

“Shaped by a Vision”

Isaiah 6:1-8 ¹

“Daddy,” my friend’s young son whispered during morning worship, “church is boring.” That comment spurred Rob Nash to write the book, *An 8-track Church in a CD World*.² That book was written thirty years ago, and we’d use different images now, but Rob is not alone in having a child who finds church boring. I suspect that nearly every one of us in this room who has children has heard a similar evaluation, and probably more than once.

As Rob reflected on his son’s appraisal, he wrote, “We play a little game each week in church called ‘Let’s Pretend.’ We pretend that people want the same things from church in the [21st century] that they wanted in the 1950s. . . . We pretend that the church is still the center of community life and that people will come back to church ‘when they get their lives straightened out.’ . . . At one moment we want to try the old, familiar ways just a little harder to see if we can make them work once again. At the next moment we look for somebody to blame because they won’t work.”³

While Rob’s assessment makes me uncomfortable, the evidence seems to be mostly on his side. And I suspect that most of us with grown children and grandchildren have one or more of our offspring who have chosen to check out of church altogether. They have become members of the “Dones” or the “Nones.” This is a serious matter, a matter of eternal consequence, and something to which we who are the stewards of the sacrifices we memorialize this day need to give our focused attention.

At the same time, as you and I sit here on this Memorial Day weekend, there is a Great Spiritual Awakening going on in America. People are sensing a new freedom to explore things of faith, and they’re checking out not only pastors and priests but magicians and shamans. They’re dabbling in goddess spirituality and becoming Wiccans. Some are taking up yoga, others are attending Native American sweat lodge rituals. Some are channeling. Others meditate.

“Meanwhile,” Rob continued, “those Christians who remain in the ruins of the old cathedral that once was are trying to decide how best to proceed in light of the destruction of the old cathedral. They watch jealously as Americans gaily play at the world’s faith extravaganza, drawn to this booth and that, exploring and having the time of their lives. The guardians of the Old Ways stand in the cathedral ruins and yell at the people enjoying the fair, ‘Hey, you’re supposed to find God over here, not over there!’ But no one pays much attention.”⁴

Have I gotten your attention yet? Does any of this sound familiar? It should also sound familiar when I repeat my conviction that God has so made us that you and I have two fundamental spiritual hungers. Every person alive today has these yearnings, whether they think of themselves as religious or not. Indeed, every person who has ever lived has had these yearnings, and every person who will ever live will have them.

These yearnings are a part of God’s created order, and there is no escaping them. Consciously or not, you and I organize our entire lives around their achievement, and the record of human history is the chronicle of the endless ways in which people have tried to gain them.

These two yearnings are, first of all, the desire for **a life that matters**, and second, the desire for **relationships that last**. With respect to “a life that matters,” you and I want

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 26, 2019.

² Rob Nash, Jr. *An 8-Track Church in a CD World: The Modern Church in a Postmodern World*, foreword by Loren Mead (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1991), p. 1.

³ Nash, pp. 2, viii.

⁴ Nash, p. 38.

desperately for our lives to count for something important, though we have many different ideas about what “important” means. For some of us, “important” means being on a winning ball team or winning a particular race.

For some of us, “important” means having a certain kind of car, a certain kind of computer game, a certain brand of clothes, a certain amount of money in the bank, a certain number of children, a certain set of letters behind our name, a certain kind of influence at school or work, being a member of a certain group or club, or achieving a certain elected office. We want to leave a legacy. We want our lives to have mattered when the day is done. The variations on the theme of “significance” are endless, but each of these variations has a common characteristic: they don’t work.

Our second fundamental hunger is for durable, mutually loving and respectful relationships. We yearn for relationships that are strong enough to stand the tests and pressures of life. We frequently have the idea that the satisfaction of this hunger for relationship requires that we be married, and for many of us, this is indeed the pattern that we follow. But it’s important to realize that the satisfaction of this yearning does not require that we be married.

Soul friendships outside of marriage can also be durable, mutually loving and respectful relationships that are strong enough to stand the tests and pressures of life. We do well to remember that one is a whole number, as our Lord Himself powerfully demonstrated.

Just as with our search for significance, our search for relationship takes many forms. Relationship after relationship, marriage after marriage, we search for heart connections. The tabloids at grocery checkout counters provide lurid examples of our efforts to lose weight, to firm up muscles, or to experience better sex, all with the implicit promise of soul friendship and heart connection. And, as is the case with our search for “a life that matters,” our various quests for “relationships that last” also have a common characteristic: they don’t work.

While you and I are seldom aware that these two desires are actually organizing everything we do, there is no escaping the reality that this is how we are made. These hungers are in our read-only memory, and they cannot be altered or erased. We try one path after another trying to fill our emptiness, and, because none of our efforts prove to be successful, those efforts become more and more frantic as the years go by.

And it is here that the message of Jesus is such GOOD NEWS, because **it is only in the way of Jesus that we find lives that matter and relationships that last**. That’s why we choose to become followers of Jesus. Jesus told us, “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*” (John 10:10).

I suggest to you that our goal is not to get people to “come to church.” **We’re trying to introduce them to a vital, intimate, personal and transforming relationship with the Living God!** What we’re trying to do is to teach people how to “dance” with God, and our goal in the dance is to follow God’s lead, to step in the direction and with the motion God is using in our time.⁵ Our goal is to discover where God is already at work and to join God in that work. Our goal is to recognize the spiritual wave God is building under us and to dare to ride that wave.

And the very first thing we have to do in order to bring people to Jesus is to love them—not as means to our ends, but as ends in themselves, *because God loves them*. So one question for us this morning is whether we really love our neighbors in Columbia enough to want them to know Jesus . . . or are would honesty compel us to confess that we’re actually more interested in finding people who will help us carry on our club?

⁵ Nash, p. 54.

I submit to you that there's not likely to be even one person in Columbia who is interested in helping us keep a social club going in this Interfaith Center. But there are thousands of people in Columbia who are quietly searching for something that will give their lives purpose; searching for something that will relieve the burden of their hidden guilt; searching for something that will bring healing to their secret brokenness. And God has put the key that opens the door to Hope for these neighbors in our hands.

Before we can change anything else, though, you and I must allow God to change our desires and transform our passion. We have to have a fresh vision of what we're trying to accomplish. Shocking though this may be, our goal is not the survival of the Columbia Baptist Fellowship. **Our goal is to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission in our own generation.** And Rick Warren, pastor of one of the fastest-growing churches in America, has written that "*The only way a church can capture the attention of the unchurched today is by offering them something they cannot get anywhere else.*"

"What in the world might that be?" you wonder. The answer is not so hard to discover as you might think. Do you remember the Beatles' poignant song, "All the lonely people . . . where DO they all come from?" We live in a lonely world. Josh Hunt, one of the leading voices in church growth these days, is well-known for his statement that "People come to church for a thousand different reasons, but they only stay for one: FRIENDS."

Why did people come to hear Jesus by the thousands? **People were attracted to Jesus because Jesus loved them, and they knew it.** Jesus loved lost people, and He loved being with them. If you look at the record, Jesus much preferred to spend His time with worldly people than with religious people—so much so that the religious people—thinking that they already knew all they needed to know—called Jesus "*the friend of sinners*" (Luke 7:34), a title Jesus wore proudly. How many people would call you or me "the friends of sinners"?

If we who follow Jesus are going to "turn the world upside down" as Jesus has told us to do, we're going to have to be willing to become friends with people who have a lot of problems. If our world-reaching strategy requires people to "get their lives together" before coming onboard, we're not going to reach many people. One of the central principles of following Jesus is that we who follow Jesus allow Him to awaken in us His passionate love for the lost ones of our world.

The big question for us is whether we are really willing to be uncomfortable, to stretch into new ways of following Jesus so that our neighbors can know Him. No matter how old we are, God calls us to live out on the cutting edge, on the boundary where the Kingdom is being formed, where lives are being transformed, by being willing to imagine, support, and underwrite ways to reach those who have not yet come to faith, and whose language, as it were, is different from ours.

Further, the more guests and new members we have, the harder we're all going to have to work to learn new names and new faces. It's going to become harder to find a parking place, and it's going to become harder to find a seat. It will happen more and more that you'll find someone else parked where you usually park, and that you'll find someone else sitting where you usually sit. And when that happens, it's going to have to be not only okay with you—it's going to have to be WONDERFUL!

The more guests we have, the more variety we'll have in what folks wear to church and to worship. The more guests we have, the more effort we'll need to make to share our hymnals and Bibles with them so that they feel included in what we're doing. The more guests we have, the more crying and wiggling children we'll have in worship. And we'll help them feel comfortable and welcome, just like Jesus would.

Then, when worship is over, we're all tempted to talk with friends or to try to save time by getting committee work done while everyone is here. But think about our guests. If you were in a new setting and nobody was talking to you, would you stand around awkwardly hoping that someone would be friendly? Nope. You'd hit the door, and you might never come back. And so would I.

When worship is over, our guests will be out the door in two minutes or less if we don't speak to them and make them welcome. So let's just quietly agree that for those first several minutes, we won't talk to each other if we see persons we don't know who are near enough to greet.

My friends, do you want coming to church to be an exciting experience? This is how it happens. This sort of relationship building is challenging; this sort of relationship building is also wonderful!

I've called this message "Shaped by a Vision." **Vision is a picture of the future that produces passion.**⁶ Those of us who have been around for a while remember how much fun it was to have the church full of young people and their families in years past, and we wistfully wish that we could experience that energy and vitality once more. That really can happen, and there will be both similarities and differences when it happens again.

When that happens the next time—and that happening may not be so very far off—it's not likely to happen in the same ways that it happened before. Those days were wonderful, but from the perspective of today's young people, those were "8-track days" at best. What we do to reach our world today will have to be somehow presented in the technology and the vernacular of today.

But here's what will be similar: **what we did as a congregation in those wonderful days was to figure out what was reaching young people and their families in that cultural situation, and then we as a church leaned into that project with a focused passion that paid dividends both in time and in eternity.** That's what we've begun to do again today: to figure out what will reach young people and their families in today's cultural situation and then lean into that project with a focused passion. Pastor Andrew is leading the charge, and changes are already evident.

The Good News is that when even a handful of wholly-committed Christians give themselves fully to the cause of God through the Church, they are virtually irresistible! They cut through the fleeting commitments of the world like a chain saw through peanut brittle.

As we think about such commitment, I invite you to hear once more the account of the vision that transformed Isaiah's life:

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."*

⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

⁶ This definition is not original with me, but I've lost its source.

⁵ “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “**Here am I. Send me!**” (Isaiah 6:1-8).

John Wesley said, “If I had 300 [persons] who feared nothing but God, and hated nothing but sin, and were determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, I would set the world on fire!” *Will you be one of them?*