

**Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz**  
**“What’s Your Business?”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, February 14, 2021**

***Isaiah 43:1-3, 16-19***

*But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.  
Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.*

***John 5:1-9***

*After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and*

*knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.*

*Now that day was a sabbath.*

Without a vision, the people perish. Without a vision, the people perish. That's how Proverbs 29, verse 18, is translated in the King James Version of the Bible. In the wisdom of Proverbs, having a vision, having a focus, having a purpose is so critical to we human beings that without it, we are in jeopardy. We are in danger. We will cease to exist. And if we are in such peril as individuals when we try to function without a vision, just imagine what the risk is when a community of people, a community like First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood tries to exist, tries to function without a vision. A vision of what God wants us to do and be together as a church of Jesus Christ. As we continue to explore the idea of interim time and what we need to be working on together during this in-between time, beginning and continuing a meaningful conversation about vision and a mission for First Presbyterian Kirkwood is or needs to be one of our top priorities.

Now, I know this congregation has done some important vision and mission work in recent years, but interim time-- interim time requires more of all of us. For our significant part of the work, which we must do together in the near future, is a mission study which is designed in part to provide crucial information to the pastor nominating committee, the PNC, when they are elected and begin the vital work of discerning whom God is calling to serve this church. And it must be clear, as we engage in this work that a congregation's vision and mission is never about the past, it is never about what it used to do and used to be and use to enjoy in the distant or even the recent past. For vision and mission, especially for a church, is always about the future, God's future. And vision and mission is always about what a congregation is doing to get itself from where it is at present to where God wants us to be, expects us to be tomorrow and next week and next year in the future. And as we might all imagine, our present pandemic has changed everything. Changed everything, especially the ways that this church and every church must focus on God's future. It might be good to spend a few moments drilling down on what we mean with these words, vision, and mission. For so many organizations, so many corporations have vision statements and mission statements these days. And I find it-- I find that often, these two words have kind of fused together, have become synonymous, and are thus easily confused.

And so, when I speak of vision, I understand it to be that image of God's future towards which the Holy Spirit is constantly calling us. This future is marked by the characteristics of God, which we see in Jesus Christ, and are reflected to us through Scripture. This vision begins with the acknowledgment that the deepest part of a human, of you and me-- the deepest part of all people everywhere is the goodness of God in which we are created. Remember way back at the beginning of Scripture in the first chapter of Genesis, God creates all sorts of things. And on day six, God creates humans, and then proclaims that we are good. And we express this divine goodness by reflecting those God characteristics that Jesus makes so alive and so intentional through his life and activity, love, compassion, hopefulness, relationships that are purposeful and joyful and lifegiving where we-- where our care for one another is always the first priority. This is a vision where we strive to be who and what we have been created

to be, when our first assumption about another person is that they are good because that is how God creates all of us. When that is our first assumption about another, then we see all people. And we see the entire world very, very differently. Then, building upon this foundational sense of vision is where the idea of mission comes into play. For me, a congregation's mission is stated in terms that are concrete and specific just how we as a particular group of people will come together and reflect our divinely-given goodness and vision for life.

The mission of the church is defined by the detailed ways a group of disciples seek to imitate Jesus, the carefully-thought through specifics of worshipping together and practicing compassion together and learning together and living joyfully together and seeking justice for all together and celebrating and responsibly using God's generous abundance. These specifics become the particular pieces of the mission of this congregation. Simply stated, if we are to be the disciples and the church that Jesus invites us to be, that Jesus expects us to be, then we need to know what we are all about. And we need to be able to tell each other and to tell all other what we are about. We can be the nicest, most loving, most mission and service-minded group of Christians that have ever existed, but if we don't know why we gather in Jesus' name or if we have forgotten why we are a community of his disciples, well, then, other people are not going to be interested in working with us and being served by us and joining together with us. And I'm guessing over time, if we've forgotten who we are, if we've forgotten our purposes, I'm guessing we'll lose interest in the body ourselves without a vision. The people perish.

The 1999 movie *Ciderhouse Rules*, based on a book of the same title by John Irving, is fascinating and disturbing and forces the rethinking of assumptions and opinions. As the title suggests, picking and processing apples is a key part of the story. The boss of the apple picking crew, who often has to deal with reluctant workers, is fond of asking those around him, especially those reluctant around him, of asking them to clarify their purpose in work and in life with the question, "What's your business?" What's your business? This is a great question for churches, a great question for us-- what's our business?

Our gospel text makes very clear that Jesus knew he was in the people business and that he was willing to care for God's broken children, even on the Sabbath when such caring was sure to get him in trouble. Jesus knew that his mission in life, his purpose on Earth, was to help those around him be captured and claimed by a vision of God's kingdom, God's beloved community, come present on earth. Jesus' mission reflects God's priorities of love and compassion and wholeness for those who are hurting and broken and who see themselves as not having worth. Jesus' passion for his mission burned inside him like an unquenchable fire. Jesus knew that the simple act of inviting another to stand and to walk-- he knew that this would violate the rules of those in power and probably would threaten his life, but he acted anyway. He acted without flinching, without regret, without looking back-- Jesus knew his mission. Jesus knew his business.

At a conference I attended several years ago, the speaker of the day invited us all to think about the life of a church through the lens of rules for white water rafting, which is a set of rules designed to keep people who are shooting through a series of rapids on a fast and challenging river, a set of rules designed to keep them as safe as they can be in the midst of that activity. The speaker lifted up five important rules for navigating such a whitewater river. Number one, if you get thrown out of the boat, let go of everything except your life vest. Number two, lean

towards the rocks. Number three, never stop paddling. Number four, rest in the calm spots. And number five, watch out for each other. I was especially intrigued with the second rule, that rafters must lean towards the rocks when they're going through a set of rapids. This action seems counterintuitive to me. The rocks are the source of all the whitewater and creates the danger of the river in the first place. My inclination is to stay away from the rocks, to try and be safer. But safe, safe isn't always the wisest choice. For all the energy of the water, the speaker explained to us, all the energy of the water, which propels the raft forward and gets everyone through the rapids, it's only found near the rocks.

Jesus' healing on the Sabbath is him leaning toward the rocks. By healing when it is forbidden, Jesus taps into the energy of valuing a child of God more than human rules. While Jesus makes one person more whole and more complete, he announces to the religious authorities and to all people everywhere, ourselves included, Jesus announces that God values human life more than anything. By leaning toward the rocks that would deny human compassion, Jesus sets the entire gospel in motion. In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah promises that God will lead us through the deepest of waters safely and that God will help us to see the new thing, the new vision which is about to happen.

All of us at First Presbyterian Church, as we begin this interim time and the process of forming a new vision of mission and ministry in this place, new vision and mission as we approach almost the quarter mark of the 21st century, as we together begin this holy work, I believe we need to follow the example of Jesus. We must lean toward the rocks for the energy they provide. We must act boldly and purposefully without flinching, without regret, without looking back. We must be willing to anger the rule makers at the risk of our individual lives and our corporate life in order to care for people, in order to make our divinely-given vision for life a reality on earth, a reality in our midst. And we must be willing to make mistakes and fail faithfully as we seek to follow after Jesus. For even when we fail, we have made a difference. Even when we fail, we have learned new things. And most importantly, even when we fail, God is glorified.

Then after we have failed, we have the opportunity to take our new learning and try again to live and be the gospel. As people following Jesus, we must always know what our business is. Critical to our business is working together, working together as God's people. For when we work together rather than go our separate ways or work at cross purposes or, worst of all, fight with one another, when we work together, our efforts are pleasing to God. Pleasing to God, even if our efforts, especially if our efforts, anger those making rules which don't value people. And when we do this, resulting in our knowing God's nurturing, which is the energy which propels us to live out the vision and mission which we receive as disciples of Jesus, are we ready? Are we ready for what the Holy Spirit has in store for us? Are we ready for the life, the vision, the mission of working together? For we must always remember, without a vision, without a vision, the people perish. Amen.

