

Walking Our Talk

Zechariah 10:1-12

I John 3:16-24

Every five years this congregation impanels a strategic planning task force. The session charges the members of these groups with the job of a taking the long view. Of thinking comprehensively about what God may be calling us to do into the future. About six months ago I asked the elders to form our newest strategic planning task force a year early. I felt—and feel—that we have entered a challenging time for all churches and we need to address that without delay. The elders agreed and now our newest task force has met three times. All of us on the task force agree that we want to be transparent and to receive thoughtful, prayerful input from *anybody* associated with this church. So here are the names of our current group: Tom Bogigian, Andrew Conner, Jill Conner, Alan Harder, Connie McLaren, Shirley Slutz, Phil Smith, Luanne Tilstra and myself. Please do not hesitate to reach out to any or all of us with concerns or ideas you may have.

We have not come up with any final answers. I can only provide a summary of our actions to date. Through our reading and observations of the realities of American life in 2024, we see that Christians and the church face a daunting situation. At our last meeting, we seemed generally to agree that the time has come to stop bemoaning this and to start seeking God's guidance for what we might do about it. We believe the

mission statement adopted some ten years ago by a previous task force and session deserves greater prominence. We see the need for current leadership—including pastoral leadership—to refresh our familiarity with it, and to do our best to test what we do in every facet of church life against that statement. We have had it printed in our bulletins and placed it on the home page of our website. Here it is: “We are a community of believers, called by God to grow in the knowledge and teaching of Christ, to share the love of Christ with all, and to respond with compassion to the needs of our changing world.”

The task force has also agreed to a concise vision statement that we hope all of us will memorize. In the leadership consultant's world you will often find the idea that such a statement must consist of no more than eight words. (Some say fifteen or more.) We got it down to three: “Worship, love, serve.” These statements may seem obvious, even banal. They may seem unimportant until we measure everything we do as a church against them. This congregation is blessed with impressive resources. We have many gifted members and friends. We have a significant amount of money in various dedicated funds. Meanwhile, have not seen any diminishment in giving even through the pandemic. We have impressive traditions. The question before us becomes, how shall we use these resources to worship, love and serve? Just doing what we already are doing, or “what we have *always* done”, will not do. What does God therefore call us to change?

A word about change. Again from the leadership consulting world, we have read

that most of us experience change as loss. To use a somewhat trivial example, when we get a new smart phone, even if the old one had started irritating us, giving it up feels like losing a familiar tool, perhaps even a friend. To use an example that cuts closer to home, when a church changes any part of its ministry, some will mourn the loss of the old ways. I have not heard much about this, perhaps it happened long enough ago for feelings to have softened, but at some point this congregation decided to end the Women's Association. I am speculating, but it seems likely that most younger women had jobs. Most of the older women wanted to meet in the daytime. Not enough could attend then and eventually, it ended, probably with a whimper, a bang. Yet for some, the loss would have been difficult, a loss.

The strategic planning task force members accept the reality that any change we propose carries the risk of creating a sense of loss. We are therefore taking our time, praying about it, having hard but good conversations. *Again* from our reading we have learned to head toward proposing smaller, experimental changes. We want to try some things (we do not yet know what). We have started telling each other that whatever we propose we need to give the chance to work but to “fail fast” if we must, not to get too invested, to remain flexible. For example, this congregation had more of a fellowship life before COVID and we miss that. We will see where that idea leads but I can report that our Christian Nurture Commission, and our Christian Educator Ellie Templeton, have already begun dreaming up some ways to recreate those hang-out together events. The Favorite Things event is one example. We on the task force hope to create more of the fun we used to have.

Besides, not all change feels like loss. The verses we read from the prophet Zechariah were written about four hundred years before Christ appeared. Both northern and southern Israel had survived their exiles and slavery. Most of the survivors had returned to the Promised Land. They had rebuilt Jerusalem with its walls and Temple. Then, Philip the Great had led his army through on its way to destroy the Egyptians' last Pharaonic dynasty, then passed back through the land on their way to the east, to wreak havoc on the Medes and the Persians, before finally meeting defeat in India. But the Greeks had left Israel alone. Some Jewish leaders interpreted this as God's blessing. They thought that the people had *earned* this good fortune with good behavior, with sufficient obedience to God's law.

The prophet knew better. Zechariah 10:1-3 speaks of God's wrath against “the shepherds”, against the Jewish leaders. They “utter nonsense” and tell lies. The Lord has “hot” anger against them and plans to punish them. *But* the people themselves can expect a *blessed* change. No longer will they groan under the oppression of their own rulers. They will be strengthened, saved. And, “Out of them will come the cornerstone...the tent peg.” The foundation for this salvation will come from the people. The Jews saw this as one of the last Messianic prophecies in their entire scripture, our Old Testament. We have no reason to see it any differently. Out of the Jewish people would come the savior. He would usher in a blessed change. His followers would know freedom and joy. Yet in response they would need to step up their game. They would need actually to do what God wanted.

John's first letter to the church also speaks of the Messiah. Our passage begins with, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Jesus came as that promised Messiah. He "laid down his life for us." With the benefit of hindsight we now know that God's plan had always required this atoning sacrifice, this death on the cross to pay the price for our sin. God, though holy and righteous, though insistent that God's people also be holy and righteous, out of *love* carried our sin to the cross. *But*. "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Both Zechariah and John urge us to walk our talk. Writing about 475 years apart, both Jews but one a Christian as well, one depending on visions from God and the other having walked with Jesus, they reached the same conclusion. We obey God not to earn God's favor, but as a glad reaction to having *already received it*.

Linda recently gave me a license plate frame that reads, "My favorite breed is *rescued*." I mean no criticism of folks who get purebreds from responsible breeders. Those animals need loving homes, too. But as the son of a veterinarian I know more than I wish I did about the whole system of shelters and puppy mills and the like. My father encouraged his clients to adopt their dogs and cats. So we have. Every pet that has lived with us, starting with the cat I brought into our marriage, came as a rescue. *But I feel like a poser, a charlatan, a nobody, when I consider the Christians who foster and adopt children*. They walk their Jesus talk like few others do. Many of us know a couple here in Terre Haute who have done this twice now. I stand in awe of their commitment to the *ministry* of providing a safe, loving home to children. And how many grandparents in our community have stepped into the parenting role for their grandchildren, when their own mothers and fathers cannot perform it, because of addiction and/or incarceration?

The point here is not to make us feel guilty for not acting like Super-Christians. The points are that, (a) God has saved us. (B) God loves us. © God calls upon us to walk our Christian talk as a thankful response. Follow the work of the strategic planning task force as we communicate it to you. We plan to recommend some changes. Those changes will feel like loss to some among us. But in the context of what is happening in our society, we must choose either to stand pat and steadily diminish, or to change and grow our ministry. As I have expressed before, one thoughtful member of the task force has urged us to focus on *people*, not the church. How might we, with all the resources of the Central Presbyterian Church, do that? Please think and pray about this, and in the tradition of this church, do not hesitate to let us know what you come up with.

A few suggestions that may guide your contemplation. How might we keep enjoying our traditional style of worship yet nudge it in some way that appeals to people currently outside of our circle?

How might we offer services that address the most deeply felt needs of people who live and work in our vicinity?

How might we work together better to understand God's calls for justice—and then to make those calls actually happen?

We can take this approach to every area of our church's work, including to the fun fellowship events referenced earlier. We can take it to things we have never tried. The points are, again, God saved us, God loves us, God calls upon us to walk our talk in gratitude. I confess I do not walk my talk all the time. None of us does. But we must *try*.