

**SermonBytes - The Messiah in our midst**  
**Matthew 5:38-48**

**February 19, 2017**  
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As I was talking with the worship committee this last week, I mentioned to them that there were only 20 Sundays left before my retirement date becomes official. One of the things that I want to do over these next months is remind you of who we are, and whose we are and who we are called to be.

A reading such as our gospel one today is one that is full of seemingly impossible visions of the practice of Christian life. Visions that seem so far beyond what we are capable that rather than motivating, seem overwhelming. And yet in its midst are transformative kernels of wisdom.

Turn the other cheek  
Love your enemies  
Be perfect even as God is perfect

I don't want to spend much time with those readings today, but instead I want to take a broader look at how we are doing with our vision as the people at the Crossroads

of Princess and Sir John A  
of suburbia and the concrete jungle  
of faith and life  
of today and the dream of what tomorrow can be

I must admit that I was hoping that after 5 years, we would be further along the road. And I feel somewhat like the gardener who planted mystery plants, expecting quick growing figs and finding instead slow growing hickory. Not necessarily a bad thing – but a very different reality

A number of years ago I read Ken Folletts Pillars of the Earth - a multi generational story of the building of a cathedral, supposedly over a period of 50 years. At the end of the story, Prior Phillip shares these words as the sun shines brightly on the newly completed Cathedral:

When we began work on the Kingsbridge Cathedral, King Stephen was newly crowned and the Princess Maud fled to France with her newborn son, Henry. For years, England was torn by war and great suffering. King Stephen is since dead and Maud's son now rules as King Henry II of England. Now we have peace and hope for a bright tomorrow.

And for these gifts and our beautiful church, I thank God, our king, the people of Kingsbridge and several generations of tireless workers. But the cathedral is not finished and nor will it ever be. Just as human perfection is something we all strive for and can never attain, so this church will forever be changing, growing, crumbling at

times...an ongoing legacy of our feeble efforts to touch God. A cathedral, my friends, is... is neither stone nor statues nor even a place of prayer. It is... a continuum of creation...a beautiful work that, pray God, will never end.

That's what church is - a feeble human effort to reach out and to touch God. A continuum of creation that pray God will never end.

The reality is that churches like all buildings and human institutions change over time and decay and crumble and transform and become something new; something that hopefully connects the human heart with one another and with the heart of God and the world around them. That is what we are about when we are at our best. Connecting heart to heart and hand to hand - God to the world.

There is an old story told about a priory (a community of faith) that was struggling. It had once been a thriving place - a place where people came because it did what faith does best - connects hand to hand and heart to heart. But it had sort of lost its way. The leader of the community asked his good friend the rabbi to come to the community and to spend a few days with them and to advise him as to what to do.

The rabbi came and lived among the brothers for a few weeks. And at the end of the time the Rabbi sat down and wrote to each of the brothers a letter which they could share with no one - not even the prior himself, whom the rabbi would not let in on the secret.

A few months went along. And people began to visit the priory once again. And others began to sign up to join the community. And within a year it was once again a thriving community. After a year the Rabbi returned, and the concern on the Priors face had become a great big grin. "Come on, out with it! What did you say to them?" The Rabbi said - the same condition applies to you, as he showed him a note. The Messiah is in your midst - The Messiah is one of you.

People who visit our church tell me that we are good at making people feel welcome and we are good at encouraging them to join in the community. But friends, we are slow to tell others about this community where we bring hand to hand and heart to heart. Where we see the presence of God in everyone we meet.

We need to get the message beyond the walls of this sanctuary. Beyond this house of praise, so that we become a hub of hope and hospitality.

I dream of coming back to visit this place and finding a plaza out on the front lawn. A place where people can sit under the trees and share a story or a cup of coffee or a cold drink or a concern about the neighbourhood. A place where people come together.

I dream of seeing a couple of bicycle racks, encouraging people to up their activity level and to reduce their carbon footprint.

I dream of a back lot covered with raised beds where families can plant seeds and work together with creation, and with God's gifts of earth and sun and rain to produce food and life and joy.

I dream of an area out back where kids can play basketball or street hockey. A place where the community gathers with popcorn and cold drinks and watch movies that help to teach us

to welcome the stranger  
to care for the widow and orphan  
to make a place for the different  
to accept everyone who comes to share in the joy of this community

Now part of the problem is that we have been hearing that bit about praying in secret. And we have been traumatized by bad evangelism and hampered by our own history - where all we in the church had to do was the catch phrase from Field of Dreams – “Build it and they will come”. Well folks, this ain't no Iowa Cornfield, and we have to find new ways to get the message out.

And there's good news and bad news in that. The Good news - No one has to do it alone. The bad news – You still have to do it.

In medieval days in the Swiss alps there was a pastor who kept telling his friends that he had this wonderful vision of the transformative power of the church. He invited his friends to come to the simple stone church which when they entered was dark and chilly, as the building had no heat and the windows were very small as glass was very expensive.

The friends looked around the cold dark building and shook their heads. He has been too long out in the country, they said. A young boy came and rang the church bell, and people came to evening prayers. As each family came in they brought with them a lamp. They lit it and hung it from a rope that lifted it up close to the ceiling. With each additional lamp more shadows were chased away and the building started to warm until when all were gathered. The fellowship was cheery and joyful, and at the end of the service the pastor told his friends “I want you to go out first and stand on the hill overlooking the church and the valley it serves”. As they went out into the gathering night, the families began leaving the church, their lanterns now escorting them the way home. The stream of light flowed out of the church across the valley, split and lit up separate homes, which then began to glow.

The pastor turned to his friends and said. “That is the church at its best.” The gathering that brings light and comfort and life and joy. The going forth – light into the darkness. Hope streaming forth into every home, bringing light and joy and peace.

When we go from this place – let us carry the light of Christ with us, bringing hope and comfort and joy into a world of darkness and need.

Matthew 5:48 Go and be perfect as God is perfect

Eugene Peterson in the Message (a loose translation of the Bible):

"In a word, what I'm saying is this. You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you"

"Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends. And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. ." [Martin Luther King, 1963]