

Isaiah 65:17-25

Acts 2:37-47

October 15, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**LIVE THE VISION
TREATING THE PRESBYOPIA OF OUR HEARTS**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Two months ago, Dr. Ken McFayden of Union Presbyterian Seminary challenged a group of pastors with this thought experiment. “Imagine that you’re sitting at your desk in your study,” Ken said to us. Someone knocks on your study door — it might be a church member, maybe not — and asks you, “Do you have a minute to talk? I have something to ask you.” The person sits down in a chair across the desk from you, looks you in the eye, and says, “I’d like to give one million dollars to the church. What will you do with it.”

I can’t get that challenge out of my mind — not so much because of the money, but because of the question that lies behind the person’s question, “What will you do with it?” In other words, tell me what your church’s vision is.

So, I’d like to ask you to engage in that thought experiment with me this morning. You should have found a piece of paper in your bulletin this morning. Will you please take a minute or two and write your answer to that question, “What will you do with it?”? Be as general or as specific as you like. Then put your piece of paper in the offering plate later in today’s worship service. I want to read through your answers and start to get a feel for what kind of vision we all share for our church.

[Give folks a couple of minutes to write their answers.]

At the request of the Stewardship & Finance Ministry Team, I am going to preach a sermon series with the theme of “Live the Vision.” Over the next several weeks, I want to explore God’s Word as it speaks to our hearts and our lives and our actions as stewards of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

The theme for the pastor retreat back in August was “Stewardship: Biblical Perspectives, Better Practices.” Ken led us through some great discussions about living as good stewards of all that God has given us, most important of which is God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and including our time, our talents, and our treasure.

Ken had to leave after his Monday night session with us, but he left us an outline to use on Tuesday morning, with the headline, “Where do we go from here?” We were asked to write down our thoughts about different topics. Let me share two of those topics and my thoughts.

Topic: Clarifying the purpose(s) of stewardship.

My answers: Glorifying God, enjoying God. VISION. Giving people the opportunity to express gratitude. Reminding us that all we have is a gift from God. Establishing priorities with money and time. Gathering resources for God’s work. Ordering

our lives, alignment with God's purposes. Community — supporting one another and investing in other peoples' gifts.

Topic: Casting a vision in the life of your congregation.

My thoughts: In 3 years — changing the mind set and culture. In 5 years — joyful and celebrating. In 7 years — abundance in all areas of church life.

Our answer to the question, "What will you do with it?" gets at the heart of our response to God's gifts. What is our vision as a church? What will we do with what God has given us and with what all of us give and invest for the ministry and mission of this church?

The over-arching theme of this sermon series is "Live the Vision." The guiding Bible verse is Proverbs 29:18, which many of you might have heard translated, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." I have been captured by the Berkeley Version translation of Proverbs 29:18, which reads, "Where there is no vision, the people run wild." That suggests a lack of focus, running all over the place, not really sure why we're doing what we're doing.

When I gave Cheryl the original title for this sermon, I told her it might change. Sure enough, Wednesday afternoon I gave her a Post-It note with the new title, "Treating the Presbyopia of our Hearts." She asked me if I had made up that word, presbyopia. I said, no, it means "old eyes" and comes from the same Greek word from which we get our name *Presbyterian*, since we have "elders" to lead us in our spiritual journey.

Dr. Dan should probably come up here and preach this part of the sermon, but maybe I've got my information correct. Presbyopia usually shows up when you reach 40 (I got my glasses at 42, but the technician at the eye doctor's office, who was a member of the church, said, "I told you you should have come in here a couple of years ago!"). You know you have presbyopia when your arms aren't long enough to read the morning paper. In other words, when you have presbyopia, you have trouble focusing on near objects and your vision deteriorates. According to an article by the staff of the Mayo Clinic, "Presbyopia is caused by a hardening of the lens of your eye, which occurs with aging. As your lens becomes less flexible, it can no longer change shape to focus on close-up images. As a result, these images appear out of focus. The goal of treatment is to compensate for the inability of your eyes to focus on nearby objects."¹

There seems to be a parable somewhere in the description of presbyopia and our Christian lives. It's no coincidence that we sang "Open the eyes of my heart, I want to see you" a few minutes ago, we will end our worship today with "Be Thou My Vision," and in between the choir will sing "Be Thou My Vision." That takes us back to the basic question, "What is our vision?" And what do we do when our vision is out of focus, when we suffer from presbyopia of the heart? The great Reformer John Calvin "argues, God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves by giving us 'the aid of spectacles.' With the corrective lenses of Scripture, God accommodates God's self to our 'disability' so that 'we will begin to read distinctly,' and then Scripture 'gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds,' having dispersed our dullness,' will show us clearly who God is."²

In our opening thought experiment, the would-be generous donor asks, “What will you do with it?” Let’s imagine those first converts in Jerusalem asking a similar question, after they heard and received God’s Word in Peter’s sermon, “Brothers, what should we do?” Indeed, what should they do with the overwhelming, generous, undeserved gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ? Peter’s answer casts the vision for those people who were cut to the heart, and for all of us who want to have a clearer vision of God and God’s purpose: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.”

And repent and be baptized is exactly what those first believers did — 3,000 baptisms in one day! But the story goes on to tell us about what else those first converts did. They didn’t keep the gift to themselves. They didn’t go home on their own and say, “Thank God I’m going to heaven and everything’s OK between me and Jesus.” No, what they did was form a community of faith and devote themselves “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of the people.” (Acts 2:42, 44-47a)

The first converts had a new vision of God cast for them through Peter’s preaching on Pentecost. They were given a new focus in life. But their new vision wasn’t just a matter of believing the right things or even doing the right things. At its core, their new vision was a matter of “seeing with the heart” and responding with gratitude and joy and love and commitment and pastoral care to God’s grace in Jesus Christ. In other words, those first believers put into practice what they had come to believe about God and God’s claim on their lives.

As I spent time planning this sermon series, I read a book by Mark Allan Powell called *Giving to God: The Bible’s Good News about Living a Generous Life*. His second chapter is called “An Expression of Faith,” in which he says, “In a basic sense, stewardship is really just a matter of putting such faith into action, figuring out what it means to believe this, in down-to-earth, practical terms, and then living accordingly. Stewardship is an expression of faith that moves from creed to practice, from merely claiming to believe something to living out that belief in real and obvious ways. I like to say that stewardship puts into practice our faith in God as our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer.”³

In the Mayo Clinic article about presbyopia, lifestyle and home remedies were highlighted, including advice about having your eyes checked, controlling chronic health conditions, protecting your eyes from the sun, preventing eye injuries, eating healthy foods, using the right glasses, using good lighting, and recognizing symptoms.

Those first believers in Jerusalem took steps to correct the presbyopia of their hearts. They went to the Great Physician who alone was able to heal them of their sin. Then they changed their lifestyle and dedicated themselves to the home remedies of the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers, the practi-

cal pastoral care of neighbors in need, worship and praising God, and living glad and generous lives.

In the weeks to come, we will hear more from God's Word about treating the presbyopia of our hearts — what do we do when we lose focus? I look forward to reading your answers to the question, "What will you do with it?" I look forward to working with our elders in the new year as we talk about helping our congregation cast the vision and capture God's vision for this church.

Over the years, I've heard many different people in different settings say something like, "The church just needs to go back to the way the early church was." The suggestion is that the early church was pristine, free from complications, and immune to the problems that inevitably come up when you get a bunch of human beings together. But I love this comment by Rev. Robert Deffinbaugh about the early church (and what it has to say to us in the church today): "The church in Acts is not perfect; it is simply pursuing the right things."⁴

The American Optometric Association states that having 20/20 vision does not necessarily mean you have perfect vision." And we know that when we reach a certain age and begin to notice that we have presbyopia, we need to do what is necessary to regain a sharp focus. The Mayo Clinic advises having your eyes checked regularly, even if you see well. The same can be said about our Christian lives of faith and service. As the apostle Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face." (1 Corinthians 13:12) This side of heaven, our eyes of faith may never see perfectly, but that doesn't mean we can't take precautions to guard against the presbyopia of our hearts, which will cloud our vision of God and what God calls us to be and to do.

Mark Alan Powell writes, "Being a faithful steward does not necessarily mean being a person who is a major donor to churches or charities, or being a person who is reluctant to spend money on his or her own pleasures or concerns. Rather, a faithful steward is a person who a) views this world as God's good creation and is grateful to be a part of it; b) knows that God cares for those whom God has made and is ready and willing to rule their lives; and c) trusts God to provide him or her with whatever is needed to be content. Faithful stewardship is a matter of becoming such a person and acting accordingly. Indeed, when faithful stewards do become people who are extraordinarily generous or thrifty, it is because they are living the way that they *want* to live, acting on a faith that tells them they belong to God."⁵

That is a wonderful vision!

"Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. I want to see you high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory. Pour out your power and love as we sing, 'Holy, holy, holy.' Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. I want to see you."

Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank you for all the gifts you have given us: our lives, our loved ones, all that we have and all that we are. Most of all, we thank you for Jesus, your Son and our Redeemer, who came among us to show us the way to eternal life. Jesus was the perfect steward of your gifts, showing that complete trust in you is necessary, and that giving of self is a most important part of following him. May the offerings of our time, our talents, and our treasure be made in the same spirit of sacrifice that Jesus taught us by his life and death for us. Amen.

NOTES

¹“Presbyopia,” by Mayo Clinic Staff at www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/presbyopia

²George Stroup, *Calvin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), p. 20.

³Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible’s Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), pp.30-31.

⁴Robert Deffinbaugh, “Characteristics of a Healthy Church (Acts 2:41-47),” at www.bible.org.

⁵Powell, p. 44.