

“Vision Sunday: Stand firm in the Lord”

September 10th, 2023 — Selby United Church – Scripture: Philippians 4:1-9

By Rev. Mike Putnam

For the last couple years, I’ve taken this Sunday (the one just before our church anniversary) for something I’ve called “Vision Sunday.”

It’s an opportunity to offer a kind of “State of the Union” sermon, where we think about where we are and where God might be leading us as a congregation. It’s an opportunity to think briefly about the bigger picture and to reflect on the moment we’re in.

Two years ago, I talked about the dramatic changes the church is currently going through – moving from a horse and buggy model, with United Churches in every town, village and hamlet, to serve a community that attended church by horse, to a more centralized model that allows us to provide more focussed and high-quality worship and programming.

I talked about how I believed that God was calling this church to a very particular and focused ministry, a ministry of “raising up a next generation of followers of Jesus.” That little tag line has become my mantra – helping me to focus my efforts when I could easily run off in all directions.

Last year I talked about our need to retool – to look at how we do ministry in light of the fact that so many churches in our region are closing or in decline, and to build boldly for the future that lies beyond this time – believing that Jesus meant it when he said that the gates of hell would not prevail against his church.

I also said that it was time to stop thinking of ourselves as a sleepy country church and start living into a vision of our church as a hub for ministry in our larger region.

And then I dropped the bomb that it was time to reimagine our sanctuary space to make it feel more contemporary and functional for the ministry we have today, and I talked about the need to increase our staff to make the workload of our ministry more manageable and sustainable.

And this year we have accomplished both of those monumental things. We have stepped out in faith. Today we have this stunning sanctuary that is perfectly designed for the needs of the present and the future. And Jane is now our half time “office manager,” and Mallory has begun as our half time “Director of Ministry Programs.”

We are well on our way to being the kind of church that is vibrant, energetic, growing and sustainable. We are answering Jesus’ call for the church to make disciples in every time and place.

Now I’d understand if you’re a little apprehensive about what I’m about to say in today’s sermon. Based on last year, you might be about to hear about the next daring set of changes and reorganization that I have in mind.

But rest easy. Because today I’m not going to talk about building projects or hiring staff or new ways of thinking of the church. I’m going to talk about stabilizing. I think that in this moment we need to settle into the vision that is already before us. I think we’re on a good course. It’s not time for a change in direction, but it’s time to focus on where we’re headed.

Stabilizing is an essential aspect of big things that move. The church, when healthy, is a big thing on the move. We’re an organization on a mission – which means we can’t sit still for very long. We always need to be going out – we always need to be changing and adapting to meet the needs of a turbulent time.

Airplanes need stabilizers. Those back fins keep the plane from tottering as it hurtles through the air at incredible speeds. Big ships need stabilizers. The ballast in the ship keeps it from bobbing about in rough seas.

But churches need stabilizers too. Groups of people need to not be tossed about by the flavor of the moment, but to stay the course, to stay on mission, and to keep our focus in one direction.

We live in a cultural moment when there is very little stability. Social values and

ideas change rapidly – ideas about what is good and right feel up in the air. The economy is facing disruptive technological shifts. The pandemic changed the way we relate to one another. Family values and core beliefs about what it means to be human are changing.

All of this to say that our society lacks stability. And if we are to stay afloat in this midst of this, we all need internal stabilizers. We need a strong sense of identity and self. But we also need a strong sense of who we are as a community.

And that’s why I’ve chosen the tail end of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi as we reflect on our vision for the next year in our community of faith.

Paul is writing to his church in the middle of tremendous turbulence. He’s writing from jail with a death sentence hanging over him. He’s writing to a church facing challenge and difficulty as they sort out what it means to be the church together.

But notice that Paul’s not flustered. He’s not caught up in the chaos of the moment. He’s a rock. He’s calm. He’s cool. And he’s boldly leading his church.

Paul concludes his pastoral letter with words that speak of the love that he has for his community of faith. He writes, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends.”

Notice the way Paul speaks tenderly to his congregation. He calls them “brothers and sisters,” and he calls them “my joy and my crown.” This is so important. Because this gathering of people is not a club – to which you pay your dues and enjoy the benefits of membership. It’s also not a committee or a service organization with work to do. But it’s a gathering of God’s children – we are made family by what God has done for us. But families, as many of you know, are not easy.

What’s the basis of this family? What is it that binds us together? Paul says “Stand firm in the Lord...”. What if I said the only thing that we have to offer the world, the only thing that we do that someone else can’t do better, the only thing that we’re truly called to do is to convey the

unique gospel of Jesus Christ?

Oh, I know, a church can do many things. We can champion this project or that initiative. We can raise funds for this or raise awareness about that. We can loan out our building or make space for community minded initiatives. But those are the kinds of things any organization should be able to do pretty well.

But our unique offering for the world is Jesus. And we must be clear about this. Because if Jesus is truly the saviour of the world, if he is the way to God and the one who overcomes the power of sin in death, how irresponsible of us to lose our focus and put our energy and resources somewhere else.

So, the first thing we must be clear about on this vision Sunday is that Christ centredness isn’t one of the many things we are. It is what we are. We are an organization with no other purpose than to make Jesus famous in our community. We want to make Jesus non-ignorable for every single person in a 30km radius around this place. But to do that we must “stand firm in the Lord.”

The next thing Paul has to say is a little side note to his friends Euodia and Syntyche. They’re not getting along. There’s a disagreement – we don’t know the details. Ever been part of a church where there were disagreements?

“Be of the same mind in the Lord,” Paul says. At one point in my life I walked away from the church because of a disagreement. I decided it just wasn’t worth it. People were cruel, unkind, and downright awful. I decided I was done with church.

But by God’s grace I was drawn back to different church with a different group of people, and it was there that my call to ministry became particularly acute.

But because of that I’ve learned to anticipate conflict. But I’ve also learned that disagreement isn’t a church problem, it’s a people problem. Get a big enough group of people together and people start to misbehave. People start to lose the vision for what we are to do and be together. And then things get messy!

There will always be people who have their own agenda, who are looking to fill some

other need through the church, there will always be people with low emotional intelligence and who make waves or cause problems. But that's a people problem. And that's why a crystal-clear vision is so essential – because our vision stabilizes things. It helps everyone in the room to understand and get behind the future possibilities for all of us together.

But there's always a temptation in churches to "major in the minors." I mean, most people in the Church can agree on the big stuff of faith, but we so often get bogged down in the minor ones. We make minor things into major things and then we tear the whole thing apart over those things.

Now, certainly the major things are worth fighting for. I recently heard of a church in our area that had a small group of people who call themselves "progressive Christians," and they thought it was their job to correct their church's theology.

So, on Easter Sunday they handed out pamphlets that challenged Jesus' divinity, undermined the resurrection event, called into question the Bible and reimaged the core beliefs of Christianity to suit this group's own personal views.

And that's a problem! I'm always up for a good discussion and even a debate. That can be healthy. We can all grow from that. But we must be clear about our core beliefs even as we are welcoming of those who see things differently. It's essential that we don't forfeit the very basis of our community in the name of inclusivity.

But on lesser matters let us be tolerant and grace filled. So many churches today are tearing themselves apart over issues that are not essential. There is never a shortage of ways to slice and dice a group of people according to some issue, outlook or idea that isn't essential to who we are.

But let us not fall into that trap. This is not one of those churches. The basis of our gathering is nothing but the core beliefs passed down to us through the ages about who God is, what Jesus Christ has done for us and what the Holy Spirit is doing in our midst. That is the totality of our unity, and it must be protected.

And it's not that your political opinions aren't important, they're just irrelevant here. It's not that your take on social issues aren't well thought out, we're just not going to let differing opinions toss us into chaos.

What I think this church is called to be is smack in the middle of the road. This is a church where you can count on good solid biblical preaching week after week, where people find good solid community and connection, where young people are well looked after and are given ample opportunities to grow in faith, and where people can move through every age and stage and feel like this is their church.

We're a country church with a country church flavor. We'll never be stuffy and formal again, because in this neck of the woods that not what people are like. So, we must reflect the style and feel of the wider community.

But I don't want this church to be famous for anything other than really good, soul feeding weekly worship, lively fun mid-week programs and deep and supportive community that extends into our everyday lives. Everything else is secondary. Let's just agree to be boring like that and leave all the secondary stuff to other people to fight about. Why? For the sake of unity – which, according to Jesus, is mission critical in the church.

Paul's next exhortation is this: "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again rejoice!" One of the things I love about our Sunday morning gathering (as well as other gatherings) is the sheer level of joy involved.

Last Sunday I posted some photos that John Moore took of our first Sunday back in this sanctuary. You know what I heard most about those photos? "What a joyful looking church!" That's what people from outside our community noticed - All the smiles!

But if you're pretty new around here you might be surprised to hear that it wasn't always so. Last Sunday was my ninth anniversary as the minister of this church, and nine years ago I would have used other words to describe the feel on a Sunday morning. Words like "small" and "formal," and maybe even a little bit "stuffy."

So this joyful community we have today didn't just happen. It had to be cultivated.

God had to bring just the right mix of people together. And we had to let go of some of our traditional ways to get to where we are now. In other words, creating and sustaining joyful community is something God has done.

But that's essential, because joyfulness is attractational. What do most people lack in their lives? Real joy. Because joy isn't contingent on our circumstances. Lots of things promise us momentary happiness but almost nothing can promise us enduring joy. But that's a natural by-product of our faith.

Why can we promise joy? Paul says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

See, when we let go of the formality and trappings of church from another era, and focus on the things that are truly essential, the joy of the Lord took root.

But the joy we experience here today is something that needs to be protected – maybe even defended at times. It's an essential part of the ballast that keeps our church upright when the waves pick up. We won't always agree, we won't always get along, we might say "I'd do it differently," but it is the joy of being the body of Christ that sustains us together.

Paul concludes, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things."

You are what you think about. There is a tendency in every church – because we're a gathering of people – to fall into the trap of negativity. Our culture teaches us that our opinions are the most important thing. The possibility for gossip is always there. The pull toward negativity is strong. "Did you hear about what she said?" "Did you see what Pastor Mike did?" "Didn't care much for the music this morning." "I would have painted it a different colour."

We must guard against this. It is so

easy to let it take root. It's toxic. It eats away at the vitality of the congregation in ways that are mostly invisible. Until one day we realize the damage has been done, there's hurt feelings, there a loss of focus on what matters. Our collective vision is left in tatters.

Friends, I believe that this church stands on the cusp of something great. God has blessed this ministry in a myriad of ways. We have been built together for a purpose. And I am certain that God has some really wonderful plans for us together this year.

But as we continue to implement and build a Christ focused, unified and joyful community of faith, we must also give attention to stabilizing.

We need fins to keep us upright as we keep moving together – which is a laser focus on who we are and what matters most as a community of followers of Jesus. And we also need ballast – which comes from people who are intentional about protecting a healthy church culture – which is built upon unity, joyfulness, and truthfulness.

As I stand in this pulpit after nine years of ministry in your midst, I can honestly say, as Paul does, "Therefore brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown," and then I affirm Paul's words, "...stand firm in the Lord."

Because if we do, this little gathering will most certainly give our individual lives real joy and peace, and our church will prosper for the glory of God in ways we can't yet imagine, and our community will be transformed in the light of God's grace found in this particular bride of Christ – Selby United Church.

And then we will all truly say, "Thanks be to God, Amen."