

A Risky Vision?

Joel 2:28, Matthew 14:22-33

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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Together, as the Church of the Brethren, we will passionately live and share the radical transformation and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

Brethren from across the country met virtually a couple weeks ago to vote on whether those words could be a compelling vision for our future life together as a denomination. I was one of the representatives from this church to that virtual meeting. Let me share the vision statement with you again.

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Voting on this vision was our only substantive business together. For several years now, our denomination has been creating this vision statement. It came about because, as a denomination, we have become fractured. The presenting "issue" has been the participation of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church, which I think is really a cover for deep fear some have about the loss of power and privilege. It has been a shameful time in our church's history. Queer members have been talked about and not to...pawns in a religious game of chess. For years we have batted their lives back and forth across a tennis net of disagreement, causing deep harm in careless and unloving ways.

A couple years ago, a group of us in this local church, studied decisions made by our Annual Conference body over the years. What we found was an alarming trend. It used to be that we came together as a denominational body to discern and discuss the relevant matters of our time. We have written statements and agreed on actions regarding racism, child exploitation, end-of-life decision making, the death penalty, church and state, criminal justice reform...just to name a few. What our little group learned through our study of these position papers is that our denomination has moved away from discernment on relevant issues of faith and practice to matters of polity and discipline. No longer has our focus been on loving our neighbor as ourselves. Instead, we have focused on who is in and who is out?

After years of queries, debates, self-righteous claims about what God says regarding the participation of LGBTQ persons, it was decided that instead of addressing the newest attempt to

punish pastors and churches that perform same-sex weddings we should set that discussion aside for a time and turn our focus to creating a compelling vision that would unite us in our call as followers of Jesus.

We spent years on this vision because, at our core, Brethren believe in collective decision-making. So, for the last several years we have gathered around tables in different settings and conferences to speak and listen to each other. The hope was that God's Spirit would pour out on us and our old would dream dreams and our young would see visions. But I think we made a fundamental mistake. The same one we have been making all along. We didn't give the silenced, the marginalized among us a safe place at the table. We didn't acknowledge that their voices are the ones we most need to hear. We had these conversations as if all people at the table felt equally safe and able to speak or as if all the voices were even invited to the table. Instead, we took the safe route of allowing the majority, the privileged and the loud just as much if not more airtime. Then a committee took the feedback, hopes, dreams and visions that were shared at these tables and distilled them down to the Compelling Vision I shared with you. This vision specifically speaks of the need to go out into our neighborhoods and listen and build relationship even though our process kept that from happening in the midst of our own discernment. Amazing how the Spirit can be present even when we don't invite her.

On your behalf, I sat at a virtual table with six other members of the Church of the Brethren from across our country to discuss our reaction to this vision. One person in my group referred to as compellingish. It didn't make any of us jump up and follow Jesus to the cross. It all felt a bit remote and safe and managed and wordy. Others wanted it to be more about evangelism and the saving blood of Jesus. Others felt like it missed the opportunity to draw the line in the sand and name who is in and who is out. I felt like it was missing a bold call to justice. Yet, all of us were struck by the word fearless at the very end.

To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

I want us to work at that idea of fearlessness. One of our scripture readings for today is about Jesus walking on water. I chose it because one of the worship services from our Annual Conference revolved around risk and this particular scripture. This is one of those well-known scriptures that even if you have never cracked a Bible you know this story. But if this is the only story you know about Jesus does it represent who he was?. Does it help you grasp the fullness of the man and his life-changing ministry? I have always thought it was such a random thing to do. I thought that maybe if I studied the context of this story, it would make more sense to me. So, I started back at the beginning of chapter 14 to see if that would help me.

Jesus has just gotten word that John the Baptist is dead. John was executed and his head had been served up on a platter in the middle of King Herod's birthday party. John's crime was speaking truth to power. He told Herod not to take his brother's wife, Herodias, and make her his wife. He told the king he couldn't have what he wanted. John was never careful. He blurted

out what everyone else already knew. He felt the need to tell the emperor he had no clothes on. His reward was to be killed and his head chopped off.

Jesus learns of John's death from John's disciples. The first thing they did after collecting his dead body was to rush off and find Jesus. They have questions. Maybe Jesus has the answers. If John's dead who will pick up the mantle? Who will speak truth to power now? Who will take John's place?

They find Jesus doing what Jesus did. He was out in the neighborhood doing relationship-based engagement. They find him there and join the line of people waiting to ask Jesus for help. But Jesus didn't have answers for them on the spot. Jesus just needed a minute. His friend John was murdered. He needed to be alone. He needed to grieve, to listen to God's voice, to seek the answer to the question regarding what was required of him now that John's voice had been silenced.

He tried to get away from the crowds...to take just a bit of time away from his *relationship-based neighborhood engagement* to pray. He got in a boat hoping to find some remote place to be alone. But the crowds followed him. They always followed him....because they were so grateful that there was someone who actually wanted to see them, hear them, know them....invite them to the table to speak. He couldn't blame them. As much as he needed to be alone, he got out of the boat and began to listen, heal brokenness, restore community, extend mercy.

But the lines never seemed to end. As evening came his disciples could see how weary he was. Sometimes they felt like they had to intervene and demand that the people give Jesus a break. The disciples said to Jesus, "You need to stop for the day. The line is endless, and people need time to go buy food before the sellers go home for the night. They won't go as long as you stay." Instead, Jesus said, "If they are hungry you need to feed them." "With what?" they said. "All we've got left is what we were going to eat for our evening meal -- two fish and five loaves." "It will be enough," Jesus said. He had everyone sit down. He blessed the bread and broke it. Then the disciples passed out the food to over 5,000 people and it was enough.

Only then did Jesus seem done for the day. He told the crowds to go home. To his disciples he said, "I insist you go ahead without me. I need time to be alone. I need to recover, to restore, to pray." Jesus still hadn't been able to take the time he needed to hear God's voice....to discern what John's death meant for the future of his ministry. John had come to prepare the way for him. As long as John was still here the way was still being prepared. Right? Now John the Baptist was gone...executed. What is next? Is Jesus in danger of the same fate? Jesus' mind was circling with grief and questions. He just needed a minute....he needed some time to be alone, because he knows that this is a pivotal moment in his ministry and call.

In the Greek it actually says that Jesus "forced" the disciples to go ahead without him....to get in a boat and head out onto the water. In the Bible, water is a symbol of life and of danger. To the ancient Hebrews the sea was a symbol of chaos and evil. Jesus sends his disciples out onto the

water. Sometime in the night, the wind whips up and the waves start battering against the disciples' boat. They are concentrating on dealing with the chaos all around them when Jesus comes walking out to them on the water. They don't recognize him as they feverishly try to manage their risk. They weren't expecting that he could show up even here.

Yet this is where Jesus meets them....walking out to them on the water...the place of life and peril. After a time of discernment and prayer, Jesus chooses....Jesus chooses to walk out into the middle of chaos and danger and life. The disciples think he is an evil spirit. But Jesus says, "Don't be afraid." Those are words of comfort. When I was a child and a nighttime thunderstorm would wake me, my mother would come into my room and say, "It's okay. I'm here. Be fearless." Jesus comes out to them in the midst of the fear and chaos of life and says, "I'm with you." Once Jesus has finally been allowed to take a minute he chooses to join the disciples in the chaotic messiness of the world and he does it with fearlessness.

Our compelling vision is not perfect. I have already told you what I think we didn't get right. I also want to tell you what is right about it.

1. We took a minute....or several years....to step back and change our focus from what we were doing to what we should be doing.
2. The compelling vision speaks to the importance of relationship being the base of our ministry. It is where we start.
3. We spoke our desire to be fearless people.

When it came time to vote on this compellingish vision we were given four options. We could wholeheartedly affirm or simply affirm or set aside our reservations and affirm this vision for the good of the body or not affirm. Any of the first three options were considered a yes vote. It passed. But we left wondering, will this vision help us fearlessly follow the call of God, wherever God's call might lead us? We will follow Jesus into the midst of life, even if it's risky? We will see, hear and listen to our own neighbors?

Is this vision risky enough? My friends, that completely depends on us.
Amen.