

## “Vision Day Message 2008”

My goal is that once a year we talk about who we are as a church. We take time once a year to take a look at our health as a church, to be reminded about our purpose as church, or vision, our core values. Of course I try to do all that throughout the year in small ways, but it's important to take time to see a bigger picture of who we are. Because vision leaks. We forget what we're here to do.

A few weeks ago on a Friday, I was home with Abby our 2 year old. I had put her down for a nap. And Janet came home about 2:30 that afternoon. She walked in and saw the dishwasher halfway unloaded, and then found me in the bathroom trimming my nose hair. She started laughing so hard saying, “What happened, were you unloading the dishwasher and had a nose hair emergency?!” She was laughing at me. And then I got to laughing as I told her what happened. I was unloading the dishwasher when I had to use the restroom. I took care of that and was washing my hands when I looked in the mirror and saw that my sideburns were kind of bushy, so I took out some scissors and trimmed them up. And then I noticed my eyebrows were kind of getting a little wooly and needed some attention too and took care of those, and then I noticed my nose hairs were out of control so I got out my electric nose hair trimmer and while I was trimming the battery died, so I went and got another battery from the study and came back into the bathroom to finish the job which is when Janet found me! And, yes, in the process, I had completely forgotten about emptying the dishwasher. We laughed so hard!

That's what I mean by saying that vision leaks. We can be working on something and then the smallest thing can get us completely derailed

I, we, need to be reminded what we're here as a church to do. We need to remind ourselves about our purpose, our core values, our vision of the future. We're not playing church here, we're really try to live out a mission.

That mission comes from a foundational understanding. Just like a garage, or a house, or a skyscraper needs a good foundation under it for it to stand strong and stand long, we've got to have a foundational understanding if we, as a congregation, are going to stand strong and stand long.

Here's our foundational understanding. **The local church is the hope of the world. We believe that only one power exists on this planet that can truly transform the human heart and ultimately change the world. “It's the power of the love of Jesus Christ, the love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world one life at a time.” (Bill Hybels, Courageous Leadership). This radical message of transforming love has been given to the Church!** That message had been given to this church and every other church, no matter what denomination it is. The local church is the hope of the world.

And that's not just a bunch of words. I get to see and hear how this local church affects many of your lives. One couple shared with me how their marriage was dead, destroyed, gone but through the love of Christ that they experienced through Saint Paul's they've literally gotten a brand new start. They shared with lots people and many of them said the same thing. They came to me and said, “Aaron do you realize how many marriages have been saved, families kept together, because of this church?” Marriages thriving because of what one local church is doing.

There's the man who was pulled back from the brink of financial disaster, because people from the church were able to step in and help him work through issues and conflicts, and problems, that you can't imagine. He was suicidal. He stopped me just the other day and celebrated a new beginning. Light and life. Because of what this local church had done.

When we say the local church, the living body of Jesus, is the hope of the world we're clarifying that business is not the hope of the world, that government is not the hope of the world, money is not the hope of the world (have you noticed lately that Wall Street is not the hope of the world?) Possessions are not the hope of the world. The living body of Jesus, the local church, that's the hope of the world.

We are not playing church. We are not just filling time. We are on a mission and that mission, ultimately, is to change the world, one life at a time in unison with other churches of all traditions who are seeking to do the same. That's our mission and our vision.

Now 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.

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 **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, "**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.

That leads into our **Core Values**. Core values are those things that most important; those things that are at the heart of what we're here to do.

**People matter to God--all people.** What Jesus demonstrated and spoke about was his love for all people. Especially those who were far from God. And God would have us see all people the way he sees them and treat all people with dignity, love and a servant's heart whether or not they believe the same way we do. I believe that God is much more interested in including people than in excluding people. I believe that God is much more interested in letting people into his family than in keeping anyone out. People matter to God—all people.

**We must reach out to people and not wait for people to come to us.** Jesus saw people who were far from him and knew that they had to be reached. He said, "**The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field**" (Matthew 9:37-38, NIV). The idea is the people of God moving out into the world with good news. One of the most powerful words in the New Testament is the word "Go." We are to be actively going and inviting, reaching out, going to seek those who are far from God, those who are hurting, those who are discouraged, those who have been burned by religion in the past. The church that opens its doors and just waits for people to wander in is simply not living out the basic understanding of God's heart. We're to go. Go into our community, into our world, into every facet of life with good news of great joy. The church is meant to be a force that moves into the world, not fortress where we come and hide from the world.

**God's Word is God's living voice.** God speaks to us primarily as we listen to him through scripture. This is to be our guide in our structure as a congregation, our teaching, and the foundation of our individual lives. God speaks and moves in lots of ways, but scripture is the most powerful and accessible way.

**Life is meant to be done together.** We need each other to encourage us, challenge us, pray with and for us, serve alongside us, and hold us accountable. This happens when we regularly join together with a small group of others and commit to being there for one another. At the coffee with the pastor for people who are interested in knowing more about Saint Paul's, I'm very up front with them. One of the hard things I tell them is that if they're not interested in being a part of a life group, a small group, then we're probably not the church for them. That's hard for me to say, but the small groups and classes, and courses we have, those are the place to build friendships, to be cared for, encouraged, loved. Those are the places where mission projects happen, and we reach into our community to do all kinds of good works. Now, I know that some of you simply can't be a part of a small group for one reason or another and that's OK, God understands, but that's different than choosing not to be connected into a small group. Life is meant to be done together.

**Living out our mission is to be done with consuming joy!** Life will always present us with pain and difficulties, but because of the power and presence of God in our lives there can be joy that overwhelms the deepest darkness. Serving God is a joy. Learning about God's purposes is a joy. And growing into the people God has called us to be is the greatest joy of all. This adventure of the Christian life, it's joyful.

How does all that get lived out? How do we put our primary purpose of leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ into action? How do we live out our core values? These get lived out in our children's ministries where we try to lead children in becoming active followers of Jesus at their level. We want our kids to be exposed to the stories of the faith, and understand that the stories of our faith are meant to lead into actions.

The same thing is true for our youth ministries. We want to prepared these young people to move in our world with a connect to God that goes beyond all the temptations they face. Temptations of materialism and sexual

activity and elitism. We want our youth to move through their world with a sense of humility and strength and integrity because they've chosen to be lights to the world.

And for our adults through discipleship, through worship, through missions, through fellowship I want you to be the living presence of Christ in your home, in your workplace, in your neighborhood. The goal is for you to focus on Jesus so that all those decisions you make everyday are done with an awareness that God is there and present and has a purpose. And that has an impact on what you say when you're angry, what you do with time, what kind of house you choose to live in, what kind of car you choose to drive, how you use your precious time and money and abilities. And that that wouldn't be about guilt or pressure, but that you would be conscious of Jesus' presence and want to do the loving thing always. And to know that when you fail, God's grace is big enough to pick up, dust you off, and start again without shame.

This week at the Move Conference I had the chance to speak to a woman named Sharon Wecker. She and her husband were members here a number of years ago and one Christmas Eve she came by herself to a candlelight service. In that hour, she collided with God and her life was changed. She told me Monday that if that moment hadn't happened she would have wrecked her marriage, drown in alcohol, and probably be dead. She's had a complete turnaround and now she's actually on staff at a church in Carthage! She said it was the authenticity of this place, the love, the purpose. It was you. It gave me goose bumps to hear her story.

Our purpose our vision guides us in striving to have the best ministries for children, youth and adults. Can we do better? Yes we can, and we're trying. But there are many good things going on. More than I can possibly talk about, but I want to touch on a few that I think are extra special. We've become a church that is deeply committed to helping people recover from drug and alcohol abuse. We have one group that meets on Thursdays and one of their leaders, Roby Boyd, celebrated 10 years of sobriety just a couple of weeks ago, that group is making an impact. Teddy Steen has had a dream for years of providing a way out for addicts and she believes that Jesus has that way. She's started ASCENT recover residences here in Joplin, and we're one of her partner organizations. On Wednesday nights, residents join with other members of the church to do life together. To study, to pray, to go deep. Joe Crosthwait is a big part of that and I'm so proud what that means.

Then there's the Matthew class. We have a growing number of adults with special needs that call this their church home. And I'm so glad they do. They add a flavor and life, and joy that's one of kind. I'm proud of Tammy Swab and Tammy Menke for having the heart and courage to lead that class. To offer special care for special people.

I think of Jim Gant and the Cheer Givers who make sure that our members who are homebound and in nursing homes are visited and encouraged and loved. So that no one is forgotten.

And we have to talk about Nicaragua the second poorest country in the western hemisphere. We adopted the village of Los Rosas almost 3 ago. I went down there and came back and told you what I saw, and you responded with passion! And the changes are amazing. People are healthy, babies are plump, kids are in school, people are supporting themselves with small businesses through microloans, they're building homes, drinking clean water, starting to truly live. In fact we have a video about that. Take a look

We're committed to addressing poverty and homelessness in Nicaragua and right here in Joplin. I'm going to be serving on a task force for the City Council to see how we address these issues.

All this points to how we want to be a whatever-it-takes church. We want to go the extra mile in living out our mission. We 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.

Is Saint Paul's as a church healthy? How do we measure that? Several ways. One is discipleship. How many people are involved in intentionally growing in going deeper in their faith. This Fall, on Wednesday nights we've had right around 500 people (children, youth adults) going deeper. That's right around 25% more than last year at this time. Another indicator of health worship attendance. That has increased 9% over last year. Another indicator of health is long-term staff. We have very little turn over. It is a privilege to work here and people want to stay here. Another indicator of health is giving. Even in a rough year financially, your giving has been strong and has increased about 9% over last year. We don't have endowments yet, or cash reserves, so your regular giving is what fuels the mission. Another indicator of health is a growing base of leadership. As the number of groups and mission has increased, so have the number of people rising up to lead, to work, to see things happen. Another big

indicator of health is changed lives. I think of the 36 people who walked out into a cold Shoal Creek to be baptized or renew their baptism. I think of the stories I hear, from Linda Moser. She wrote, "Just felt a strong urge to email you and let you know what a blessing [the] Sunday services have been for me. It was a hard realization that my identity was taken years ago. Reprogramming by thinking and heart has been tough for me. But I truly believe that God is using you, Mark and your messages to help me do just that. [God] sometimes has to remind me still over and over, but it is sinking in. He has revealed so much hope and joy sometimes it is hard to keep it all in. I used to just feel sorry for myself for being alone and betrayed. But I have learned when you take your eyes off yourself and look to him, those feelings fade and don't seem so important. I have so much to live for...I am excited to see what God has in store and trying to keep open to whatever that is...I have NEVER attended a church where I was so eager to go! I can't wait to hear what message God has for me next! It's like I can't get enough...."

Are we healthy? Yes. Could we be healthier? Yes.

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 church. I love this place because in it I truly see the living actions of the living Jesus. 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.

Let me tell you about dream I had several years ago. This is a real dream that has had very real consequences. I was at a time when I was wondering what I was supposed to do next. Ministry was starting to seem foggy, getting bogged down. One night I had a dream that I was in a large underground chamber, like a the hub of a subway. It was dark and wet. There was junk and trash strewn all around and there were other people in that big underground chamber with me. It was a scary place and I had to be careful. Every so often there would be a huge rush of water through the chamber and if you weren't careful it would wash you away and you would be killed. After each rush of water a big pile of debris would be left behind and I and the other people there would go through the debris as fast as we could to see if there were any people in it that we needed to rescue. That was all we did.

There was a huge rush of water that left a very big pile of debris in the middle of the chamber and somehow I felt that there was a family inside the pile that needed to be rescued. I also knew that there wasn't much time before there would be another rush of water. I tore through the debris and clutter and found a bright red pickup truck. It had that orange plastic fencing wrapped around, the kind you see around construction sites. It was all I could do to tear through it because it was so tough and my hands were so worn but I knew I had to do it quickly or I might not rescue the people in the truck. I finally tore with all my strength to get to the driver of the truck and there sat Jesus behind the wheel. He had a gentle smile on his face. I was in shock! I knew exactly who it was and I started to cry. As I stood there sobbing these deep cleansing sobs, Jesus reached out to me, took my face in his hands and kissed me.

I felt a power go into me. It was joy and peace and things I couldn't describe but I knew that I had been given the kiss of life. I was filled with something that I couldn't describe.

I woke up that morning feeling great, knowing that I had been given a vision. I knew that I was to be about the business of rescuing people, saving people who were about to be washed away and didn't even know it. That is what I am about here. Helping the lost get found. Digging through the debris to try and save who I can because somebody saved me. I am doing what I do because of a God-dream to reach out into this four-state area with news so good, and a God that is so loving, that I don't want anybody to be left out!

I to encourage you to dig through the debris piles and find people who may be on the verge of being washed away and save them. It takes new ways of thinking, and we can't place it safe anymore.

I love the church. And I love being your pastor. 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.