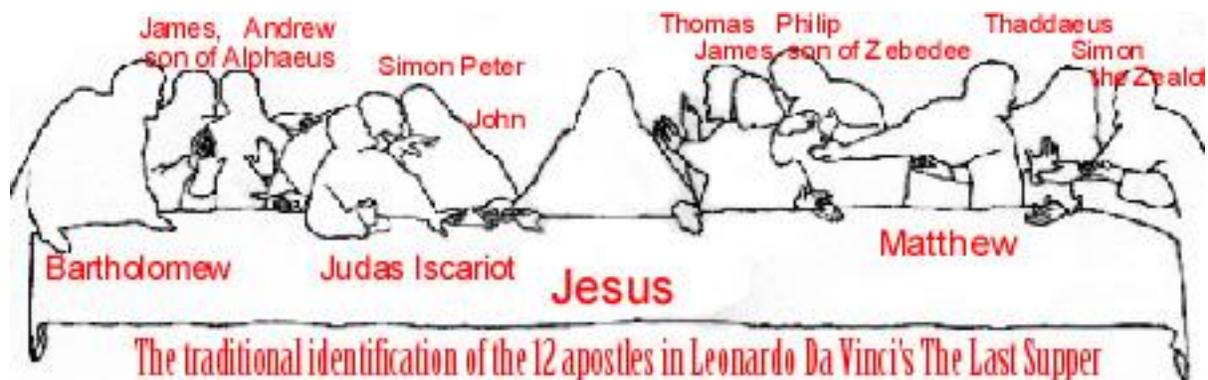


New Beginnings: Vision
Acts 4:23-37
John 20:19-31

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
April 12, 2015

In Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper, Jesus presides at table with his twelve disciples seated on either side. It is generally understood that Da Vinci wanted to portray the exact moment when the disciples were reacting to Jesus' statement that one



of them would betray him. "Is it I?" they ask themselves.

On the far left as we face the painting, Bartholomew, James the Lesser and Andrew form a cluster of three. Next to them, Simon Peter leans close to John as if the two are whispering about Judas behind his back. Judas sits between them but is left out of their conversation, his hand on the proverbial money bag. Simon the Zealot occupies the opposite end of the table, talking with Thaddaeus and Matthew, who gestures emphatically toward Jesus. Next we have Philip and James the Greater, with imploring looks on their faces.

"Is it I?"

Closest to Jesus in Leonardo Da Vinci's painting, closer than John, Peter, James, Andrew, closer than anybody else and very nearly in Jesus' face is the one disciple I haven't mentioned yet. We see just the profile of his face, and one hand with the index finger raised. Thomas. The one who famously said "unless I put my finger in the marks of the nails... I will not believe!" The one who got a special repeat resurrection appearance from Jesus, all his own.

In Ross King's book, Leonardo and the Last Supper, King suggests that of all the disciples, Thomas might be the disciple who would appeal most to Leonardo Da Vinci, the painter the inventor, the experimenter, the scientist, the engineer. Da Vinci was not content with other people's answers. He wanted to know things for himself.

There is no condemnation of Thomas by Jesus in our gospel story. There is only a blessing. Leonardo must have liked that. I know I do.

“Have you believed because you have seen?” Jesus asks Thomas. “Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have come to believe!”

Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have come to believe. *Well, that's us, isn't it!*

Although we have not experienced the risen Christ in bodily form like the original disciples, we are equally blessed. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says—to us! “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says—to us!

He is real in ways we can't see. He is real in ways that exceed our expectations. He is real beyond the boundaries of what we can know with human certainty. To be a Christian is to live with this peculiar brand of un-certainty that we call “faith.”

We walk by faith and not by sight.

This is true across the board and for everything that we do, or try to do, as Christians, both individually and as a faith community.

We walk, we work, we plan—by faith and not by sight.

I have a story about walking by faith and not by sight:

The story began around the time that I stepped down from the first church that I served in New Hampshire, and around the time that I became pregnant with my son Daniel. I'd been listening to the brother of a friend talk about his work with the Center for Disease Control and with the World Health Organization on the control and treatment of the parasitic disease *elephantiasis* (or *lymphatic filariasis*) which is endemic in tropical countries. The disease causes swelling and gross disfiguring of the leg and is a stigmatized disease affecting women ten times more than men. A Brazilian woman with no medical degree had discovered through observation that a daily regimen of foot washing, along with treating minor cuts and scrapes with an inexpensive, over-the-counter antibiotic dramatically reduced symptoms. Our friend's brother, Dave, was looking for funding for an educational initiative to test this foot washing regimen in Haiti. And Dave was a Christian.

Dave talked to me about the strong connection he felt between the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet in John 13 and the public health initiative of teaching women

to wash their own feet in a particular way and for a particular purpose. “I just know there’s a role for the church,” he said to me. “Do you think the Presbyterians would support this?”

Well, I knew nothing about parasitic diseases in the tropics. I didn’t speak Portuguese. I didn’t speak French, or Haitian Creole. I’d never written a grant proposal in my life, and I had a new baby at home.

“Yes, Dave, I think the Presbyterians will support this,” I said, based on nothing. And I set out to make it happen with God’s help.

I traveled to Leogane, Haiti with Dave and some others and asked a lot of questions. I obtained grant guidelines for the Presbyterian Women’s Thank Offering and Birthday Offering. The big money was in the Birthday Offering, so we decided to go after that one. I wrote drafts, circulated them to tons of people, revised them, recirculated them.

And one day the letter arrived in the mail stating that our project, “From Clinic to Community,” had been selected for a \$200,000 award. This paid for three years of community-based support groups to educate women living in rural Haiti with elephantiasis, to teach them new skills, and ultimately to help them self-organize a community store to promote micro-enterprise initiatives for women as they began to manage their symptoms and stay healthy.

I found myself, the mother of a toddler, traveling four times a year for three years to the Leogane region of Haiti as chairperson of the Advisory Committee for this project. And I will tell you that at no point from start to finish did I feel adequately qualified or equipped to do what I was doing.

The project came from Dave’s vision. “I just know there’s a role for the church,” he’d said. He effectively communicated that vision to me. So we shared the vision, and we got busy. We walked by faith and not by sight.

This morning I want to talk some more about vision because a vision for our ministry as the Church on the Green is essential and we don’t yet have one.

I’ve been serving as your pastor for 2 1/2 years now...believe it or not! You’ve listened to... 125 of my sermons (and, by the way, thank you for listening!). We’ve covered a lot of ground together, but these next two months, starting next Sunday, April 19, will be *the most important in our ministry*. Period. Hands down.

As you have heard me say for several Sundays now, we are about to launch the Discernment Phase of the New Beginnings program. Over the next two months, those of you who sign up will meet in small groups to discern a bold new vision for our future in ministry as the Church on the Green.

You will be asking yourselves what our ministry might look like ten and fifteen years from now. You’ll be asking, is there something we haven’t yet considered that is the

very thing God wants us to make happen in this community, starting now??? At the end of the two months, we will commit together to a New Beginning that will take us into uncharted territory.

If you ask me, the church is always at its finest in uncharted territory. I did not know what i was doing when i worked on the project in Haiti, but that was OK. The vision for the project took me well beyond the boundaries of my knowledge and training into the very place God needed the church to be. It was exciting.

I believe God is calling the Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green into uncharted territory. What ministry opportunities are right outside our doors here in Bloomfield? And which of those opportunities has “our name on it”?

A vision will emerge from your small group meetings. The vision will be our bold New Beginning as the Church on the Green. We’ll need to walk by faith and not by sight to make it happen, and it will change us.

I can’t say what “it” is because that is *your work*. I could stand up here and yammer away about *my* vision for the Church on the Green, but it needs to be *your vision*. It needs to come organically from you—from what you love, from your hopes and dreams, from what makes your hearts go “pound, pound, pound.” It has to be authentically yours or you will not have the energy and investment to make it a reality.

Your vision for ministry must also be based on an eyes-wide-open observation of who we are trying to reach. *Who are our neighbors?*

I’ve been doing a lot of reading this week and here are a few things I’ve learned about our neighbors:

1) An article by Stephen Stirling for NJ Advance Media two weeks ago reported that as long-term NJ residents are moving out of the state, new immigrants are moving in. Population increased in Essex County from 2010-2014 by 11,376. 31,870 NJ residents moved out of Essex County, and of those who moved into Essex County, 24,346 were new immigrants.

“The annual update from the Census shows just incremental change, but these changes are part of a larger set of trends that is expected to completely remake the fabric of the state in the coming years and decades¹,” Stirling writes.

Who are our neighbors? Our new neighbors—the ones who may be looking for a new church home and for the support encouragement of a church family—will very likely be from a variety of cultures and language groups and will likely be at various stages of adjusting to life in these United States while sustaining strong ties with family “back home.”

2) Another article also by Stephen Stirling from September of last year reports on the results of a recent study by United Way of Northern New Jersey focusing on

economics. The Federal poverty line for a family of four is, officially, \$22,811. Adjusting this figure to account for the cost of living in NJ, the United Way study calculated a basic survival budget for a family of 4 to be \$61,200, and calls this figure the “ALICE threshold.” ALICE is an acronym that stands for **A**sset **L**imited, **I**ncome **C**onstrained, **E**mployed. 8% of households in the township of Bloomfield are below the Federal Poverty Line, which is roughly 1 in 12 households. 32% of households in Bloomfield are below the ALICE threshold. That’s roughly 1 in 3!

Who are our neighbors? One in three of our neighbors in Bloomfield are “one lost job or one medical emergency away from potential financial ruin².” Those figures are slightly higher in Belleville, slightly lower in Nutley, and quite different altogether—as you might imagine—in Glen Ridge.

3) One last set of figures pertain to young people who we always refer to as “the future of the church,” the 18-34 year olds. According to the US Census Bureau American Community Survey, as reported by Stephen Stirling for NJ Advance Media, more than 50% (50.7%) of 18-34 year olds are a race “other than white” which is up from 22% in 1980. 40% of 18-34 year olds in NJ live at home with their parents. 36% speak a language other than English at home. 71% have never married (in 1980 that figure was 48%)³.

These are the young people we would like to see coming to our church in droves. *They are our neighbors.* What does our church have for them that is meaningful to them? How are we inviting and welcoming them now? What happens to our future as a church if we can’t reach this age group?

When I imagine the Church on the Green 15 years from now, I envision a multi-ethnic, economically diverse caring community that is passionate about strengthening lives and neighborhoods with the transforming love of Jesus Christ!

But that’s just the broad brush strokes. And that’s just one voice, mine. In this undertaking, my job is to listen to you. The visioning is your work. I can’t do it for you.

The early church that we read about in Acts 4 experienced hardship from the get go. After the high priests in Jerusalem hauled Peter and John in for interrogation, the early Christians responded by praying for boldness. Notice that they did not pray for their circumstances to change. They did not pray for God to make their situation less complicated.

Their prayer went like this:

*...grant to your servants to speak your word **with all boldness**, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (Acts 4:29-30)*

Note also the description of what life was like in the early church (Acts 4:32-37):

- *no one claimed private ownership of any possessions...*
- *there was not a needy person among them...*
- *with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrect the Lord Jesus*
- *great grace was upon them all.*

Belonging to the risen Christ represented a dramatic departure from business-as-usual. No part of one's life was left unchanged when one joined the early Christian movement.

I believe that can still happen. And that it *should* still happen. The trick is *to be bold*.

Like the early church, *let us pray for boldness*, knowing that the risen Christ is with the church in ways we cannot see, that he is a real and certain presence in our lives in ways that exceed our expectations, and that he will lead us beyond the boundaries of what we can know with human certainty into uncharted territory.

The church is at its best in uncharted territory. So, off we go!

To the glory of God.

~Ruth L. Boling, Pastor

¹Stirling, Stephen. "Immigrants filling the void as residents flee N.J. by the tens of thousands," NJ Advance Media for NJ.com, March 27, 2015.

²Stirling, Stephen. "Struggling to survive: 38 percent of N.J. households can't meet basic needs," NJ Advance Media for NJ.com, September 14, 2014.

³Stirling, Stephen. "N.J. young adults more likely to live with parents, less likely to marry than rest of U.S." NJ Advance Media for NJ.com, December 5, 2014.