

VISIONS... The promise of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was that the followers of Christ would have visions and dreams that would always propel them (us) forward with new energy, with new life. We always talk about new life in the Christian church, and they can seem like just “heavenly” visions, so it is helpful when we can translate them into more “earthly” visions, relevant to every day happenings.

In our reading this morning from Acts, Peter had a very earthly vision about being told he could kill and eat all kinds of animals. He also interpreted that to mean that he could have table fellowship with all kinds of people, not only Jews, but Gentiles too. The more universal interpretation of this vision is that God created and loves all people, can cleanse, heal and save people of all cultures and tribes.

Our reading from the book of Revelation has the heavenly and utopic vision that there will be a “new heaven and new earth,” with no more tears or pain, even no more death, and all living beings praise God with songs! Yet this all comes to pass only after scenes of death and destruction, and the images are so strange we have a hard time relating to them....the four horsemen of the apocalypse, the woman clothed in the sun who is gives birth, but a dragon is waiting to eat her child, beasts with many horns, rivers of blood, etc. Many of the images are of death and destruction from God’s wrath. It’s no wonder that most of us have the book of Revelation at the bottom of our reading pile... though maybe Revelation is more and more relevant, given the amount of hostility and war everywhere these days!

Actually, the “take away” from the entire drama of Revelation is the vision that GOOD ultimately WINS over evil! It seems to me a shame that the VICTORY has to involve so much bloodshed in its imagery; maybe the visions of John in Revelation are a true reflection of the way our world operates, that force is often necessary to defeat evil, to stop evil, to annihilate evil. We know weapons and force were necessary to stop Adolf Hitler, and it seems that now force and more weapons and killing will be necessary to stop Vladamir Putin.

Back to the most hopeful part of the book of Revelation: the ending, about the “New Heaven and the New Earth.” Yes, it is a heavenly vision, an other-worldly vision, that all will be made new, that there will be no more tears and no more pain. It is also an “apocalyptic” vision, meaning that it will only happen at the “end” of the world, only after all has passed away. To make the words more relevant, we have to ask ourselves WHAT things have to pass away before a “New Earth and Heaven” can truly come. We are always asking ourselves that question, even on a personal level as simple as ... What do I have to discard, throw away, let go of, before there can be room for something new to come into my life?

At a personal level, even at the end of our lives, we can think of things we are giving up, to embrace a new vision, yes, even a heavenly kind of vision. Visiting with one of our older members recently, I heard: “what a luxury this time of life is! No duties, nothing I have to do, just time to think and reflect” The attitude was one of continuing surprise for the gifts and graces of life! The mood was one of total gratitude! I hope I can get even close to that when my time comes.

Concerning our communal church life, I know full well that when I arrived some 20 years ago there had already been much talk about buildings being an albatross around our necks. Today, most Christian leaders and social commentators say that we will cannot re-make the church communities of 50-60 years ago (2-3 generations ago!). We know that back then church for many was the main social event of the weekend. We know that for many, Christianity was thought to be the only way to think and live. Progressive Christians now can easily admit that people find “God” through many paths: “I don’t want to fall prey to thinking Sunday morning soccer is the devil, but see that it is indeed the joyful expression of exercise, play, and community!” We do have to share Sunday morning (though I wish coaches might think of starting at noon!). We do have to think of how

our beautiful message of Christ's love can reach out to homes, to the community, yes, to soccer fields, to coffee shops, even to homes via computers. These are specific visions of how the church needs to change.

I could go on a long time about visions and changes in how we present the Christian message. But I will wind down with one very specific vision for Christian community... a vision of how to use a very large building, with balconies and large seating capacity, with acoustical qualities almost as good as Symphony Hall... you get the point!!!! We are already on this path to using our amazing Meetinghouse more and more for music, to fully use its unmatched acoustics and size. So I'll close with sharing this incredible testimony that just came in from Paul Winter, after his concert here several weeks ago:

I recently had the great pleasure of performing with my ensemble, the Paul Winter Consort in the Belleville Colonial Meetinghouse, along with the Cantemus Chorus. This meetinghouse is a national treasure! I feel that musical events are among the highest usages of these "sonic temples." Meetinghouses like Belleville will, I feel, become increasingly treasured "oases" for our communities, sanctuaries from the fast-paced din of contemporary media culture. ...then, quoting his own song, he says it is from a poem by Amesbury's John Greenleaf Whittier, a poem written at the end of the Civil War, here is an excerpt: Sound over all waters, reach out from all lands, The chorus of voices, the clasping of hands. With glad jublations, bring hope to the nations.

Surely music is a huge part of God's gift of connection, of joining hearts, of finding a common pulse and beat among our human brothers and sisters and the creation itself. And our Meetinghouse is indeed a treasure, a sonic temple for heavenly music! Let's keep the heavenly visions alive, even as we find ways to translate them into specific earthly visions. Amen.