

SERMON, "DREAMS FOR TUMC" – JAY VETTER – SEPTEMBER 16, 2007

New Testament Lesson: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Well, I'm kind of glad that when Paul was writing to Timothy and sharing a little bit of his own story of his becoming an apostle and being a leader in the Church that he remembered that Jesus Christ had utmost patience.

In the old Revised Standard Version it's translated "perfect patience". I wondered what that was? Perfect patience. That would be something to behold. But one of the things we understand is that the love of Christ is very patient with us, as individuals and with us as a Church.

I wanted to take some time today to share with you some of my own personal dreams for Trinity United Methodist Church. Now I need to say from the outset these are "my" dreams. You know preachers are pretty self-centered. When we move to a church we think nothing happened there until we got there. Maybe churches are like that too. Maybe they think their preacher doesn't know anything when he or she got there, because they haven't been anywhere before.

But I want to say from the outset that to this pastor and congregation relationship each one of us pastors bring personal faith experiences. We've been on a journey. We've had the arrogance to believe that God called us onto that journey. We're a little dangerous. You have to be careful with us.

But also, that every congregation has been on a journey. This congregation, not as Trinity United Methodist Church, but in its roots back to the churches that went together to form Trinity, goes back almost 140 years or maybe more by now, here in this community in Grand Island. So there's a wonderful heritage that this congregation brings. A faithful witness. There's the heritage that Onamae and Nancy and I bring as your pastors and all your pastors that have gone before us have brought. We're fortunate to have some of them still around in our congregation, pastors who bring a heritage to be a part of us.

I've been here a couple of years now and I think I've been sizing you up. I'm sure none of you've been sizing me up, have you? I think it might be time to sort of lay it out on the table, some of what I have as dreams for the Church. You may or may not agree

with them. I could be completely off base, and if I am it's your job to get me back on track.

I do this so we might begin to work together to see what future we have. Part of the reason I'm doing this is because I don't know if I have much time left. I think I've got more time than you, Onamae. But I'm getting older. I've only got 6 to 10 more years if I'm lucky, to be your pastor. I don't mean to live, Mary, I just mean to be your pastor.

I think it would be good for us to put our cards out on the table, and say where do we think we ought to be heading.

I'm going to tell you my first dream. My first dream is I'd like to seem some children up here and in the other services.

The first congregations I served 30 some years ago, 36 years ago, were the Trenton circuit of the Chillicothe district of the Missouri West Annual Conference. It was a circuit; there were four little churches. Three of them were in the open country. One was a city church and the greatest thing that I did, when I was their pastor, was I helped them die. It closed. That was in Chula. Anyone here been to Chula, Missouri?

At that time there were two hundred people in Chula and there were four churches. The Chula United Methodist Church had fourteen members. Five of them were shut-ins, and the average attendance was seven. If we did that well this place would be full. If half of the people that claim membership were in worship every Sunday in this congregation, this place would be full twice every Sunday. Some of those 7 died off and it became time for the Church to close.

My favorite church in the circuit was the Dockery Chapel Church. They had a young family in that church with kids; there were three children. One of them graduated from high school during the three years I was pastor. I thought there was hope for that congregation. I was in seminary; I was filled with enthusiasm for ministry.

The second year I served the church I took a class on United Methodist polity. We learned all about the United Methodist Book of Discipline. So I went up there with my Discipline and I said to them, "You know we should..." because they were always talking in that church..."You know we need to invite people to church. We need to reach out. We need to get some younger people in our church." So I thought, these guys want to do something. So I said, "Let's have a nominating committee meeting next time I come on Sunday, I'll stay after."

So we had a nominating committee meeting. This church had like thirty-five members. Everybody knew what everybody did and what they were suppose do and what they'd done for a long time. I discovered when I got them to list their officers, they were still working out of the 1939 Discipline. That's the one where the Episcopal North and South got together.

I was kind of being forceful, "You know if you really want to include new people in your church -- you have to make it possible for them to get involved in the church and when

you just assume what everyone's going to do and everyone knows what everybody does and you don't make it transparent how you make decisions and you don't show people how they can get involved in leadership of the church, nobody new is going to come into this church, because there's no way for them to do it.

I went back and forth with them for a while and when the meeting got over without resolving anything except "Well, we'll keep doing it the way we have been." Forrest was not the patriarch of the church that was Clyde. Forrest was the truth teller in the church. Don't you love those names in the northern hills of Missouri...Forrest and Clyde? Clyde was the one that led the singing and told the organist how fast to play. I asked her one day, "Why don't you play these hymns a little faster." "I've tried, she said. "It doesn't matter if I play fast or slow, they all follow Clyde." Everybody knew.

But Forrest was the truth teller and he was thoughtful. I was there for two years, we had a little picnic and everything to say goodbye to me. He's the guy that in the last Sunday that I was there he came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You know, Jay, I think we've done you some good." And they had. He said, "We like it when they assign some of you young whippersnappers to our church. We can teach you some things." Excuse me Del, but he said, "We don't like it when the old retired preachers get sent here 'cause they're all set in their ways, we can't help them." He said, "Maybe that's our role with the church".

You see, he understood that their church had a role in the bigger church. They weren't just by themselves. He said, "Maybe that's our role to help some of you young people to learn how to be ministers, and then send you out." Well they were so few...when they sent me out one of them came up to me and said, "Would you mind keeping that McGovern sticker on your bumper?" Now that's in Grundy County Missouri and that county is more Republican than any other place in Missouri and that is the only McGovern sticker any of them had ever seen. He said, "That way if we're ever out driving we'll know you when we see you."

On this particular day after the little battle in the nominating committee to get the church to maybe change the way they do things (if they wanted new people to get involved and give them a chance to step into leadership), Forrest had put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "You know, Jay, when us old codgers die this church is going to close, we know that. We just can't say it out loud. We just can't say it, because we want to think of ourselves as having a mission, but when we die this church is going to close. I wish there were more children up here."

I'm wondering whether things have changed very much in 35 years. When I first came here two years ago I spent quite a bit of time going around and meeting with you all in your homes and asking you all questions about what are your hopes for the church. ***What are your dreams? What do you appreciate about the church? What brought you to this church? More than any other thing that I heard in the dreams is that we need more young people in our church.***

Our church has been getting smaller and smaller and smaller and older and older and older. It sounded to me like Forrest saying, "You know when us old codgers die this church will close."

Now this church is a lot bigger than Dockery Chapel. It will take a lot longer, but when we're willing to be honest, we have to admit that we are failing to find a way to include younger people in the life of our church.

One of the things that's most important to me, in fact, **I believe that the single most important indicator of the vitality of a congregation is how it includes young people. How it relates to children. How it nurtures children. How it does the process of confirmation. How it brings new younger people into the life of the church and to the decision-making and leadership of the church.**

If a church isn't doing that, it's probably dying. You know the Christian Church really is only ever one generation away from extinction. **The faith has to be passed along. It has to be taught and caught. It has to be nurtured.**

When people call and ask about a baptism, you know what I tell them? ***That's the most important thing we do in worship, we'll find a time to do it. We'll find a place to do it.*** Maybe we don't want to do it the first Sunday of the month, because church gets long, but even if that's the only Sunday your family can come we'll do it then. ***We're at our best when we do that. When we as a congregation say that we will surround these parents and this child with a community of love and forgiveness, we're talking about what we're really suppose to be up to.***

When we work with young people to bring them into full membership of the church, to nurture them to make their own decision about their faith, we call that confirmation. When we do that, it's an important program.

So, my first dream for the Church is that we'll take seriously what it means to change our ways enough to include new generations.

I left Grand Island in 1990 and came back in 2005. There were more people living here in 2005 than there were in 1990 and there were fewer people in the United Methodist Churches in Grand Island. ***We're not doing something right. My first dream.***

My second dream, I guess you could call it my second, third and fourth dream, by the way...I have too many dreams to share with you today if you want lunch. I tried last night...it got to be 7 o'clock and they all left. (I bet some of them wish they hadn't of.) But, my second, third and fourth dream that I want to share, I think fits within the quadrennial theme we've had as a denomination for two quadennia, and that's "open hearts, open minds, open doors".

My dream for our congregation ... this congregation made a decision several years ago...long before I got here, to be located here. First in the 1920's there were the two Methodist Churches that were here. Were any of you here in the discussion, the 1920's? I can say whatever I want about that then, because you weren't here, right?

Most of what I know I got from Jack Sorensen. He said there was a big debate in the Church about whether to build a new church on the north side or the south side. Apparently there was some prejudice people had about which side of the tracks you lived on. Some people left this congregation when they decided to build on the north side.

Now some of you were here a few years ago when this church made a decision to stay here in this neighborhood, that is ever changing, and to relate to this community and some wonderful programs grew out of that.

How many of you have been Howard Helpers raise your hand? You've gone over to Howard School? There are a lot of kids over there, aren't there? How many of them were just white kids? Not very many. That's our neighborhood. We live in a neighborhood that's constantly changing, that is filling up with people whose first language is not English. How are we going to relate to them? Are we going to have open minds, open hearts, and open doors to our new neighbors?

I've heard so many Jim Chubb stories since I came here. Those are so much fun. How many of you have a Jim Chubb story? Lots of you. When I ask many of you how is it that you're a part of Trinity United Methodist Church, you say "Dr. Chubb invited me." Maybe he invited you a lot of times before you showed up. "Then Dr. Chubb asked me to help with the youth group or to do this, or to do that in the Church."

In order to have open doors, practice hospitality, we have to be inviting and welcoming. I think he must have been inviting and welcoming. I never met Dr. Chubb. He left in 1973, that's the same year I came back from seminary after they got through trying to straighten me out down in Missouri, but I've heard so many stories and it appears to me that his greatest gift to the Church was that he had the capacity to make everyone feel that they were important, that they were valued, that they were needed, and that they had gifts to offer.

And that's my dream. That every member and every person with whom we come into contact with as a congregation will come to know that they are special, that they are loved, that they are wanted and needed. That's hard to do, because just like that Scripture I read with the kids, sometimes religious people, instead of being welcoming and affirming to people who might come our way, we grumble about them because they don't look right, or smell right, or talk right or act right or believe right. I believe it's so important for us, and to take very seriously, that each human being is of infinite value, uniquely loved by God and that every one of us is gifted by the Holy Spirit for some ministry.

When you joined the United Methodist Church you promised to support it with your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service and I think we've all been given some gift that we can share in one of all of those ways.

So my dream is that we'll celebrate and use our gifts to have open minds, open hearts, and open doors.

Somebody was telling me the other day that Jim Chubb really only had one sermon. He only had one message he preached all of the time. I know you always sang the first same hymn, right...every Sunday, Holy, Holy, Holy, so you know that hymn then. So whenever I'm feeling a little insecure we'll sing it, and I know somebody will sing along.

I think it was Kenny Elson was talking to me and he said, "Jim Chubb just had one message and he preached it in a lot of different ways. His one message was, forget what's behind and move on to what's ahead, and be visionary and look at opportunities for ministry and move into the future." I wonder if he'd still be preaching that today if he was here?

One of the people that's influenced my understanding of what's important to a congregation and something that I think is needed in this congregation now is my friend Bahazad. I met him 10 years ago. He came to Lincoln as a refugee. He came from northern Iraq. He was Kurdish. He was brought to this country because as a nurse he had worked in a hospital run by Americans during the first Gulf War. There was a belief that his life was in danger if he remained in Iraq. They brought him here as an refugee on asylum. He's Muslim. I've learned so much from him about faith. I've learned so much from him about what this world needs.

I like this notion that we believe we should have open minds, and open hearts. I believe there's a great need in the world today for people of faith who choose to relate to other people of faith and people of other ethnicities without expecting them to all become like us.

I'm not just talking about just being tolerant of each other, or tolerating each other, although we need tolerance in the world today because when you look around the world there are people of faith who believe that they are in a war with other people of faith and that our job is to eliminate them, because they are trying to eliminate us. I never found that to be true in Bahazad. I never found it to be true in all the other Muslims that I met through him and through my involvement in the Lincoln Interfaith Council. I never found it to be true in this community of people I've met working through the Multi-Cultural Coalition. I believe this community desperately needs congregations and faith communities who understand that they are part of a larger community and that they have a responsibility to it.

I think this congregation understands that. That's part of the reason why you chose to stay here. Why you started a relationship with Howard School. Why this congregation is involved in the development of old Walnut. Why we work to develop and support this neighborhood. We need to find ways to learn and grow from one another and we need to open our minds and our hearts and even our doors to people who are different from us. That's another dream of mine that we will become a part of this community where people find unity but also find an appreciation for our differences and that we grow from them.

I have a dream that this congregation...that we will become secure enough in our faith that we can love others and give to others and accept others without feeling a need to dominate them.

I remember going to meetings when I was in Lincoln and we were talking about our conference's program, and somebody got up and made the motion that we delete every reference in the conference program to any kind of interfaith dialogue, unless it was designed to convert us. One of the problems we have as a Church and trying to love the world is that we think we would like to love the world as long as you're willing to become like us, we'll love you. There's a tremendous need for the Christ like love. Read the gospel. Jesus never told people who were on the outside to start believing something different before he would touch them or heal them or relate to them or feed them. The only ones he got mad at were the grumblers who said, "They don't believe the right things, they don't live right. They don't act right, they should be part of us."

We need to be on fire with that kind of love to reach out and care for and minister to the world. I like the part that says open minds. One of my dreams for our church is that this church will be a community wherein we can be intellectually honest as we struggle with our faith, where we can dare to ask the tough questions, the ones that maybe express more doubt than assurances, where we can explore one another's faith stories and one another's issues without becoming judgmental of one another and demeaning and putting down one another's faith.

We need to have our hearts warmed as well. Our hearts are warmed when we share our stories with one another. One of my dreams for our congregation is that our congregation will be a place where people can be honest about their life's experiences and be affirmed and comforted and guided and led, where we will open our hearts to one another because when we do we are strengthened and we are healed and we are encouraged and we experience the love of Christ. Isn't that what Jesus said... "*Whenever you welcome one another you welcome me.*"

That's probably about enough dreams for today, don't you think Carolyn? Sometimes I wonder whether I've been called here to be a Chaplain in a Hospice. You know Hospice is a wonderful ministry. I don't want to put that down at all. Since when are Christians afraid to face death? That's not a big deal to us... I mean it's a big deal, but it's not something that we shy away from dealing with. You know in the first All Saints Day after I was here in 2005, we read the names of more than 70 people who were members of our Church who had died. That's an important ministry. This Church does a good job of that. We have Stephen Ministry that cares for people and helps them with their struggles. We do a good job of caring for families during bereavement and providing bereavement meals and we do quite a few funerals too, don't we, Onamae, and Nancy and Del? It's a good thing there's a lot of us. That's a wonderful ministry. I think Forrest was trying to tell me that's the kind of ministry they wanted from me in Dockery Chapel Church. I was like a chaplain to a chapel.

That may be the ministry to which I've been called, I don't know. I'm not going to make that decision. This congregation is going to have to make that decision. Remember, I told you I'm not going to last much longer. The decisions we make as a congregation of how we want to progress are going to outlive all of us that are in this room.

Maybe if Forrest is out there, maybe you need to come and tap me on the shoulder and say quit bugging us about this stuff. We're not really serious about it. Quit bugging us about making changes to welcome people who are different and younger people into the life of our church. Just be a good pastor to us and help us to know that we are loved by God and preach the gospel to us.

That's a fine ministry. You know what? I think I could do that for six more years. I could probably play more golf while I was doing that as a matter of fact. That's not so bad. But what are we being called to do? We've been struggling in the leadership of this Church in the Administrative Council in the last three or four months, or more than that, ever since last years Church Conference when we voted to have a Capital Campaign in the spring of 2008.

Now when it's 2006 it's kind of fun to make a decision to do something in 2008, isn't it? But I've been kind of holding our feet to the fire to continue to work at that until we get to 2008. We've identified already that our goals are, first of all to pay the debt on the last building project. Secondly to make our building sound and we've been working on that, to make it safe. The third thing was to make changes to our building that will be consistent with our hopes for ministry and our goals.

The Administrative Council has been struggling with this. At our last meeting we said that the priority, for the changes that we need to make, is to make our building more helpful to children and youth ministries. I think we're gong to have some interesting times figuring what that means, probably because that's coupled with information that we received from the Trustees about the soundness of the building. We're going to have to spend some fairly major dollars on the original building, the one that was built in the 1920's. That's Gollaher Chapel, the Parlor, the offices, the classrooms upstairs, because the heating and cooling system, I don't need to get too technical with it. It's a single pipe hot and cold water system. You wanted to know that didn't you. You either have hot water or cold water going through the pipes. You know the pipes are reaching the end of their usefulness and so are the heat exchangers and it's going to cost two to three hundred thousand dollars to fix that all up. Now we don't have to do all that. We can just keep fixing in piecemeal as we go along. That's the kind of discussion we're having. So, I'm pretty sure that the discussion that's going to take place over the next few months is going to be, if we're going to have to spend that kind of money, what other changes could we make that would make this building more useful for children and youth ministries.

I know that makes some of you nervous. Not as many in here as 8:15 a.m., cause when you're talking about making major changes to Gollagher Chapel, people who worship there get nervous. And we ought to get nervous.

I want to invite you into that discussion. I think some of these things are going to work themselves out, because it's up to the congregation. We won't make any decisions without having a congregational meeting and vote on them, but you know what, even after we vote we won't do anything unless you chose to support it. The final vote that all church people make is with their checkbook and with their hands and feet. The truth is that we only do what we're willing to do.

So, I hope that you'll be willing to engage in a discussion about that. Maybe we'll come out and say it's not a good time to spend much money, let's just get our debt paid and be as comfortable as we can, and like I said I'm fine with that. But, I'm going to hold your feet to the fire to have the discussions. Once we make a decision, I'm going to hold your feet to the fire to follow up on it, and we'll see how we do.

Now I want to invite you to sing my favorite hymn with me. We just sang it not too long ago, but I just couldn't resist having you sing it again. It's a hymn that was written by Harry Emerson Fosdick, to an old Welsh tune, and it's a hymn that's really a prayer for the Church. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote kind of at the beginning of the great depression in this country, he was pastor in Riverside Church in New York City, but it's really asking God to give us, as the people of God, what we need to be faithful to what we've been called to, "God of Grace and God of Glory".

1. God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power; crown thine ancient church's story; bring her bud to glorious flower. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour, (of this hour) for the facing of this hour.
2. Lo! the hosts of evil round us scorn thy Christ, assail his ways! Fears and doubts too long have bound us; free our hearts to work and praise. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days, (of these days) for the living of these days.
3. Cure thy children's warring madness, bend our pride to thy control; shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom's goal, (kingdom's goal) lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.
4. Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore; let the search for thy salvation be our glory evermore. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, serving thee whom we adore, (we adore) serving thee whom we adore.