

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Confirmation Sunday
Acts 11:1-19
Revelation 21:1-6

First United Church of Christ, Northfield
Rev. Sandra K. Johnson
May 6, 2007

New Vision

There are a lot of stories in the Bible that involve a vision. We heard two of them today. The first was the story of a strange vision Peter had, of a great bundle of foods that Jews had been forbidden to eat for many centuries. In the vision, Peter heard God say that these animals were clean, that is, suitable for eating by the faithful. By itself, that vision would just be an interesting footnote (or maybe “foodnote”) about the religious practices of devout Jews. But Peter understood this vision to be far broader and more important than that: he saw it as a message from God that all people (not just all foods) are clean and welcome in God’s sight. Peter’s interpretation of his vision truly altered the course of Christianity by welcoming gentiles as well as Jews into the company of those who believed. Our proclamation that everyone is welcome here is, in many ways, just an extension of that vision into our own times.

The second vision we heard this morning comes from the strange and evocative book of Revelation. The author (who was probably John of Patmos, writing at the end of the first century) describes a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. We might have expected a vision of a return to Eden – to the safety and security of life in God’s garden. Instead, we heard that the home of God is not far away, but here among mortals.

You might also remember that the story of Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus included visions, as does the story of both Josephs – the one in the Old Testament who is sold into slavery by his brothers, and the one in the New Testament who takes his wife and child to Egypt for safety.

We have become very wary of visions in our own time. We usually see them as outcomes of stress, fatigue, or mental illness. We interpret both our sleeping dreams and our day dreams with psychology not theology. And we use the word *vision* more often to describe corporate planning than spiritual enlightenment.

But I want to suggest this morning that visions – and the imagination that conjures them up for us – are vital to the religious life. We read in the book of Proverbs, “*Without a vision the people perish.*” It is vision that draws us into the future and makes it possible for us to imagine a different world. It is vision that makes it possible for us to forgive and reconcile with one another. It is vision that nudges us into working for peace and justice. It is the idea, as our UCC Justice and Witness Ministries group says to us, that “another world is possible.”

Christians find this vision in the life and ministry, the passion and Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus sets before us a vision of how the world should be – filled with people who are humble, compassionate, generous, and dedicated to peace and reconciliation. I would

argue that it is this vision of life in God's shalom that is central to vibrant and lifelong faith. When the vision is clear and in front of us, we move through our lives with clarity and purpose; when it is blurry or absent, we move with spiritual and emotional clumsiness.

That is why the questions we are going to ask the Confirmation Youth in a few minutes are not about doctrines, dogmas, or even beliefs. Instead, we are going to ask them if they share our visions of faithful life, and we are going to invite them to walk with our faith community as we pursue our visions together.

Most of the time we don't talk about those visions as dreams, or as hearing the voice of God directly. But we have visions, all the same. The people who started the Community Action in Northfield (several of which were from our church) had a vision of offering help to people in need. The people who organized Earth Day a couple of weeks ago have a vision of how God wants us to care for the earth and all of its resources. The people who ordered all the flowers in our hallway this morning have a vision of young people serving on the mission trip, and the people who have brought their bikes for blessing have a vision of God being involved in everything they do, including riding.

You know we often think about Confirmation as a process in which we present a bunch of information, ask the young people to make a decision, and then welcome them into our community. That's a perfectly legitimate process – if you are joining a health club or choosing a cell phone plan. But it is not a very good description of how we move into a life of faith – which involves the same elements but in a different order.

Confirmation is a process of first inviting young people into our community and then sharing our visions with them. If we are doing a good job, we also share our spiritual practices with them, and we share our questions and our doubts and whatever wisdom has come from questioning and doubting. There is no one single decision to live as a disciple. It is something that all of us decide over and over again, as we live together in community. Discipleship is the habit of paying attention to our vision of God, of the peace that God calls us to build. And all of that is true of adults who become part of our congregation, too, not just the youth in the Confirmation Program.

More importantly, each new person who enters our community brings new visions to us. We sang about this in our opening hymn: "*Let us bring the gifts that differ and in splendid varied ways, sing a new church into being, one in faith and love and praise.*" The gifts of imagination and vision are among the most precious that we bring to our life as a church, and today we celebrate with special joy the new visions that these young people bring to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer for May 6, 2007 (Confirmation)

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

Gracious and loving God, you have called us into your church to be the body of Christ, and we pray this morning for the strengthening and renewal of the church.

We thank you for gathering us, and for welcoming all of us, no matter where we are on our life's journey. And we thank you for the companionship of our fellow members, and especially for our newest members who were confirmed today. Help us to see the gifts and graces of each person, and to call out those gifts in one another for the building up of the whole body.

We thank you, too, for the leaders of our church: for those who are officers and member of boards and committees in our own congregation, for those who serve the Minnesota Conference of the UCC (both staff and volunteers), and for those who serve the wider church that stretches across our country and around the world. Help them to be faithful servants, articulate prophets, and loving servants.

We pray this morning for our brothers and sisters in other Christian traditions, and remember your hope that we might all be one. Help us then to find those centers of faith, witness, and service that are the heart of every faith, and to spend our energies strengthening those centers. Help us, too, to keep a sense of perspective and humility about the divisive issues that so often drain our energies and leave us tired and discouraged. Return us to a vision of your whole church.

And we pray this morning for ourselves – for the courage and clarity to proclaim the good news of the gospel with urgency and joy. Make us polyglots, able to tell our story in many ways: in music and in poetry, in visual art and in narrative, in silence and in scholarship. Keep us mindful of the people around us who are hungering and thirsting for lives of meaning and purpose, and nudge us into bolder testimony about the ways we are fed at your table.

All these things we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...