

Vision Sunday in Summary

Yesterday was our 2018 vision Sunday, and for those who weren't able to make it, or for those who fell asleep prior to, or during, my sermon/vision for the coming year, I thought it would be helpful to use the bulletin article this week for a brief(er) summary of what I hope is on the horizon for the Stamford Church of Christ.

I used Psalm 1 as a guiding text. The essence of that psalm is a simple confidence that God cares for, blesses, and guards the righteous, while the wicked burnt out quickly and are forgotten. As we've been studying the Gospel of Luke Jesus redefines what it means to be righteous out of the typical pious definitions. Righteousness, for Jesus, errs on the side of kindness and compassion, justice, and sacrificial love. My great hope for Stamford Church of Christ is to continue living in a legacy of *that* kind of righteousness that God watches over and blesses.

Psalm 1 also employs the image of "a tree planted by streams of water," as a metaphor for the righteous person. I think of that image as also applying to groups of people—a church perhaps! So think of Stamford Church of Christ like a tree planted by streams of water. A tree is a great image because it has roots and a trunk and those establish where the tree will grow, but then it has branches, and branches upon branches, and that means trees grow. Roots extend, trunks expand, branches goes this way and that in response to the conditions they face. The same is true, I suggest, for this church. It has been established and has existed faithfully in the righteousness that God asks of us, but it will inevitably grow and become something different. Not something so different that it will be unrecognizable, but the difference between the way a person looks as a child then as a teenager then as an adult and so on. The only thing I wish for the Stamford Church of Christ is to continue being what it is, with all its values and virtues, and to follow that path on the new adventures it takes us.

So I described a set of values and virtues that I think embody what Stamford is: home and thought and diversity. Stamford is a home above all. It is a place where God's love is manifest in our lives toward one another, and people feel that. If the only reason Stamford Church of Christ existed was a place where people could feel loved then that would be enough. Yet it is also a place where faith is not a matter of unthinking obedience, but of critical and transformative thought. Finally it is a place of diversity that resists the conformity and homogeneity that increasingly describes our social lives today. These are incredible markers of a church today.

The areas where I hope to see this church move in the coming years are simply extensions of those basic values and virtues. I talked about four areas: service/justice, spirituality/education, relationships, and presence. Each of these areas are not isolated issues, but often involve one another to be practiced properly.

I placed service/justice first because I think it is the most important. As the church grows into a new age it will continually wrestle with the purpose of its existence. Is the church here as a theological beacon to show other people why everybody else is wrong? Well,

we've kind of left that one behind long ago. Is the church here simply as a social club for people with nothing better to do on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights? I hope not. Does the church exist so that seminarians can have something to do or a way to make a living? While I hope its true purpose does not exclude this idea necessarily, I don't think it is the reason we gather together, worship together, and share a common bond. The church is the place where the life and love of God can be lived out. But this does not just apply to ourselves and within the boundaries of our property, but arguably applies in a more important sense to the ways we live out God's life and love in sacrificial and altruistic service to those outside our property lines. I hope in the coming years that the Stamford Church of Christ will be known as a place of love, care, and service to our community in North Stamford, to the city of Stamford generally, to the individual places where each of us live, to the body of Christ generally and to the world.

The other three areas are perhaps footnotes to that general vision of service/justice. We will continue to strive towards deepening our spiritual lives not only through devotional practices but through educational initiatives. We will serve our common life through deepening our relationships with each other both through common practices like small groups and through adopting the habit of ministering to one another: viewing ministry as something done by everyone for everyone. Finally, through all of these values and virtues we seek to establish a sense of presence to one another, our local communities, and to God.

The most important thing to keep in mind through all of this, however, is that the church is a tree, not a corporation. This is not a vision from a CEO about the future growth of this company; it is a way of discerning how to best be faithful to our calling as Christians. The only outcome we are concerned with here is personal and communal transformation into the image and likeness of God, and the extension of that divine life for the sake of the people we encounter.

So as grandiose or idealistic as this vision may be, there is only way one real way to muck it up. We will inevitably fall short in a hundred ways. We will forget, or get too busy, or simply not have the time or resources to do the things we hope to do. Some things will be great, and others we will need to do better on in 2019. But none of that will mess this up. If anything it simply is part of our spirituality of imperfection that reminds us that we are not an institution, we are a community of people. The only real way to muck this up is to forget why we are doing any of this thing we call church, and to end up serving ourselves instead of serving others.

So let us live boldly and idealistically into the coming year with big ideas and dreams for the sake of the Kingdom of God. And may we be such a tree planted by streams of water, because the water is Christ, which produces fruit in us when it is time, and will keep our leaves from withering.