

The First Baptist Church, Midland
October 11, 2009 – Stewardship Sunday
Matthew 5: 13-16

The 360° Life: Where Are WE Going?

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Theme: Financial Stewardship

Are you an antique buff? Over the years, I've spent more than a couple hours rummaging around tables with assorted treasures from the past, and have to confess it's sometimes fun to look at the "stuff" from the 1950's because it transports me back to my childhood... and that's not a bad place to visit.

But do you know what else I have noticed about these antique shops? Every now and again you'll find one doing business out of an old church building. In fact, I've been in a few where they even had the old pulpit and pews for sale leading me to wonder... *what happened?*

Once upon a time this was a viable building where people committed to the Lordship of Jesus in their lives would gather in worship and fellowship. But slowly, the vitality of the congregation evidently went away, and the remaining edifice became one large antique housing many small antiques. And that's sad, isn't it? More than that, it's a reminder to all of us that we must take seriously the ministry and mission before us lest our story winds up with a similar ending. Don't believe me? Consider Matthew's words.

In our lesson this morning which is taken from The Sermon On the Mount we are reminded by Jesus himself that we are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It's a warning really about what happens when people of God lose their saltiness and hide their light. Using the metaphor of the morning, the church becomes an antique losing its purpose and direction and ultimately ends up closing its doors. But if we maintain our saltiness – that is our ability to lend flavor to life - and keep our lamp on the lamp stand giving light to all who pass by, Jesus says our works will give glory to God in heaven and this will sustain the ministry and mission to which we have been called. So allow me a few suggestions related to seasoning life and lighting the way.

I truly believe that God is calling us to do great things as we seek to reach our community with the Good News and as we seek to fulfill our vision for ministry. You remember our vision, don't you? ***In the spirit of our compassionate Christ, we are a family of growing believers serving all of God's people in an ever changing world.*** And as I allow my mind to play with this vision of our future and my heart to embrace its possibilities, this is a bit of what I see given the realities of the culture we are seeking to serve.

First, I believe God continues to call us to be a center for community. This is what a "family" is all about. It is a community of faith that is open to all who are searching for their spiritual grounding... a community where people of different

backgrounds feel welcome... a community where diversity and tolerance is not just respected, but where it is a fundamental value. No, this does not mean we are all things to all people, but it means we find our common denominator in our salvation through Jesus and search for ways in community to live out that common belief. Yes, diversity is a strength and not a weakness and God calls us to be in ministry with one another in the context of our differences. This is one way we lift our light to the world all around. God is calling us to be a center for community.

Paul said it so well to the Corinthians, **“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!** (2 Corinthians 5:17) He was talking about a spiritual environment where diversity is respected and where differences are reconciled. And do you remember his wisdom to the Galatians? **“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”** (Galatians 3:28) You see, the model for diversity was established from the beginning of our life together and I see a future wherein our church will continue to lead the way in our city toward this ministry of reconciliation. Remember our statement which we share with the world? We are the church where *The Differences Are the Difference!*

Then I also believe we are called to be a center for caring. This is what “the spirit of our compassionate Christ” is all about. After we confess our faith in Jesus, the core of our ministry is related to caring for one another and for those beyond our walls. Our church is a place where relationships reign supreme for this is our core value.

There is a very simple way to grow our faith and to grow the church. It is not at all complicated and it comes out of the heart of the gospel. *Because God first loved us, we love each other.* It is that simple. We are here for each other in good times and in bad. When we are hurting, it is here that we find our healing. When we are happy, it is here that we share our joy. When we are confused, it is here that we search for answers with fellow strugglers. When we are challenged, it is here that we discover our confidence and strength with the support of one another. When we are grieving, it is here that we find companions to walk with us in our sorrow. When we have doubts, it is here that we find our grounding. When we are lonely, it is here that we discover friendship. And when we have a noble call, it is here that we respond to that call. All of this is to say our church is built upon relationships... relationships that come to life through our love for one another. We are a center for caring.

May I share a third belief related to our future together. I believe we are called to be a center for worship in ways that will express the integrity of our beliefs and the values of our congregation, and in ways that will reflect the needs of our community. Now we’re talking about the “growing believers” referenced in our vision.

Our church is a place that is open to God’s leading and to the influence of the Holy Spirit as we seek to faithfully stand before God in the experience of praise and adoration, and to humbly return our thanks for the gift of life and the thrill of the journey. Our worshipping environment is always evolving as we seek to be open to the creative

expression of our faith in ways that will feed our spirits and honor our God while at the same time preserving and embracing the grand traditions upon which this church has been founded. Put another way, it is always our prayer that our church will be a center where worship is embraced with authenticity and shared with integrity.

Then there is another dimension to our vision as it relates to “growing believers”. Simply stated, we are a center of learning. Christian Education is not the icing on the cake. Rather it is the cake and must never be taken for granted. Our church is a strong center for spiritual development in ways that embrace the integrity of sound scholarship providing learning opportunities for people of all ages. We provide teaching that is grounded in the critical understanding of the scriptures and their application to the contemporary issues of our day. Upon that foundation, our learning will grow and it will be limited only by parameters of our creativity.

As we move along, there is another area in our vision related to our “growing” ways. We are a center for praise through the ministry of music. Many of us have been drawn to this place because of the gift of music which our church has embraced and enhanced through the years. We are known throughout the city of Midland for the quality of our music and we continue to build upon that strong foundation. Give us a month or two, and you’ll experience just about every kind of Christian music you can imagine. No doubt about it... God speaks to the heart and moves the spirit through melody. We will never underestimate the power of God to change a life through a song.

Next, as we look to our future together it is also clear that our church is called to be a center of encouragement and affirmation for “all of God’s people”. Every single person is gifted for ministry, and we claim it as our responsibility to prepare all people to serve. We all are salty enough in some way to add a savory taste to our common journey and we all have the ability to light the way for others.

Another way to say this is to affirm that we are a permission giving congregation. As new ideas for ministry and mission are born, people are encouraged to run with their ideas as long as they are in keeping with our core values and our understanding of God’s vision for this church. For me, one of the most exciting moments happens when you come with an idea for a new ministry or mission... with a possibility we haven’t considered before... with a dream toward which we can begin to move. To be part of a Christian family that is not dependent upon the pastoral staff but is openly affirming of the ideas and dreams of its people... a place where the pastoral staff and congregation are interdependent in their commitment to faithfully serve God in ever new and creative ways is the fulfillment of a dream for me... and hopefully for you, too.

Finally, one more critically important image related to our future. There is no doubt in my mind that God continues to call us to be a center for mission. And this is mission that unfolds at the local level through our hands on involvement and at the national and international levels as well. This means we bring a sincere commitment to use our dollars to support the work of those who travel in our place to bring our gospel message alive. And it means, too, that we who feel the call will also travel to serve. This

is the kind of environment we seek to preserve and strengthen as we continue to be a center for mission.

Well, dear friends, I have said a lot this morning and I do hope I haven't overwhelmed you. I have a tendency to do that sometimes when I get excited and I will tell you honestly that working in a context that is so tolerant of diversity, so open to learning and experimenting in the classroom as well as in the choir room, so entrenched in the principles of soul freedom, so affirming of personal gifts for ministry which allow new possibilities to continually bloom, and so trusting of its leadership as we seek to posture this church for ministry in an "ever changing world"... makes me excited.

Now I close with a final thought as we all prepare to come next Sunday sharing our promises and pledges to undergird our vision for 2010. Friends, your church needs you and the support you can sustain. It is a critical time in which we are living and people need the Lord. And in order for that to happen in this place, it demands our financial generosity. We all need to be good stewards of our finances.

We know that God is the Creator of all that is and all that we have is given on loan. And we know, too, that within our hearts we want to do the right thing and return that part which properly belongs to God. The Biblical mandate is clear... we are called to be a tithing people. Yet deep within it is a personal decision that each of us must embrace on our own not because we must... no, this is not a legal proposition... but because we may. This is a privilege pure and simple and it is one of the ways we truly bring honor to God and express our commitment to Jesus Christ. More than that, it will enable our congregation to move faithfully and boldly toward its future as we seek to embrace our vision and as we seek to discern our destiny.

You have my word and the commitment of the leadership in this great church that we will continue to grow toward becoming a center where God is lifted and honored, where Jesus Christ is loved and served and where the Spirit of God is embraced and unleashed. For 140 years people have come to this place searching for Christ and we will continue to be committed to standing in that long line of faith to secure not just the future of our church but ultimately the salvation of God's eager seekers... both for the current generations and for those who are yet unborn.

It has been said, "For most of us, our biggest problem is not what we have done or not done, not what we have felt or not felt, or believed or not believed, but simply that we have not remembered with how great a love 'God loves us'." (William H. Willimon) In the spirit of his love, may our salt ever maintain its saltiness and may our light ever shine.

Amen and AMEN!