Embracing the Vision

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I have come to have a new appreciation for Jesus’ disciples, as early examples of what it’s like to be a follower of Christ. As I reflected in my sharing last May, at the time of Jesus’ death, the disciples showed themselves to be slightly confused, understandably uncertain, and still not quite getting what was going on.

In the scripture for today, Acts Chapter 2, the disciples are in Jerusalem on Pentecost, a Jewish feast day held 50 days after Passover, to celebrate the first fruits of the wheat harvest. One of the commentators I read to prepare for today noted that Jesus often used metaphors and stories about harvest in his teachings, which gives added meaning to what occurred on that specific Pentecost. By applying the harvest metaphor, we understand that the earliest disciples were not only called to spread the good news of Jesus Christ; they were also the first fruits of Jesus’ ministry. Jewish tradition teaches that Pentecost marked the day when the Law was given to Israel. *Our* tradition is that Pentecost is the day that the Holy Spirit was given to God’s people who would continue the work that Jesus had started. And like those early disciples, as we accept our place in this new covenant, we are both the harvest workers and the fruit of the harvest.

Peter himself is a perfect example of what this can look like in real life. In Matthew 16:15, while in Caesarea Philippi and before his death, Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” and in verse 18 we read that Jesus said: “And I tell you that you are Peter. On this rock I will build My church. The powers of hell will not be able to have power over My church.” And this is the same Peter who later, shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion, denied knowing Jesus three times. The book of Acts shows us Peter’s maturation into that stalwart bearer of good news that Jesus was able to see. This is the path that all of us are invited to accept.

Today, we who identify as followers of Christ are recipients of that same spiritual inheritance and should think of ourselves as descendant participants of the Great Commissioning found in Matthew 29:19-20 that describes another of Christ’s appearances to his disciples after his resurrection. Jesus says:

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

The first Pentecost following Jesus’ death and resurrection, a celebration of the first-fruits of the harvest, is what this Great Commissioning can look like. In Acts 2:17-19 Peter says to the gathered crowd:

In the last days, God says,
    I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
    your young men will see visions,
    your old men will dream dreams.

Even on my servants, both men and women,
    I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
    and they will prophesy.
I will show wonders in the heavens above
    and signs on the earth below

And later in that same chapter, in verses 42-47 we read that the first followers of Christ

42 devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In the words from Willie James Jennings that we read at the beginning of our service,

This is the beginning of the miracle of Pentecost, the revolution of the intimate. This is the beginning of a community broken open by the sheer act of God, and we are yet to comprehend the extent to which God is acting to break us open. Indeed, it will be community created by the Spirit precisely in the breaking open.

I remember being told that the Church of the Saviour was founded to bring to life that early Christian experience. I believe that Church of the Saviour strives to be a modern expression of that Great Commissioning, inviting people who are seeking more from their spiritual life to transform themselves into a living expression of God’s love. We are both harvest and harvest workers.

In Chapter 1 of *Servant Leaders Servant Structures*, we read of the very early experiences that informed the creation of the Church of the Saviour in 1947. Foundational questions from that chapter are “What does it mean for the church to be God’s waiting people? Can our waiting be meaningful to others if we are not obedient while we wait? What does it mean to be ‘radically obedient?’ – radically committed?’ What must our lifestyle be?”

These were the kinds of questions that Church of the Saviour’s founding pastor, Gordon Cosby wrestled with during his wartime experiences in Europe, where death happened every day. Later on in the chapter, we see some of the responses to those questions are embedded in the principles of how this new church would operate in faith, based on call, or commissioning to God’s service:

First, we are called to develop an intimate relationship with God. (Inward Journey)

Second, we are called to be persons in community, where the nature of the relationship would allow each person to be called fully into being. (Grounded in Community and Gift Evoking)

Third, we are called to change, to overcome whatever we find in ourselves that keeps us from growing into a full expression of our discipleship to Christ. (Inward Journey)

Fourth, we are called to move out and take up the stance of the suffering servant and be a witness to the Divine or Holy Spirit within. (Outward Journey).

The organizational structure was deliberately ecumenical, to be a church “whose heart is heavy because of a divided Christendom. A church that emphasizes the things that unite Christians rather than those which divide them.” “The Church of the Saviour aims at no novelties of organization or practice. It seeks to have freedom to experiment and exist outside of the denominations. It seeks to represent the authentic Christian tradition based on 4 convictions.

First, the service of God requires total commitment.

Second, that power demands discipline. [And with this discipline we can experience what in my own language is called *signs, miracles and wonders.*]

Third, that the gift of the Holy Spirit depends on the existence of a true fellowship, based on love.

Fourth, that such Christian community is best assured in a small group, dedicated in service.

The experiment to which the Church of the Saviour is devoted is this: is it possible in the 20th/21st century, working with people recently turned from secularism or from merely nominal Christianity, to create conditions under which the living Christ shall manifest? Is it possible, through total commitment, conscientious discipline and group study and worship to bring into begin a dynamic fellowship with the adventurous ardor that is the essence of religion? In all of this is the understanding that we are ALL ordinary people called to service and everyone’s gifts count.

These questions and early conclusions are woven into the first membership commitment of the Church of the Saviour:

* I come today to join a local expression of the Church, which is the body of those on whom the call of God rests to witness to the grace and truth of God.
* I recognize that the function of the Church is to glorify God in adoration and sacrificial service, and to be God's missionary to the world, bearing witness to God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ.
* I believe as did Peter that Jesus is Christ, the Son of the Living God.
* I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ, promising to give Christ a practical priority in all the affairs of life.
* I will seek first the kingdom of God and God’s Righteousness.
* I commit myself, regardless of the expenditures of time, energy, and money to becoming an informed, mature Christian.
* I believe that God is the total owner of my life and resources. I give God the throne in relation to the material aspect of my life. God is the owner. I am the ower. Because God is a lavish giver I too shall be lavish and cheerful in my regular gifts.
* I will seek to be Christian in all my relations with other persons, with other nations, groups, classes, and races.
* I will seek to bring every phase of my life under the Lordship of Christ.
* When I move from this place, I will join some other expression of the Christian Church.

Now, I don’t know about you all, but when I first came to 8th Day I was just looking for a church in my neighborhood that had childcare and good music. I did not know that all of this was going on. In fact, it was years before I knew that all of this was going on. Even still, church life was steeped in these values, and I can say without a doubt that I would not be what I am today if I had not come to 8th Day. 8th Day changed everything for me.

I know that this language may be a little dated, but even reading those words sound both thrilling and intimidating. And recognizing the cost of this membership commitment, Church of the Saviour decided that membership renewal would be annual. Over the years, as the church, its membership and its missions grew, the organizational structures and agreements changed as well, as has been described in several of the books written by Elizabeth O’Connor.

* At first there was one church community that had several sequential church homes, the last one was located at 2025 Massachusetts Avenue (bought in the 1950s and sold in 2010).
* In 1953 the church purchased land in Germantown, MD that now houses Dayspring Farm, the Dayspring Silent Retreat Center and the Wellspring Conference Center.
* In 1960 the Potters House opened as a coffee house. It was first owned by Church of the Saviour, then by the Potters House Church and is now owned by 8th Day.
* In the 1970s the decision was made to separate into several faith communities, including 8th Day (the New Lands). At this juncture, 8th Day began its experience as a lay-led church, which it continues to be, as one of the current seven sister churches, which are all independently incorporated.
* These churches come together to discuss common themes and interests under the Ecumenical Council, which meets at least three times per year and has representatives from each of the sister churches.
* In 1989 the Festival Center, also opened its doors, with the vision of being a training center for servant leaders under the Servant Leadership School. Newly renovated, the Festival Center serves as a hub for activists, artists, people of faith and no faith, seekers, and mission-driven groups.
* Gordon Cosby died in 2013 and his wife Mary Cosby died in 2016. After Gordon’s death, the Church of the Saviour communities have continued, mostly as lay-led churches, in our earnest attempt to serve as authentic representatives of Christ in this world.

Over the next few weeks, you’ll learn more about some of the basic principles of 8th Day around inward journey, community, outward journey, call and gifts, and about how we have come to organize ourselves as a local expression of the Christian church that is still evolving and working with those early questions:

* What does it mean for the Church to be God’s waiting people?
* Can our waiting be meaningful to others if we are not obedient while we wait?
* What does it mean to be radically committed?
* What must our lifestyle be?

But for today, we’d like to spend some time getting to know who is here amongst us. After the service, let us quickly put away our books and chairs, and everyone is invited to come upstairs for a simple meal and a chance to get to know each other just a little bit better through some discussion questions about our individual spiritual backgrounds, how we came to 8th Day, and most importantly, what we’d like to learn over the next few weeks as we examine our common and individual spiritual inheritance.

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May it be so.