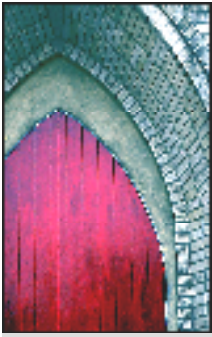


VISION SUNDAY-2008

SCRIPTURE TEXT:

I PETER 4:8-11 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
August 24, 2008
VISION SUNDAY

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

A Public Manifesto:

Vision Sunday is set apart to dream and pray about how God might grow and deepen Oak Hills' impact in our city and our confidence in the Gospel. I spent time this week reflecting on Oak Hills' past. Do you know what I saw? God has been very good to us. He has carried us well over the years, preserving a healthy, unified leadership, even as we've faced new challenges. Even in great trials and refining, He has taken folks in this church who wouldn't call themselves experts in mercy and used them to bring deep comfort and hope to the broken hearted.

Vision Sunday is a public manifesto, a day to name what matters most to us as a church, what we **should** want most. There's so much to want, isn't there? And so much to thank God for. It is healthy to measure our progress as a church, to dream and "to spur one another on toward love and good works." (Heb 10:24) But we must take care lest we measure by the wrong stick. C.S. Lewis said when it comes to the promises of the Gospel, we can be "like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." Our vision as a church ought to be to become all God means for us to be so we might function as He intends. To maintain such a vision, we must keep our focus on the reason we exist in the first place.

1 Peter 4:8-11

⁸Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Start With The Ending:

Last week we focused on the charge to keep on loving one another earnestly. The heart of this is a plea to not give up on one another as we come to see each other's imperfections. Earnest love can handle the discovery of flaws, wounds and addictions. Like an umbrella of grace, earnest love can cover a multitude of sins because it is more than a warm feeling. It is an ongoing commitment to one another. But for what end? If you think the call to love is only to help one another through hard times, you're stopping way short of the ultimate purpose behind this and everything else the Christian is called to do.

To grasp the purpose behind verses 8-10, we need to start with the end of this thought, verse 11. There is a glorious, cosmic function behind everything Christ calls His people to—"that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." In verses 8-10, Peter calls us to love, then tells us how to love. But at the end, he tells us **why** to love. If we are to understand how to love well, we need to start with the ending, and ask what should drive us to obey this call to keep on loving earnestly.

Concerning how to love, Peter outlines four duties for the Christian. If we look at them as ends in themselves, we may see God's commands merely as arbitrary standards we must measure up to in order to stay in His good grace. But what if vs. 11 is true? That would mean in some way obedience proclaims the Gospel—that God means to use us to reveal Himself to the watching world. As we unpack these four Christian duties, let's start with the end and ask how these duties might accomplish the great purpose of glorifying God through Jesus Christ.

1. SHOW HOSPITALITY WITHOUT GRUMBLING: When my brother and I were in college, my parents signed up to provide a foster home for kids who had been removed from the worst of situations. Their first call was for a 13 year old girl who had been mistreated by every man in her life. Here's how she came to us. One day she woke up, got a bowl of cereal, heard a knock on the door, answered it, and there before her stood a social worker and a couple of police officers, come to remove her from that situation. By 3:00PM, she sat in our living room as the social worker tried to explain that she was safe and this would be her new home until they got everything worked out.

I remember how mom and dad called my brother and me to make sure we'd be okay with this. We went to a church which loved to remind us that whatever we do "for the least of these, that we do unto Christ." (Mt 25:40) So Ryan and I both, of course, had no objections. But neither of us knew what this would mean for our lives. We were our parents only two kids—boys 14 months apart, now both in college. But all at once we had a 13 year old sister. For the summers we lived at home, we learned quickly that we were in over our heads.

But at the same time, my parents were remarkable people. Still are. One thing they modeled with unflinching conviction and unflappable grace was that hospitality was not a second tier responsibility for the Christian. In fact, my parents always put my brother and me in the presence of people who were hurting, alone and in trouble. And it is just so interesting to me that here in this text, of all the things Peter could have put in his mini-list of Christian duties we find glad-hearted hospitality.

Hospitality can seem to be a sucker's game. We go into it thinking, "How hard could it be to open my home to someone in trouble?" But then they chain smoke menthol cigarette's with the filters broke off in our garage because they know the rule about smoking in the house, but there's three feet of snow on the ground outside. (True story of a crisis pregnancy my parents took in.) Or we say, "We'll host a get together for the young families in the neighborhood," only to watch the neighborhood kids destroy our clean home. Somewhere along the way, we begin to think we're getting wise this sucker's game. But not wanting to appear inhospitable, we develop some rules—fail-safes to keep people in our homes, but not disrupting our homes.

Hospitality is not for suckers. It's for Christians. But apparently according to Peter, it makes the heart want to grumble enough that the call to show hospitality without grumbling made it into the canon of Scripture. It seems as if Peter is saying, "Expect hospitality will put you out a bit. It will cost you. Don't grumble." Grumble about what? Is Peter talking about grumbling about the work involved in cleaning the house or cooking a meal or making a bed, or is he talking about people and their neediness? Probably all of the above. When you think of the persecution and the underground network of house churches growing throughout the Roman world when Peter wrote this, it is easy to imagine both the needs and risks must have been very high.

When you consider that the aim of the Christian life is to glorify God through His Son Jesus Christ, of course hospitality would be central. Jesus played host to the most needy, desperate, ill-equipped collection of have-nots ever. We are all and have been sick, in prison (*real or imagined*), hungry, thirsty and displaced. Jesus came to where His people were and are and took us in, gave us what we needed and did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took us from our various forms of vagrancy and gave us a home with Him. The call to hospitality is a call to mirror what He had modeled.

2. USING GIFTS AS STEWARDS OF GOD'S VARIED GRACE: In this little turn of a phrase, we catch a glimpse of God's design. God could have arranged His creation any way He pleased. He could have given each of us every gift and talent. But He didn't. He gave me some and withheld others—gifts He gave to you. He gave you gifts others around you lack, and gave others gifts you lack. And He did this on purpose. Paul described it by saying together we make up one Body—the Body of Christ, but each of us are different parts. Some are hands, others eyes or ears. And no one part can say to the others, "I don't need you." (1 Cor 12:21) Built into His design for the church is this charge to use what He's given recognizing that these gifts are grace to others.

We're stewards, not owners, of God's varied grace. We get so self-important and protective with our gifts, believing they give us our identity. But loving earnestly with our gifts means we use them for God's glory—which means we use them to serve. How does this glorify Him? We are His hands and feet. When we serve together as one, we present Christ as so much bigger than just one strength or angle. God doesn't give gifts just so we might know how special He thinks we are, but rather that, through us, others might know how precious they are to Him.

3. SPEAKING AS ONE WHO SPEAKS ORACLES OF GOD: When we look at the great commission Jesus gave His church on earth, we see that it was, in large part, a ministry of communication—to "be His witnesses, making disciples of all the nations." (Mt 28:19) Christians are meant to be people of "The Book," meaning we have a life-long assignment to study in an ongoing way the content and application of God's word. You may not feel like someone particularly gifted with words, but if you are a Christian, make no mistake, your life is a testimony. Your words and actions bear witness to what shapes and guides your life, and here Peter is telling all of us, to take that very seriously.

This is a burden. We learned earlier from our study in Malachi that the word "oracle" means "burden." Speaking the truth about God is a burden, not because it is drudgery, but because everything God tells us is **relational**. Every word has something to do with who He is and who we are in relationship to Him, and that is forever relevant, and weighty. It is **always** meant to change us. When you speak, whether by your words or by your life, do so with the knowledge that your life is telling a story.

Relying on the Holy Spirit, we must seek to faithfully convey the **weight** of the message of Jesus Christ—to carry that burden to the hearer. And the hearer must do more than listen. They must take up that burden and, also by the Spirit's help, strive to apply His word to their lives. Speaking the burdens of God is the business of praying that in every conversation and situation we'd be God's mouthpiece—that we'd treat our words as though they were both numbered and valuable. Again, let's not forget the end goal here—we are called to speak as ones who speak the oracles of God in order that in everything God might be glorified through Jesus Christ.

4. SERVING BY THE STRENGTH THAT GOD SUPPLIES: This little expression here is a gift of grace to the weary. That Christians are called to serve each other and our world is an inescapable expectation from God's Word. But this verse gives great counsel for our approach: serve by the strength God supplies. There is nothing God will call you to that He won't equip you for. He will supply everything you need for everything He has called you to do and be. Your call is not to generate the strength in order to serve God. It is to serve as a steward of God's varied grace, and to trust Him to supply what you need.

This is a call to a generous life. The Christian is called to be as generous as possible with our resources, time and abilities. When we see in the end of this text the objective of our service in the name of the Lord, we see it is for the sake of a name other than our own, a glory other than our own and by a strength other than our own. It is for the glory of God through His son Jesus Christ, whose name we bear as Christians.

So even here the call to serve with the strength God supplies calls attention to the mercy, faithfulness and grace of the One who served us by giving not only His last shred of strength, but His very life, dying in our place as a payment for the multitude of our sins. Christ is our model in serving one another. He never diverted His course from what His Father had appointed for Him—the cross. Even in His darkest hours just before His arrest, He asked for God's will to be done through Him, though He was so filled with the sorrow and stress of what awaited.

Don't Give Up On Me:

So what should we want as a church for this coming year? That "in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ," because, Peter tells us, "to Him belongs glory and dominion forever." What we ought to desire most not just from the things we do as Christians, but from the lives we live as Christians, is to see God glorified through His Son Jesus, and that our obedience and faith would be something God would use for that purpose. We should want to serve even when we feel like all our strength is all tapped out. In fact, that's the best posture from which to serve, depending on the strength He supplies alone.

There are so many areas of ministry in this church which are developing—some just beginning, others morphing, others putting down even deeper roots. But the gifts God has supplied this church He has scattered across our lives as a sower scatters seed. His call for us all is to use those gifts because He has a vision for this church which transcends any image of worldly success we could muster—the glory of God through His Son Jesus Christ. To paraphrase Peter, I pray our vision for this year would be to, "Love actively, letting our love cover a multitude of sins, giving ourselves away for the sake of others so that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ because God alone is deserving of all glory." May He be our vision.