

THE RISK TAKING CHURCH

When he was 88, the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes found himself on a train. The conductor called for tickets, but Justice Holmes couldn't find his ticket and seemed terribly upset. He searched his pockets and fumbled through his wallet without success. The conductor was sympathetic. "Don't worry, Mr. Holmes," he said. "The Pennsylvania Railroad will be happy to trust you. When you reach your destination you'll probably find the tickets and you can mail it to us." The conductor's kindness did not put Holmes at ease. He said, "My dear man, my problem is not 'Where is my ticket?' but rather 'Where am I going?'"

Unfortunately we are too often just like that. We move forward through life unsure of how to respond to the changing situations in world around us. The problem often is that we have no clear direction or picture of where we are going. We lack a defined destination. We lack vision.

Heb 11:6 without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. 7 By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. 8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Sherlock Holmes and Watson were camping one night. In the middle of the night Sherlock Holmes awoke and looked up at the stars. He asked, "Watson, what do you see". Woken from his sleep Watson looked up and said "stars". Yes, but what do these stars tell you. Watson said "Cosmologically they tell me that we are part of a large universe – that we are one of billions and billions of planets. Theologically they tell me that we have a great God who made all of it. Meteorologically they tell me that the sky is clear and we will have good weather tomorrow. Temporally they tell me that it is the middle of the night and we should be sleeping! Sherlock, what do they tell you." "Well," he replied, "they tell me that someone has stolen our tent".

Let me ask you this morning "what do you see?" As you think back over the past year and look at your own life and the direction of this church what do you see? Where are we as a church going? In terms of vision there are 3 different types of churches and people:

1. The Under-taking Church – looking back

The undertaking church is one that is always looking backwards. All that people ever talk about are the "good old days". They miss what is happening today because they are always looking back to yesterday. Decisions in this kind of church are based on what has worked in the past – if it was good enough for them it is good enough for us.

Psalm 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

The children of Israel missed what God was doing. God was doing a new thing but they did not understand it. They saw the captivity as an end and not a beginning. They did not see that through the captivity God was setting the stage for Jesus. The Babylonians would be defeated by the Persians who would allow the Jews to spread all across the Mediterranean. They would be defeated by the Greeks who would unify all the different peoples through it's language and customs. They would be defeated by the Romans who would build road and make transportation possible to every remote corner of the then known world. When Jesus was born the stage was set and the message spread like wild fire. In one generation the disciples went out to reach the entire Roman world.

Years ago when Mao Zedong was the leader of China there was great persecution of the Christians. Mao wanted to eliminate Christianity. First he arrested the Christians and then spread them all over the country thinking that then they could not meet together so the church would die. Second he wanted to punish them so he gave them the worst jobs possible – garbage collectors and grave diggers. On the surface you would have thought this would work. However, in spreading out the Christians he planted Christianity through the entire nation. In making Christians garbage collectors he gave them access to every home in the country and in making them grave diggers he placed them in situations where they could share their hope with people who were grieving.

Poor eyes limit your sight; poor vision limits your deeds. -- Franklin Field

While you can learn from the past, you can't live there. You have to live and adapt to where you are or you will perish. When we lived in Kuwait we met a lot of Canadians who were living there but acting like they were still living in Canada. That just does not work. You have to adapt in order to survive and live there. Too many churches today are spending their time and resources lamenting the past when they should be adapting to the future. What has worked in the past may not work in the present because the audience has changed.

The gospel must be preached afresh and told in new ways to every generation, since every generation has its own unique questions. The gospel must constantly be forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence. -- Helmut Thielicke

While it is possible for a church to be always looking back it is also true for a person. How do you look at your walk with Christ. Are you only remembering the GLORY DAYS of your ministry or do you feel the best years of your life are yet to come? When they rebuilt the temple after the captivity many people were upset because it was not as beautiful as before.

Haggai 2:3 Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?

God reminded the people that he was with them and that His Spirit was still there. It is impossible to serve God yesterday. You cannot live off yesterday's bread. It does not matter how God has used you in the past – how will He use you in the future? A person or church that tries to walk looking backward is bound to fall – positive or negative.

2. The Care-taking Church – looking present

The care-taking church is always concerned with pressing issues. It is so busy and there are so many needs that it's focus is on immediate issues. It seems to always be in maintenance mode.

It is constantly trying to keep its head above the water. Decisions in this kind of church are based on immediate assets. The number one question is always "do we have the money now to support this"?

Matt 15:32 Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." 33 His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

All the disciples could see was their lack of resources. They failed to focus on the power of God.

A pig ate his fill of acorns under an oak tree and then started to root around the tree. A crow remarked, "You should not do this. If you lay bare the roots, the tree will wither and die." "Let it die," said the pig. "Who cares as long as there are acorns?"

A care-taking church is realistic and comfortable. As long as the services are good and the needs are met and the people are happy then all is well. If it isn't broken then don't fix it. The problem is that they walk by sight and not faith.

It is easy to slip into the care-taking mode in our Christian walk. Certainly I have experienced this. When the work for the day is so great that you cannot see tomorrow coming then you are in trouble. We need to have a greater vision as individuals of God's plan and purpose in our lives. Do our prayers reflect God's greater glory? Are our thoughts on today or can we still see the big picture.

Vision encompasses vast vistas outside the realm of the predictable, the safe, the expected. – Charles R. Swindoll

No man is worth his salt who is not ready at all times to risk his well-being, to risk his body, to risk his life, in a great cause. -- Theodore Roosevelt

3. The Risk-taking church – looking future

The risk taking church is always looking forward. They believe that the best is yet to come. They invest all they have today so that they can be all that God wants them to be tomorrow. Risk taking churches seek to be cutting edge. They want to see how God is moving and to use all available technology and music to make Christ known.

One of the reasons that we don't take risks is fear of failure. However failure is just a part of life and is often a prerequisite to success. If you aren't failing then you aren't trying!

Jonas Salk attempted 200 unsuccessful vaccines for polio before he came up with one that worked. Somebody asked him one time, "How did it feel to fail 200 times trying to invent a vaccine for polio?" This was his response: "I never failed 200 times at anything in my life. My family taught me never to use that word. I simply discovered 200 ways how not to make a vaccine for polio."

A blind man's world is bounded by the limits of his touch; an ignorant man's world by the limits of his knowledge; a great man's world by the limits of his vision – Paul Hovey

By faith Noah went and build and ark. Think about this. He invested everything he had in something that seemed completely impossible. Can you imagine building a boat in your back yard in a day when

there were no cranes that could move it! Though he could not see or understand it, he based his life on God's word and was willing to wait 120 years for the promise to be fulfilled. Noah's vision was based on what he had been told by God.

By faith Abraham left his home and went to the promised land. Though he was living in a tent he saw the future city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. He believed God and based his life on that vision.

Have you ever heard the expression – “this is a dream come true”.

What destroys perspective is our tendency to measure ministry on too small a scale. We lose the wide-angle view because we're riveted on the close-up. Using a microscopic lens, even a harmless spider looks like a hairy, horrible monster. Most of us would never clean cobwebs from the house if we focused on the close-up view of spiders.

Jesus was a risk taker. He entrusted the salvation of the world to 11 weak and frightened men. Through God's power and vision they changed the world. Instead of looking at past or trusting in the present they saw God's future church and boldly went forward to make it happen. That is faith.

A pastor thought God gave Him an idea, and he presented it in the monthly elders meeting. After giving his most impassioned plea and really “selling” the idea to the elder board, the board voted and voted down the pastors proposed changes 12-1. The head elder looked at the pastor and said, “Well pastor, it's 12 votes to 1. You have been out voted. Looks like time is up for the evening, so will you please close in prayer.”

The pastor, not wanting to give up yet on what he felt God was leading him to do then lead in prayer. As he prayed, he lifted his hands up to heaven and prayed, “LORD - I know my brothers here do not have the same vision you have given me. Please help them to see that this is not MY vision, but YOUR vision!” At that exact moment, a lightning bolt with a loud clap of thunder burst in through the window in the meeting room, striking the table, splitting it in two and knocking all the elders to the floor. As the dust cleared, the pastor looked at the head elder and said - so, what do you think about that? The head elder, dusting himself off, sighed and said, “Well, I guess that's 12 votes to 2, then...”

If you catch a small shark and confine it, it will stay a size proportionate to the aquarium you put it in. Sharks can be six inches long yet fully matured. But if you turn them loose in the ocean, they grow to their normal length of eight feet. That is like what happens to some Christians. I have seen some of the cutest little six-inch Christians who swim around in a little puddle. Enlarge their vision into the broad view of a whole creation and you help them become great.

Sometimes churches look at themselves and say, “Oh, we can't do this and we can't do that because we just don't have the resources.” And their vision gets limited by their circumstances and instead of taking giant steps of faith, they take baby steps. I'm reminded of the story of a man who had done something wonderful and the king called him in and told him he could mark off as much of the kingdom as he wanted and it would be his. The man took his staff and traced a line in the dirt around himself. The king watched as he finished and said, “Is that all you want? Just what's in that circle?” The man said, “NO. I want everything OUTSIDE the circle.” What if we drew a line around this building and said we want to claim all the territory beyond this place for God?

What is your vision? How big is your faith? In which direction are you looking? Are you willing to lay everything on the line for God? Are you motivated by what has happened in your life, by what you presently have or are you open for God to use you in ways that you have never been used before. Is your vision for your life and family limited to immediate needs? God is shaking the kingdoms of the earth and the Kingdom of Heaven is forcefully advancing. Don't miss what God is doing – join Him.

A vision without a task is a dream; a task without a vision is drudgery; a vision and a task is the hope of the world.

Questions? Series coming up in January – invite a friend.