

“Vision: United”

Psalm 22: 22-31, Acts 8: 26-40
Rev. Anne Weirich, April 29, 2018

This week our sermon series on Vision 2020 is focused on the third letter of PCUSA - the “U.” The vision 2020 team decided on the word “united.”

A lot of things come to mind to my mind when I hear this word... United States. United in holy matrimony. United Airlines. In the UK - the football team Manchester United. I only know this because I have friends in the UK and the Holy Land who are crazy for this team.

The reason they like this team the most is because it has a sort of scrappy self-made reputation. It has often teetered on the brink of ruin. Once, the team sold 1 pound shares to locals to survive. But mostly they are loved because United built itself by trusting in young, unknown players.

They sort of remind me of the Green Bay Packers.

I love the Packers. Not just because I’m a cheesehead myself - born in Milwaukee. But because of how they operate.

The Packers, given an exception by the NFL, have always been a non-profit, publicly owned team. In 1923, as the team faced bankruptcy, 400 people were offered \$5 shares at the local Elks club. Now there are over 360,000 shareholders from all over the country and millions of shares. There are no dividends. Stock does not appreciate in value and can't be traded. No owner gets free tickets. No one can own a controlling amount of shares. So why do it?

Well, some say that 360,000 fans own the team because no one else wanted it. :o)

However, for most people, there is great pride of ownership and a sense that the team rises up from Green Bay rather than weighs them down with expenses. The organization contributes to the city. They've never thought of leaving Green Bay for a larger venue. The stadium is sold out every game, win or lose, and there's a 30 year waiting list for season tickets.

My friends who are Manchester United fans have seen their club trade shares on the NY stock exchange. And go for the big money players. It's now the most valuable team in the world. Many feel that

corporate sponsors disenfranchised the fans. Fan loyalty is still there. But most long for when the founding principles united them, rather than wins and wealth.

Shared, united vision always seems the best way forward. But it's not the easiest to hold onto. The shine and polish of big money and flashy players is hard to resist.

The Vision Team didn't use any sports metaphors when they described how we are called to be united. Sports metaphors only reflect some of the same ideals found in faith, after all.

Vision 2020 draws us out even further into the world by expanding our thoughts about being united.

- As members of the Church universal, we are Christ's disciples, called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- Against forces that seek to divide, Christ compels us to bear witness to a love that sustains community across great differences.
- Striving to love all of our neighbors as ourselves, we approach others in a spirit of openness and trust as we follow Jesus

Christ in respecting the freedom of other religions, world views, and traditions.

A friend of mine from Gambia was visiting in the Columbus area for the last several weeks. His name is Rev. Abou Camara. He came to explore a partnership of some kind with the PCUSA.

Over the last 20 years or so, Abou and his wife and a small group of church leaders have been planting churches in Gambia, Senegal, Guinea Bissau and Guinea Conkray. These are largely Muslim areas and most, but not all the members of his church are converted from Islam.

Last Saturday, at Presbytery, Abou told us that in Africa in addition to differences in religion, there are also differences in language and tribe. In Gambia, English is the official language. But there are fifteen tribal languages. Like most people in Gambia he learned five of those languages just by playing with friends, chatting among acquaintances in various settings.

When they were starting out, they would send a leader to a village who could speak the language. In some cases the churches would not

grow beyond a very few people - even after several years. So they decided to send someone from the same tribe. When they did this, the churches would soon outgrow their buildings and overwhelm the leadership with work.

He's concerned, because, in Christ, these tribal differences should not matter. But, in reality, these things do matter to people. The hope is, that as the faith grows and deepens, tribal affiliations won't be a stumbling block. But he's under no illusion that it won't take generations to make this happen.

Abou told me, you're lucky. Here - you don't have tribes.

Well - I'm not so sure about that.

It would depend upon how we might describe a tribe, I suppose. Because in most churches we look fairly tribal. We don't have a lot of diversity among us no matter who we are. Sometimes it is because of language. Other times it is because... well - that's a complicated answer.

There are many sentences of Scripture that we can draw upon that teach us how God's vision of a united people is supposed to look. The psalm for today is one of those.

This is a psalm about the "great congregation." The words reflect the vision of a united people.

The great congregation is without borders and tribes - with justice for all - "the poor shall eat and be satisfied," says the psalmist. And it includes everyone... listen again.

All the ends of the earth shall remember

and turn to the Lord;

and all the families of the nations

shall worship before him.

For dominion belongs to the Lord,

and he rules over the nations.

The psalmist goes on and tells us that not even time prevents God's great congregation. Those who have passed from this life to the next

rest in God's dominion. And those who are "a people yet unborn," are also a part of God's congregation and shall turn and worship the Lord.

What psalmist is telling us about God is: regardless of what it looks like from our vantage point, or how we long we persist in dividing ourselves by nation or race or ethnicity or religion, it doesn't look like that to God.

We are united - whether we are aware of it or not - because God unites us. Or to hark back to last week's sermon - we are **being** united - at all times and in all places and at all levels by God.

This means that we are called to seek this united vision. The vision team reminds us that the Spirit compels us toward this united character. We're to seek it with all of our heart, spirit, strength and mind and intentionality.

This is actually the story of us, as God's people isn't it?

We can pull sentences of scripture out of the Bible right and left. But for me, the story comes alive and shares the truth more clearly when we look at the **people** God chose for posterity.

The psalm says posterity will serve the Lord to tell future generations who belongs, who is united to God. And look at the unlikely tribe God has assembled to tell the story for all time - for posterity.

Episcopalian preacher Fleming Rutledge writes in her most recent book that...

All along God had taken the low roads, chosen the least likely folks. To start a whole new nation? How about picking a pair of childless senior citizens? Need a spokesperson for your people Israel? Choose the one who stutters. And on and on it goes with God until finally even the prophets foresee that when God's Chosen One shows up, it will be more like a shoot emerging from a dead stump than the arrival of some flashy military or political figure. It will be the one from whom people would just as soon hide their faces than the beautiful people gracing glossy magazine

covers.

<https://blog.perspectivesjournal.org/2018/04/24/weak-power>

These are the people who say for God, “God has done it!” God has united us - all of us.

The entire book of Acts continues to tell stories of the people being united into God’s vision of the great congregation.

Some people say this books should be named “The Acts of the Spirit.” For the Spirit is leading the new church in ways that break the bonds of tribe and ability and nation and power.

This week the Spirit’s leading is told through the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. We start with an angel - a messenger from God - who sends Philip away from Jerusalem south toward Gaza. Head down the mountain into the desert - the wilderness there along the coastline. So Philip goes along.

The same road is being traveled by this wealthy man from Ethiopia. He’s been to Jerusalem - an 8 day journey at a fast clip - and now he’s heading home.

As his entourage handles the horses, he's reading the scroll of Isaiah. We might assume he's one of the righteous gentiles who honors God. But, as a eunuch, he is disfigured physically. And just like the lame man, he can't enter the Temple or join any congregation.

The Spirit sends Philip to run alongside this elaborate chariot for a bit. Eventually, he's invited to ride, and asked to help. This unlikely pair study the Word of God together. They talk about how the verses that the Ethiopian struggled to understand were about Jesus - the servant who suffered. Philip must have told the eunuch about baptism. Because when some water appears, *in the desert*, the Ethiopian asks to be baptized.

There were plenty of "forces that divide us" present to become a stumbling block in this story about who God's great congregation includes.

Philip, as a good Jew, could have said - well - you might have respect for Yahweh, but, you're not fit for the Temple - I'm not sure you're fit for baptism. The eunuch could have looked at this funny man running along side and asked his charioteer to leave Philip in the dust.

They could have looked at each other and said, you're black and I'm brown... we're from different tribes and we best leave it like that. Or you're Jewish and I'm from an Ethiopian religion - we best not mingle our truth.

But the Spirit chose these folks for posterity. And nothing - not even a desert landscape - prevented those whom God has united from sitting next to each other in the great congregation - which just happened to be housed in a chariot that day. God has done it!

Last Sunday evening, I took my friend Abou to church in Zanesville, where he'd been invited to speak to an Apostolic congregation. This denomination's central focus is the baptism of the Spirit.

The leadership of the church is African American. And the small congregation is a mix of black and brown and white - young and old - disabled in ways physical and mental - rich and poor. United in the Spirit. The worship was two hours. And at least an hour was dedicated to stories of how the Spirit had moved in their lives. Some of the stories were as new as mine - as I described how Abou and I came to be there

that night. Or they were as old as sixty or seventy years. These old stories were perfectly told - polished by posterity. Each story united us. The feeling of love grew as each person spoke.

Finally, Abou, son of a Muslim Imam, told his story of how the Spirit worked through the stories in the Koran and the Bible to bring him to Christ. "I became a Christian," he testified, "because my Christian roommate in boarding school loaned me his Bible when I asked for it. And as we studied, I found the same people - Abraham, Moses, Mary, Jesus - in both books. I believed the Koran was true. So, then, the Bible, with even more stories about the same people, must be true, too."

The rest of Abou's story reads like Philip's story. Eventually, he left his family and was baptized by Korean missionaries. Then the Spirit sent him to seminary in the Philippines, and Nigeria and to plant churches the countries of West Africa.

Abou's story can be our story, too. He shows us what it means to be "members of the Church universal, ...Christ's disciples, called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit."

Sometimes this will mean running alongside a moving chariot and figuring out a way to get a ride.

Sometimes it means allowing ourselves to see the truth in other religions through the lens of our own truth.

Sometimes it takes great courage to stand against the forces that divide us - for it is not only the good that is polished for posterity. Sometimes posterity is nothing but polish. Things like the deeply ingrained harmful facets of race, class, gender and tribe must be exposed and dismantled.

It can be a great deal of effort to join the great congregation that God has prepared for us from before time.

But listen again to what happens when we do...

“When [the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip] came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way **rejoicing**.”

That’s the vision of being united! We are all snatched up and sent on to do more of the same.

To be on our way, united - all rejoicing - united in the great
congregation - when we all, as the psalmist says, “shall live for God.”

When we can say with one voice, “God has done it!”

Amen.