

“Moved by a Vision”

Get ready . . . I invite you to rest, deep breathing, aware of your breath, for sixty seconds. Imagine the word I will now give you: DOG. Play with that image. Do whatever comes to mind with that image. Study the image so you can identify it later.

What you just did is called visioning. What did you feel as you rested? Were you relaxed? Anxious (“What’s the crazy pastor doing now?”)? Mystified? What did you see when I gave you the word? (I’m pretty sure you held an image of a dog, not that saw the letters “d.o.g.” Describe to someone seated near you what you saw.

Today we read that St. Peter had a vision. I wanted you to have a little experience of what that might have been like for him. His, of course, was different. Peter reports that he went into some kind of trance. We don’t know what kind that was, but I feel safe to assume that it was outside the realm of Peter’s normal experience. Like you, Peter experienced movement, a voice, and images — he was very much aware of himself in this entire episode. I hasten to point out that Peter’s experience was transformative — yours was experimental.

A while back, the Plain Township school district in Stark County ended the practice of mindfulness for its elementary school children because it was regarded by some a “too Eastern.” I don’t know what was being taught in that school, and it may have been directly out of the Buddhist or Hindu traditions; but the idea that such practices as meditation (another term for mindfulness) are alien to the Christian faith is nonsense.

Spiritual formation has employed such practices for centuries. What is “spiritual formation”? Part of it involves spiritual disciplines, such as meditation, fasting, and solitude. Part of it involves spiritual exercises — let me give you one: “Centering Prayer.”

I’ll begin by providing a formal definition: *“Centering prayer ... is a discipline of intentional silence, where the individual in trusting faith,*

empties their self to become entirely receptive to God's divine love. This is a prayer of surrendering life as lived on our terms to receive the indwelling love of God given to us."

Here's how it works: Each person chooses a word to help them keep focus and as a reminder of their intention to remain open to God's love. A commitment to the practice of sitting in silence for a period of 20 minutes, twice a day, is best. You might start with 10 minutes and slowly build to 20 minutes. Just following the arc of your inhale and exhale while in a seated posture, with eyes closed or gazing downward, can be transformative. This practice can be done alone or in a group.

Rest again. Become very aware of the presence of God with you. Pick a word or phrase and repeat it out loud as many times as you can for the next sixty seconds. That will become your "trigger," so that any time you feel a need, or just a desire, to go to prayer, summon up that word or phrase and you will be centered into prayer.

Part of spiritual formation includes visioning — which always has three goals:

1. What does God want you to experience? (Intimacy with Him. Keep asking: "Where is God in this?")
2. What does God want you to know? (What is true? What is real?)
3. What does God want you to do?

Back to Peter. He is challenged by *"the circumcised believers"* because he had eaten with non-Jews [this was THE issue in the earliest Church: Who is "in"? Peter butted up against it, as did St. Paul]. This is what Peter learned God wanted him to do in this vision. He was resistant to the idea; he refused the command to eat what was before him (any new idea get resisted). How did God overcome his resistance? Not by command or instruction, but by having Peter experience this vision. Did you catch that the action was repeated three times? This was to establish the concept along new neuropathways.

Peter came to know that his opinion on the matter did not matter; it was

God's view that must prevail. How do we gain God's view on anything? We must be grounded in the Word; tethered to it. Drawing closer to God is not just "head stuff," it is relational. As we come to know God as more and more real for us, more and more we are drawn to desire what He desires.

For what do you need a vision today? Some area of struggle (a doubt, a concern, a relationship with another)? Some challenge you would like to be able to meet (a personal goal, e.g. "Lose ten pounds;" a particularly vexing problem at work; that mess in your basement that you've been telling yourself for years needs to be cleaned up — okay, that one gets a little personal for me). Some relationship you want to improve or mend? Draw into God and let God draw close to you.

It changed Peter's life and ministry. It altered the course of Church history. It made it possible for you and me to be part of this Christian community (imagine if the idea of "only Jews" had prevailed!) All this became possible because Peter was moved by a vision. Next Sunday, we will hear how St. Paul was moved by a similar vision that altered his course.

At which point I can recognize that some of you may be questioning if you want any vision that may change you. Some years ago, at a Formational Prayer Seminar, a participant in the very front of the audience was reacting (perhaps even overreacting) to something that was said. Her reaction was to hyperventilate, out of control in front of all 120-plus people in the room. Dr. Wardle, who leading the session, quietly went over to her, and invited her to close her eyes, and try to picture Jesus standing right beside her. She quieted down, and as he prodded her a bit to tell him what she was seeing, she replied that she could see Jesus standing right there. Then she started to weep. Not sobbing, uncontrolled; not heaving sighs, or anguished cries; just weeping. At first it seemed sad, but as it went on you could tell there was joy in the tears, and before long the weeping had become laughter, soft at first, then giddy, raucous laughter. When that finally settled down, the young woman was led out

of the room in the company of a couple of caregivers, who would sit with her and process what she had experienced. This all took place just before the noon hour, and when the group had reassembled after lunch, the young woman was back among us. Dr. Wardle asked her how she was doing, and this was her response: *“That was some heavy shit.”* [I jumped in immediately to the say, *“I think we should counsel our sister that, when you’re in a group like this, you really should not ever use the word, ‘Heavy.’”*]

So let me invite you this far along the journey (and it is just that, a leg on the journey): If you cannot in honesty say that you want God to change your life to conform more to the life of Jesus . . . Can I get you to agree that you can want to want that? Then wrap that in prayer and give it to the Holy Spirit and allow yourself to listen to the Spirit speak into your heart. Who knows, you may have a vision that truly moves you to be where God not only wants, but knows, you need to be.

With that, let me once again get back to Peter. I mentioned earlier that this account is, in part, about THE biggest issue confronting the earliest Christian Church. Our passage this morning is part of a fabric of stories the began with Peter’s encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10). Now, a chapter later, Peter is called upon to defend that interaction with a non-Jew. As Luke tells the story, the “circumcised” (those would be people who are observant Jews) are upset that there has been an interaction with the “circumcised” (that would be most of us, Gentiles).

When I served as President of the Greater Cleveland Marriage Coalition, I was asked to make a presentation to a board of Jewish rabbis about the goals and purpose of the coalition. I did not know if this group of rabbis were liberal, reformed, conservative, or orthodox, so I was bit nervous. I introduced myself as *“a goy named Christian who has the temerity to try to inform a group of rabbis”* about anything. I was assured that I was most welcome. It turned out this was a group of very conservative Jews (in hindsight, I’m not so sure I would have been as welcomed by a more liberal group).

The debate in the earliest Church was this: Does not one need to become first a circumcised Jew in order to “fit” into the Church? So note in our lesson *“the circumcised believers criticized”* Peter for eating with Cornelius and his household. At first . . .when they heard the account of what led up to that encounter, *“...they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’”* If I may paraphrase the woman at the Seminar, *“That was a heavy shift.”* What accounts for that shift from basically, *“How dare you!”* to *“Why wouldn’t we?”* It was the vision.

It took Peter three times to get to the “aha” moment of the vision. But once he had it, the vision took on its own power. Peter was reluctant to step away from all he had been conditioned to think about non-Jews, so God just kept at it with him. I led a member of the Bible Class few weeks ago in a similar exercise (something I have done with Confirmands over the years) by asking, *“Which are you, a sinner or a saint?”* No matter the response, it was going to be wrong. If the response is, *“I’m a sinner”* I would paraphrase God’s words in today’s Acts account: *“Don’t you dare call unclean what I have called clean.”* If the response was, *“I’m a saint!”* then my reply would be, *“So, you think you’re all that do you?”* After about three shots of that kind of exchange, either the person asked the question throws up their hands in despair, or has a revelation that those two options do not cancel out each other.

And your point, Pastor, is . . .?

Well, first I am impressed by the number three at work here; I think we must always be functional Trinitarians.

Then I am caught by the full one-eighty turnabout, which I have no choice but to lay at the power of the Holy Spirit.

Third (here I go, being functionally Trinitarian), if a vision can make such a difference in the life of the early church — let me alter that, it not so much “made a difference in the life of” as it brought life to the early Church — if it can have such an effect, we have to ask ourselves, *“What*

vision is God giving us?" Where are we going? Who are we bringing along? Who might we be leaving out? How can we get to where we need to go, and how can we bring others into that journey? What will be our source of energy to get all this accomplished?

(I need one more question to make this last part Trinitarian) Who will take a lead role in seeing, shaping, and moving the vision?

My mother taught kindergarten all the time I was in school, so I appreciate the story told about a teacher who was helping one of her kindergarten students put his boots on. He asked for help and she could see why. With her pulling and him pushing, the boots still didn't want to go on. When the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost whimpered when the little boy said, *"Teacher, they're on the wrong feet."* She looked and sure enough, they were. It wasn't any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on - this time on the right feet. He then announced, *"These aren't my boots."* She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, *"Why didn't you say so?"* like she wanted to. Once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off. He then said, *"They're my brother's boots. My Mom made me wear them."* She didn't know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up the grace to wrestle the boots on his feet again. She said, *"Now, where are your mittens?"* He said, *"I stuffed them in the toes of my boots."*

Having a vision, holding a vision, and attaining a vision wonderful, maybe even exhilarating ventures, but in the end, hard work, often with obstacles, setbacks and frustrations, is necessary.

When the Spirit of God is guiding it . . . I think the only appropriate word is *"Wow!"*

Amen.