

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper
Sunday, March 28 2021
Sixth Sunday in Lent, Palm Sunday



“A Vision to Preach to ‘Those Who Have Ears’”
Sixth of six in a series during Lent entitled
“Biblical Optometry: Discerning Our Church's 'Corrective Vision'”

Scriptures: John 12:12-16 and Acts 16:6-10

During the COVID pandemic, how many of you, by a show of hands, have found yourself watching many mini-series on Netflix or Hulu?



Stephanie and I are currently watching Marco Polo. This past year, I watched The Tudors, The Turn, Versailles, and The Last Kingdom. By then end of these series, I am terrifically invested in their characters and plots. When the last episodes conclude, I’m devastated. Until I watch the next series. So, it is with

our current sermon series. I want this one to continue. I'm distraught that it is ending. Distraught ... until we start the next one.



Today, we conclude our series on vision in partnership with the Long-Range Planning Team. Our theme for the series has been “Biblical Optometry: Discerning Our Church’s ‘Corrective Vision’”. Throughout the series, we focused on seeing our church, its context, and its future in new ways. As I thought and prayed about the scriptures all week, they both lured me toward the concept of ‘audience’.

As I said earlier, as ‘an audience’ I become invested in the plots and characters of the mini-series I watch. Therefore, we at Centre Church must first discern, in what plot will our prospective audience become invested? Second, we must discern who is the audience that will invest themselves in us, the characters?



Much of our series has dealt with the former question – what is our plot? Why do we exist? Yes, we exist ‘to demonstrate the Gospel’. Yes, we exist ‘to foster the Kingdom of God’. We have already discussed in weeks’ past how: worship, health care, environment, poverty alleviation, and more faithfully living-out that which we claim to be - an Open & Affirming and Just Peace church. Today, let us then focus on who is our prospective audience – with whom do we seek to be in fellowship?



‘Back in the day’, in the 1800 and 1900s, it used to be ‘anyone and everyone!’ Well, I have news for you: today it is *not* ‘back in the day’. ‘Back in the day’, most people in North America were Protestant Christians. Most attended worship. ‘Back in the day’, all the way until the 1960s, going to church was the norm for most everyone. ‘Back in the day’, three and four generations often worshipped together as a ‘family church’. ‘Back in the day’, most married couples did not divorced and families did not live in two or three places. ‘Back in the day’, most people lived within walking distance of church. ‘Back in the day’ many people lived in the same town their entire lives. ‘Back in the day’, the church was the primary locus of social life. ‘Back in the day’, particularly at

Centre Church, if you were a professional of any sort, you went to church to network because this was where the respectable and staid people congregated. 'Back in the day', membership at church was almost synonymous with membership at the golf club. 'Back in the day', it was enough to open our doors, welcome people, and say "Come"- and people came! Back in the day, the church had weight in society, for it was woven into daily life and culture.

Today, for good or for bad, we are not 'back in the day'. We can say, "Our doors are open", "Welcome", and "Come" until we are blue in the face and virtually no new faces will come through our doors.



Our families are broken. We are transient. Vermont is arguably the most secular state in the Union. With private transportation being ubiquitous and increased technology, there are ten-thousand other entertaining avenues and opportunities in which socialize. Most people are not familiar with hymnals, the Lord's Prayer, or the Doxology. The 'coffee hour' is strange and uncomfortable to many. I don't know, some might even think 'liturgy' is a type of pasta. The seasons of the church are unfamiliar; the narratives of the scriptures are unknown as most have never been to Sunday School. In short, little that we do is familiar with most outside our doors. For far too long, our

audience has been us. And trust me, I love 'us'. We are a great audience. I love each and every one of 'us'. But, we are fading; we are shrinking; we are evaporating. Dee has left us. Joanne has departed. Sylvia has transformed. Frances has reunited with her Creator. Few of us are watching anymore.

We must have a new vision – a new plot.

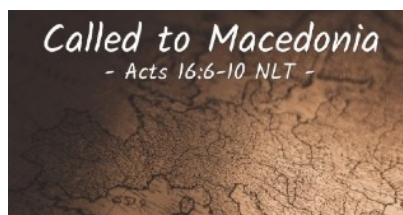


We must have a new audience. Paul Nickerson, our church consultant, encourages us *to be focused on who it is we seek to attract and with whom we seek to be in solidarity*. Who do we wish to invest in our plot and in us as characters? Well, they are committed to racial justice. They are committed to the environment. They are committed to celebrating the broad spectrum of human sexuality. They are committed to health. They are committed to education. Those who share our Gospel-United Church of Christ values are all around us in Brattleboro! We must be the church *outside this church* to meet this audience and to demonstrate to them that we share their 'kindom' of God concerns and interests. Then when they ask "Why you are with us?", we can say, "Because we are Christians and at Centre Church share your values". Then we can invite them to join us and share with them the theological font that

forever feeds and strengthens us. We will invite them to the font that provides us all with a stunningly beautiful religious tradition and solid spiritual underpinning that enable us and them to deepen our faith.

I see both scriptures speaking to Centre Church about audience – on whom will we focus to attract to our fellowship and thus with whom will we strive to be in solidarity? Both scriptures encourage us to focus on prospective like-minded and spirit-filled constituencies.

Let me say right-off, I am going to speculate. I have consulted no commentaries nor interpretive Bibles in preparing this message.



What happened to Paul in Phrygia and Galatia? I suspect the reference to the Holy Spirit keeping Paul and the other disciples from preaching there was a nice way of saying the people of Phrygia and Galatia told Paul to “piss-off”. What happened to Paul at the border of Mysia and Bithynia? I suspect those who greeted Paul told him to “bugger-off”. What then happened after multiple rejections? Paul focused his vision and narrowed his constituency. Paul ceased trying to preach to ‘anyone and everyone’ while ending-up with ‘no one’. Paul’s

vision for the early church's constituency narrowed and he became more focused. The decision to zero-in on Macedonia was Paul's 'corrective vision'.

This Sunday is Paul Sunday.



We read the familiar story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem. The crowd received Jesus as royalty. The supporters placed palms along the road to honor, to dampen the dust, and to, as it were, 'roll out the red carpet' -but it was green. The crowd shouted, "Hosanna, Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!" Yet, we know the scene changed. As we journey through Holy Week, we know Jesus was betrayed, arrested, interrogated, judged, and crucified. While Jesus was being judged, the crowd bade for his punishment. Allow me to speculate that the crowd who shouted "Hosanna!" was a *different* crowd than the one that cried "Crucify him!". I doubt they were the same folk.

The lesson from John's gospel might be the same as the scripture from Acts. Some listen and recognize, and some do not.



Did not Jesus more than once teach, ‘Those who have ears will hear, those who do not will not’ and ‘those who have eyes to see, will see’ (Matthew 13:9-16)? Jesus more than once warned that the Gospel will not be accepted by most, and after departure from them, the dust must be wiped-off our feet (Matthew 10:14).



Friends, as we observe Lent and as we discern our church’s vision for the future, let us repent and cease ‘seeking panoramically’. Instead, let us focus our gaze on, invite, and welcome those with whom we share gospel and *kindom* values and in those who will invest in us and our plot.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.