

I Kings 3:4-12 Ephesians 1:15-19

### Seeking Wisdom

*Happy talk - Happy, happy talkin' happy talk. Talk about things you'd like to do. You've got to have a dream If you don't have a dream How you gonna make a dream come true?*

Last week, we did a little happy talkin'. We uncovered a great number of things that make this church important to you, and more importantly, many of them may be things of lasting value capable of blessing and transforming the lives of others as they have yours. Those things range from love of the people and care for one another to generous giving and generous theology, to meaningful worship, and I know I am leaving out some, maybe even the ones most important to you. Suffice it to say that a number of us felt that this church has value and is worth having a dream for.

So I proposed that we start dreaming; and some Sunday soon, I'm going to ask you to start naming dreams. But before we name dreams, it seems a good thing to step back and seek wisdom. Wisdom that, as the writer of Ephesians says, enlightens the eyes of your hearts so that you may know the hope to which Christ calls you, and discover the power that God gives you as the body of Christ.

Here in Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Church of Christ, we have discovered that there are congregations stuck, plateaued, struggling, in all kinds of neighborhoods and locations. Wealthy, large congregations going nowhere; small, suburban congregations, medium sized congregations in cities or villages, spinning their wheels. But we have also discovered that there are vibrant, growing congregations in all kinds of neighborhoods and locations. Large congregations growing larger; small suburban congregations becoming beacons in their neighborhoods, medium sized congregations in cities and villages, filled with energy, life and vitality.

The difference between those who grow and those who languish does not seem to correlate to their locations. Neither does it correlate to their size or their ethnic background or their worship style.

The factors that distinguish vibrant congregations from languishing congregations appear to include the following things:

Vibrant congregations have learned to look outward. They understand that they are missional entities, not institutions with a mission statement. I cannot stress this too much. Most congregations at one time or another in their lifetimes, find themselves talking to and listening to only themselves. Self-talk, no matter how loving, soon becomes talk about how to maintain the status quo, how to keep the organization going. They lose track of the world around them, and soon begin to feel helpless to know where even to begin reaching out. They don't know their neighborhoods, nor do their neighborhoods know them. They also don't connect with other churches, don't develop any kind of wider connections that give them a mirror through which to look at themselves. So they usually have inaccurate pictures both of who they are and of the world around them.

Learning to look outward isn't as hard as it seems; it's just scary when you haven't done it for a long time. As churches, as individuals, we get into routines and ruts. We go to work by the same route every day; shop at the same grocery store week in and week out; hang out with the same comfortable people. Our worlds become constricted. A part of learning to look outward is becoming able to step far enough away from your usual habits to look back at yourself from outside; to see yourself, as Bobby Burns put it, "as ithers see you." Churches are usually surprised in a number of ways as they begin to do this.

Vibrant congregations develop deep spiritual lives, including helping each member to name his or her spiritual gifts. When members claim their spiritual gifts they claim their ministries. And each member has a ministry. This church's bulletin and newsletter both proclaim that the members are the ministers. For some, that is a reality; for others, that is a nice catchphrase on a piece of paper. You. YOU. Are called to be a minister; a disciple. But just because the bulletin says you are doesn't make it so. Developing congregation-wide spiritual practices, and discovering individual spiritual gifts only happen when intentionally put into place. They take effort. They happen through retreats; prayer and meditation groups learning new practices; workshops and classes with wide participation. They require persistence and commitment.

Vibrant congregations develop their leadership abilities and qualities. Leadership development grows where gifts are discovered and utilized and where ministries feel like ministries rather than committees.

In short, vibrant congregations develop healthy habits such as these (found in Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations by Robert Schnase):

Radical hospitality

Passionate worship

Intentional faith development

Risk-taking mission and service

Extravagant generosity

This church claims extravagant generosity as one of its practices already and I believe that is among its strengths. But I suspect it's been a long time since it's risked its status quo in favor of its future. Likewise, I believe that like most churches, it considers itself to be more welcoming than outsiders would consider it to be.

So it is time to follow Solomon's example and pray for wisdom; not just in church on Sunday morning, but at all times. It's time to become like the church at Ephesus, with eyes enlightened and power claimed. It's time to ask yourselves some questions, and listen for God's answers, which may come from very unexpected places.

As Christ Congregational Church, a United Church of Christ located at 2500 South Sheridan in Denver prepares to seek a new pastor, it needs to discover the hope to which it is called; which, as I have already hinted, I truly believe you will discover as a treasure in your own backyard. This interim time is not just a time of waiting; it's a time of preparing. How are you to know whom you should ask to lead you into the future until you have developed some sense of the future to which God is calling you?

You want to have a dream, and you don't want it just to be wishful thinking but a transforming dream like the dream that propelled not only Dr. King but this nation into a new era; so begin looking around you; begin asking for wisdom; begin to think of daring and sharing and engaging with and learning to love this fast-paced, sometimes strange world of the twenty-first century. If you truly do so, you will find your church becoming renewed in every aspect of its life. That's why God has placed you, and me, here at this time. God loves this congregation, and walks beside it as God calls it into the future. Don't ever forget that.

Blessings on your future. May God lead you into the world, and may your treasure be worth the shoes you wear out on your journey outwards and back home. Let's get on the road.