night as I prayed I had the strongest sense of God say, “Aaron, I want you.”

I finished up High School not really knowing what I was supposed to do, just knowing that I was supposed to be a minister. I went to college and in college I began to question everything. I began to wonder if this calling was

real. So I ran. I went to Japan for year. I said to God, "God, if you're real, and you want me, then come and get me." And he did...

After a year in Japan I came back to finish my degree and then get ready for seminary. When I got seminary at Duke, I struggled again. I began to have reservations about the ministry thing. I looked at local churches and I didn't like what I saw. It looked like so much pretense, red tape, just going through the motions. I began to think that I didn't really want to get involved in the local church because they all seemed too broken and hopeless. I began to think that I was better than that. I was too good to be the pastor of a church. Surely there was some other specialized ministry for me. I was really just afraid.

It took the leadership of a very wise supervisor I had while I worked as a chaplain at the Duke hospital. She very wisely listened to me, and saw through me, and one day she said, "Aaron, you really do think you're too good for the local church don't you? But here is the truth. All ministry flows from the local church. **All ministry**, and if you think you're too good for that, then you have a real problem." Ouch! Sometimes honesty hurts doesn't it?

She was right, and from that point on I knew, I knew that I was supposed to be a pastor. You see, for a time in my life I really believed that the local church was so broken and flawed and fake that it would really be better if they all just went away. But here's what I believe today. Today, I believe with all of my being that the local church is the hope of the world. I believe that only one power exists on this earth that can truly transform the human heart and ultimately change the world. That power is the love of Jesus Christ. His love that destroys sin, wipes out shame, heals wounds, brings peace where there is war, and ultimately changes the world one life at a time. **This radical message of transforming love has been given to the Church!** To this church and every other church, no matter what denomination it is. The local church is the hope of the world.

And we as a church have a vision. The Bible says **[SLIDE...]** **"Without a vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18, KJV)**. Vision can be defined in a lot of different ways, but at its heart it means having an image of what you can become and what you can do in the future. For us as Christians it's following God's will for what you can do and become in the future with God's strength. Having a God-honoring vision literally pulls us into the future. Vision gives hope and purpose. Without vision, something in us dies. With vision, we're empowered to give our lives to something bigger than us.

Take a look at this clip from the movie Henry the V where the soldiers are preparing for battle and their leader shows them that what they're giving their lives to is so much bigger than they are. **[VIDEO: Henry V, approximately 2 min.]**

A God-honoring vision of what we can be and become helps us to know that we're a part of something so much bigger than us. So we must always have a God-inspired vision that we relentlessly pursue or we die. And our vision at Saint Paul's comes from our primary purpose. That primary purpose is to **[SLIDE: "Our primary purpose is to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ."]** This purpose comes directly from scripture. Particularly Matthew 28. This is called Jesus' Great Commission. It's when he sent out his followers then, and through the ages, to go do his work, to live out his vision. It says that Jesus came to them and said, **[SLIDE...]** **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20, NIV)**. That's at the heart of our vision.

So let's break this down into some categories. How do we live out our primary purpose for our children? **[PICTURE: Children]**. In other words, what vision do we have for the children of Saint Paul's? Children involved in the ministries of Saint Paul's are going to gain something significant. They're not just here to be entertained, or looked after while their parents are doing something else. I asked our Director of Children's Ministries, Todd Taylor, to articulate this. Our vision ultimately is to help kids grow into becoming more and more like Jesus. We're starting a rotation model for Sunday School which means that kids will be focusing on 9 biblical principles each year. They'll have four workshops on each principle using differing styles of learning so that they really get it!

Our vision is also that kids make friends, that they know that they're each unique and that God has a purpose for each of their lives. We want them to learn how to pray, how to talk to the God who made them and how to listen for his voice for all their lives. Yes, they'll have tons of fun too! But that fun will happen as they grow in their faith. We'll be moving to a place where even our children are in small groups so that they build strong relationships with other kids and their leaders.

Last month at Vacation Bible School we had 300 children at one time in the building. After it was over I asked Todd, "What are you learning by having 300 kids to teach and guide, and let's face it, control!" I asked him

that because someday we'll have that many children on a typical Sunday morning or Wednesday evening. Todd's response was, "What's going to be very important is having small groups for kids and a rotation model where they're really learning." He also said, "We won't be able to do it without more adults serving." That means serving on Sunday morning for an hour, or serving on Wednesday nights for two. It means that those of you whom God's been nudging, asking, calling to help serve, well it's time to say, "I'll do it." What better way to invest some of your precious time than in the lives of children? What better way to make an impact on society and our future than to give one or two hours each week to leading kids in becoming like Jesus?!

You see, you can sit and gripe about how the world is going to hell in a hand basket, you can moan and complain about how kids today don't have any respect or morals, or...or, you can search your heart and find out if God is calling you to do something about it. And listen, you don't have to know everything about the faith to teach kids, we'll train you. You've just got to be willing to learn and share as you learn it. You've got to be willing to be a real servant to the littlest ones that God's entrusted to us as a church. Give your life to something bigger than you. Invest your life in the eternity of some children.

Oh, and what else did Todd say he would need? more space. Wouldn't it be nice if we could do kids' ministry in tents on the yard and in refrigerator boxes on the parking lot? But you know what, you can't do it that way. I want my daughter in the best environment possible, and you do too. An environment that's fun, engaging, safe and suited to their age, and interests, one that makes them want to come back every week. That's going to happen when we get serious about stewardship—about giving. Nobody else is going to do it but us.

One night last week I was driving down our street and I noticed a big plastic sack right in the middle of the road. It wasn't a trash bag, but it was full of something. I stopped to pick it up, because that's what it means to live in a neighborhood. We care enough to pick up a bag of stuff even if it's not yours. So I stopped in order to be a good neighbor. But I have to be honest and admit that I stopped my car to pick up that bag for another reason. Do you ever do this? I stopped and picked it up secretly hoping it was full of money! Not for me, but for the church, to be able to get some of those things for kids that we really need. To get started on the building extension for youth and children, before it gets any more full. I picked up that bag hoping that it might just be full of cash, but it was full of trash...and ants.

You see, a big bag of cash isn't going to fall out of the sky. God's probably not going to do that because it's far more important that we learn stewardship, and, it's far more important that we live within our means so we can give. It's far more important that we put our money in a mission and not in more stuff that won't last. God's not going to drop a big bag of money out of the sky because the only way we break the grip of the monster of materialism, is through generosity. And God's desire is for us to invest in his mission, and if you don't believe that that mission includes our children and our youth, then let's just hang it all up and let the world go to hell in a hand basket! Or, lets invest it in the lives of our kids. That's what the Bible means when it says, **[SLIDE...]** **"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38, NIV).** When we give toward a vision like this for kids, we're given back so much more because we've invested in life, and in eternity.

So let me lay this challenge on you. I challenge you to try to out-give me and Janet. I challenge you to out-sacrifice us. Some of you already do this, but it's just a few. Are you up to that challenge? I believe with all that I am, that our children, my daughter and your kids, and grandkids, and neighbor kids, are worth it.

Our vision is to be ready for all the children that God will send our way and to very intentionally, and very personally, through small groups, through preparing them for real life, guide them into becoming like Jesus.

One boy this summer came to one of our Summer ministries. And over the weeks he opened up to one of our leaders. He talked about how his mommy and daddy got a divorce. How his mom brings him to church as often as she can, but that his dad's not a Christian. Over the course of that summer program he began asking more and more questions about the faith, he eagerly memorized parts of the Bible, he begged his mom for a Christian T-shirt and over the course of a few weeks, his life was changed. That is our vision for kids—and that that's repeated over and over and over again.

And what about our vision for our youth? **[PICTURE: Our youth group]**. We classify youth as those in grades 6-12. And our youth group has it going on! I believe that our youth are some of the most faithful disciples in our midst. And they've got some very clear goals that Nancy Hampton, our Director of Student Ministries has worked to develop. Their goals are to **grow** in fellowship with others and **grow** in God's love. To **know** Jesus. To **go** in service to him, and to **show** others God's love. To **Grow**, to **Know**, to **Go** and to **Show**.

You see, our youth ministries are incubators for future leaders. Leaders in our cities and nation. Leaders in our corporations, leaders in schools, hospitals and churches. Our vision for youth ministry is that these young people are prepared to enter the real world. That they are equipped to handle what's going to be in their faces. You know what I'm talking about. They'll be faced constantly with compromising their integrity to make a buck or get ahead, they'll be faced with shallow pleasures that will look very tempting but have the potential to damage their minds and souls and bodies. They'll face a culture of materialism and instant gratification. They'll be immersed in a sea of moral relativity. And our vision is to prepare them to push back the darkness! To be prepared to face reality and become next generation leaders. Our youth ministries are changing lives and preparing these young people for the future.

Our youth ministries are also moving to a small group model of ministry. A model where the youth bond with one another and with their leaders so that they can learn from each other and inspire each other, include others and take care of each other.

Nancy told me about one youth whose life has been changed. He comes from a single-parent home and came to youth group through the invitation of one of the girls. Girls, keep up the good work! You have a lot of sway over the young men around you! This young man started coming regularly and getting involved in everything, even though his mom isn't involved in church. This young man went through confirmation this year, and also went to camp and this summer he gave his life to Christ! When he got back from camp he went on a mission trip to work with the poor. And while he was on the mission trip he got his younger brother to come to Vacation Bible School, and his brother came every day riding the church van. Now his little brother can't wait to be a part of the youth group this fall!

Our youth group continues to grow. They have this vision to reach more and more unchurched youth with a message of hope, not judgment, but hope and power and love. And you can help. If God's nudging you, say yes! Give your life to this ministry and see what happens in you and in the youth. And even more than the children, the youth need space. Our proposed extension has 8,000 sq feet just for the youth, and they need every inch of it. The vision of reaching more youth needs your support, your investment of time, your money, so that the world will be different.

And then what about our adults? Pastor Mark is very carefully refining our vision for this area. We envision many small groups meeting in homes in the Joplin area. Saint Paul's has had a growth spurt this past Spring and Summer. We're consistently having 100 more people in worship each week over what we had last Summer! So as the church grows bigger it must grow smaller. You're going to be hearing more about this as we enter 40 Days of Community, but just know that finding that group of 4 or 5 or 6 or 8 people that you will get to know, learn with, grow with and do life with, is so absolutely essential for becoming what you have the potential to become. This is important for all adults, those of you that are young and just starting careers and families, those of you that are in your 80's and beyond, you need this too. We don't want anybody to fall through the cracks and the best way for that to happen is that everybody is connected to a few other people.

We also have as a vision to become a church of radical hospitality. That we take very seriously the biblical mandate to welcome visitors, guests and strangers. We have a vision that everything about us says, "You are welcomed here." We want to set a new standard for our facilities inside and out, for our information center, for our worship hosts, our warmth and welcome, helping people to know that we were expecting them and we are glad that they are here.

Some other big parts of our vision are things you may have heard if you've come to a lunch with the pastor. We want to start new churches and new off-site ministries. We helped to start Pathways UMC a few year ago, and we're just a short time away from opening the off-site ministry called The Salvage Yard. Our bar-scene alternative, our place to go to church if you don't like church or been burned by a church. A place to go if your body is pierced and you've got some ink and you want to go be with others like you. We want to always be giving birth to something new.

We also want to change our community, so that in 25 years it looks different, better because we helped the poor, we built and rebuilt homes, we cared for the elderly, we opened our doors to educate and train people. Because we fed the hungry and clothed the naked.

We envision training the next generation of pastors and spiritual leaders. I'm making contacts with the president of Saint Paul seminary in Kansas City and the Bishop of Missouri to see how we can partner with them to bring in future pastors and guide them through a curriculum so they're ready to lead fully functioning biblical

churches that have real vision to transform lives and communities. We're certainly not a perfect church, but we have the most amazing people and the most amazing staff and I believe we can help prepare next generation leaders to make churches the best centers of hope and relevance that they can be.

So here's the deal. This isn't my vision. It's a vision that's been shaped over the course of many years and through meetings with the staff and leadership and countless conversations with you. And it can't happen without you. So I challenge you to give your life to this God-honoring vision. Give your life to it. I have. I hope you understand that I'm not here at Saint Paul's for the money, or the prestige, or to be in the spot light. I could make more money doing something else, and frankly being in the spotlight gets old real quick. I'm here because we're on a mission together and I want to see people who are far from God, connect to him and find purpose for their lives. You see, I love this church. This wonderful, compassionate, giving, loving, sometimes quirky, sometimes stubborn, sometimes lazy, church. I love this place because in it I truly see the living actions of the living Jesus. But we have a long way yet to go. But imagine the joy we'll have on this big vision together! I believe that the local is the hope of the world.

God's asking you and me today, "What are you going to do with your one and only life?" Your time, your talent, your treasure? God's saying, "If you lay those things down for me, then miracles can happen, and visions can become reality." If we give ourselves to God-honoring visions then ideas become life. And lives are transformed, and the world is changed. But the vision of this church can't happen without you. We need each other. Nobody can do this alone. I need you and you need me.

So how are you going to answer the question at the end of your life when you stand before the God who made you? How are you going to answer the question when God asks you, "So, what did you do with what I gave you? Your time, your talents, your treasure?" Will you have a good answer for that? "I mastered John Madden Football on the Xbox every year!" "I learned all the buttons on my satellite remote control and could even use them without looking." "I lowered my golf score." "I accumulated so much stuff I had to rent a storage unit to it all!"

Or will you say, "I laid it down, for a vision bigger than me, bigger than my one and only life. I laid it all down for children, and youth, and other adults. I laid it down for the non-religious and nominally religious. I laid it all down for the poor that Jesus loved so much. I laid it all down."

I love the church. And I love being your pastor...most of the time. And I love the vision that God has put in front of us. So let's do this vision. Let's experience the sheer joy of being a part of something that is so much bigger than any single one of us. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.