Begin with the End in Mind

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Matthew 20:18-20

Sermon Series: Recalculating

Last month, I needed to travel to seven cities in nine days. While you might imagine the most important things I packed were my lecture notes and my suitcase, I have to say the number one item was my GPS! I began each day knowing my destination for that day’s travels, beginning with the end in mind. Nevertheless, I must have heard my GPS device say a single word ten thousand times—recalculating. The journey of life for us, personally, and for our congregation, functions in a similar way. We want to keep the end in mind, what we are seeking to be and to do and we want to be open to the “recalculations” we must make to get us there. So, we use the ultimate GPS of God’s Positioning System. We seek to discern God’s will for our lives as we listen to God through Bible study and prayer and as we listen to the people of wisdom in our lives.

Those of us who share in the life of the Vienna Presbyterian Church are well aware we have been on an intense and challenging journey over the last few years. We have walked together in hard and painful places and in pleasant, wonderful places. Over the last several months, our elders, working with Pastor Pete, the other pastors and staff and members of the congregation, have engaged in a process of discerning our future as a congregation. To assist in the process, our elders engaged TAG Consulting, a company with vast experience in working with congregations such as ours.

Some eight hundred of us participated in a survey known as the Transforming Church Index (TCI), and a number of our leadership groups worked through a variety of other assessment approaches to better grasp where we are and where our congregation may go in the future. One of the great opportunities in life our Lord gives to every congregation and, indeed, to every person is to show honor, dignity and appreciation for the blessings of our past and present, to assess with clear eyes our strengths and areas of potential improvement and then, as all of our GPS devices love to say, to recalculate how to move into the new future our Lord has for us.

Some of the strengths that people expressed in the survey include appreciation for worship services and biblical preaching, our facilities, our ministries to children and youth, our impact in the wider
The result has been the proposal of five major strategic goals.

Strategic Goal 1: Spiritual Transformation

To help people become more like Christ for the sake of others by engaging them in the process of spiritual transformation through personal spiritual disciplines, worship, growth groups and service. This focuses us on our central calling to be and to make disciples.

Strategic Goal 2: Next-Generation Ministry. Develop an inviting ministry that meets college-age and young adults where they are on their spiritual journeys and come alongside them on their walk with God in the VPC community.

Strategic Goal 3: Integrated Family Ministry. Develop an integrated ministry by providing opportunities and environments that strengthen marriages and encourage and equip families as they worship, learn and serve together.

Strategic Goal 4: Outreach. Expand the influence of the gospel and VPC through a focused outreach to the 146,000 families living near VPC who do not have a church home.

Strategic Goal 5: Leadership Development. Implement a program that identifies, recruits and develops spiritual leaders for the building up of the Body of Christ at Vienna Presbyterian Church.

Now, we understand five strategic goals to be “advancing” goals taking us into the future we trust our Lord is leading us into. Session has also proposed two “sustaining” goals, goals that specifically...
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Sustain two key areas of action: Build on our mission and outreach ministry to focus on active participation of VPC members in external missions and the equipping and sending of people called to mission work.

Continue to support the healing and restoration of our sexual abuse survivors and their families; implement policies and actions to establish VPC as a Safe Church; provide support to other churches to prevent and, if necessary, recover from sexual abuse within their constituencies.

I am excited about these goals. While Pastor Pete, our elders, our staff and church members pursue many concerns and activities beyond what is captured in these proposed strategic goals, these do embrace some of the great callings and opportunities we share here at VPC—and, again, our elders are very interested in your input and feedback. This morning, I will spend my remaining time looking at the first of the five proposed goals and, over the next weeks, Pastor Pete will address the other four goals.

Strategic Goal 1: Spiritual Transformation. This focuses us on our central calling to be more like Christ for the sake of others. We know this is at the very heart of the mission Jesus Christ gave to everyone of us in what is famously called The Great Commission: And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:18-20). The core idea is be a disciple and make a disciple. Are you growing as a disciple of Jesus yourself? Are you encouraging others to grow as disciples?

So just what is a disciple? A disciple is a learner, a follower. If you learn from a person you become that person’s disciple. So the growing disciple of Jesus is increasingly like Jesus. My dear friend Dale Patterson lives in Dallas, Texas, and tells of a time years ago, when, as he says, “My Dad, who was an electrical contractor saw to it that I learned a real vocation—I was apprenticed as an electrician—but as a welder specifically. You don’t learn how to weld in a classroom, but as a helper, an apprentice to an expert, a journeyman. We were living in Missouri, and my journeyman, the guy I apprenticed under and who taught me how to weld, was Joe Smith. He didn’t have a high school diploma, only had a few good teeth left in his head, but he was as skillful a craftsman, as smart a man as I’ve ever
known. His job was to teach me to weld. My job was to learn from Joe. I apprenticed under Joe for many months. In truth, [Dale said] I loved to weld, and I was learning from an artist. Joe was a fine teacher, gracious but tough, and he wanted me to be a good welder. I’d watch him; then he’d watch me, give me tips, critique, encouragement and a swift kick every now and then.

“As my apprenticeship in welding ended, I had to go for testing and certification. I went two hundred miles away to Saint Louis; my examiner only knew I was from a little town in SE Missouri; he knew nothing more about me. His only job was to certify my welding. He put a couple plates of carbon steel in front of me, and said, ‘Weld these plates together.’ So I did. When I finished the weld, I put a wire brush to the weld and cleaned it up and gave it to my examiner. He looked at it carefully, and a big smile came on his face. ‘You apprenticed under Joe Smith, didn’t you? I’d know his welds anywhere!’ The examiner, of course, was right.” As Dale says, “‘It wasn’t Joe’s weld, it was Dale’s.’ But he’d learned, he’d apprenticed, he’d grown as a disciple of Joe Smith. His handiwork was all over Dale.”

Just as Dale became like Joe, so you and I are invited and called to become more like Jesus. The student becomes like the Teacher. This is the heart of our first strategic goal.

And there is something else about being a disciple that is wonderful. In addition to becoming like the teacher, we have the joy of getting to know the teacher. When Ann Marie and I were a newly married couple living in West Lafayette, Indiana, Bill and Joyce Fall, who were old enough to be our parents, invited us and three other newlywed couples to join them in a small group Bible study centered on growing our new marriages. There were many things the Falls taught us and to the degree Ann Marie and I live them we are their disciples. But something even more wonderful came of that time together. You can understand it if I tell you a few weeks ago I flew to Indianapolis in order to drive to an engagement in southern Illinois. But first, I drove well out of my way to West Lafayette, found 148 Blueberry Lane and knocked on the door. Ninety-five-year-old Bill Fall opened the door and gave me a full body, bone-crushing hug. It was utterly wonderful. When we grow to be more like Christ it means we get to know this Lord who loves us and loves to hug us.

I appreciate the way Dale Bruner explains the first words of the Great Commission, “Therefore go and make disciples.”¹ First the there-

¹ Dale Bruner The Church Book – Commentary on Matthew 28:18-20
So, are you making disciples?

Are you growing yourself as a disciple of Jesus?

Are you growing your children and grandchildren as disciples?

Are you growing anyone as a disciple of Jesus?

Studies of the Christian maturity of God’s people today show that typically, for men and women between the ages of 20- and 60-years-old, that not much spiritual growth is happening and its not happening with our children either. If it is going to happen, it will not be because the elders propose a strategic goal and you simply agree with it. It will only happen by God’s grace if you and I are willing to commit to the practices specified in the first strategic goal—Strategic Goal 1: Spiritual Transformation. To help people become more like Christ for the sake of others by engaging them in the process of spiritual transformation through personal spiritual disciplines, worship, growth groups and service. The idea here is that for each one of us there is a clear recognizable path to grow as a disciple of Jesus. A personal commitment is asked of each of us to pursue the practices that feed the soul such as prayer, Bible reading, worship each week, growth groups and service. This provides the necessary spiritual food for the soul.

One beautiful spring day, when our son Lee was eight years old, he ran up to me and said, “Dad, guess what? There’s a pond behind Cumberland Elementary School and there are tadpoles. Could we go catch some?” Well, that sounded like great adventure.

We went into the garage and found an old coffee can and a long handled minnow dip net. We climbed onto our bicycles and went down the street and down around behind Cumberland School. There in the middle of a massive construction project was a giant pool of water about six inches deep and ten yards across. The bottom of the mud pool was black, covered with a hundred zillion little black tadpoles.

Our eyes lit up. We’d found gold. We jumped off our bikes and with the first scoop with our minnow net caught at least
So, what do you need to grow in the image of Jesus, in your experience of being loved by Jesus?

It’s true that God’s love for us is like tadpoles. Now four or five tadpoles would probably have been sufficient for our purposes but seeing there were a hundred zillion left, we took the coffee can and dumped all fifty in, put the plastic top on, and bicycled home. We filled an old plastic kitty litter pan half full of water, put in a piece of wood so that the little froggies could have a place to sit and we fed them fish food every day. We did not know what else to feed them so that had to do.

Well, life in our little tadpole farm went fine for about three months, although after three months they hadn’t grown at all. They were still itty-bitty little tadpoles about half an inch long. One day, Lee said, “Dad, let’s go back to the mud puddle and see what’s happening to the tadpoles that we didn’t catch.” “That sounds like a good idea.” We went back down to the mud puddle and to our surprise as we stepped off the bikes, we saw tadpoles were gone. The bottom of the pond was just the color of mud. I wondered if some disease had killed them or if birds ate them. Suddenly, I noticed a little movement by my foot. I looked down and there was an itty-bitty frog. Then as we began to look under the leaves and the grass and the brush, why there were a hundred zillion itty-bitty frogs. They’d all grown up. I was astonished. I thought, “Well, the frogs that we had at home haven’t grown at all and these are fully mature frogs.”

What was the difference? Very simple. The tadpoles in that pond had had the correct food to eat. Our tadpoles were simply surviving on fish food. They were growing older but they were not growing up! I learned later that tadpoles eat boiled lettuce (in case you ever want to raise tadpoles)! Clearly, congregational life was never meant to provide a place for people only to serve or merely to be busy. It’s not to be a place to merely grow older without growing up in the likeness of Jesus and in our love for Jesus. We want to create the environment in which we help one another become more like Jesus and love Jesus more.

So, what do you need to grow in the image of Jesus, in your experience of being loved by Jesus? Commit yourself to the path of discipleship: the regular practice of prayer and Bible reading, worship each week with God’s people and participate in a growth group and in a life of service.