

## **“Vision Quest”**

*Trinity Sunday/Peace with Justice Sunday*

*Matthew 22:34-40 and 28:16-20*

You are not alone this morning. Take a good look around you. There are people here who love you, who want to worship God with you, and share this church with you. Whether it took you three cups of coffee to get going this morning, or if you couldn't wait to get here, this is the place where you belong. You are not here by accident, and your presence is a gift to all of us, and a sacrifice of praise to God. Thank you for being here.

Would you pray with me? Almighty God, Father, Son, and Spirit, the blessed Trinity, we praise you. We, your people, are gathered here to be your church. We come with burdens, seeking relief. We come with sin, seeking forgiveness. We come with confusion, seeking clarity. We come expecting you to challenge us and change us. You are God, and we worship and adore you. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, and help us to follow Jesus Christ, our Lord. We pray this in his name. Amen.

This morning I have a task for you. You may have heard of speed dating. In speed dating, you get about 30 seconds to have a conversation with someone, and then you get up and switch tables. We will do something similar this morning. In a moment, I am going to ask you to stand up and move to a brand new location in the sanctuary – anywhere you want, as long as it is a different pew than where you started. On the way, you must talk with someone for no more than 30 seconds, and you get bonus points if you have never met them before. Your goal is to learn one new thing about them, such as where they were

born or their favorite thing to do in Bellaire. Everyone is going to do this, including me. Ready, set, go. *[The people get up and move. Use a timer.]*

The reason I had you move is that I wanted you to have a new perspective this morning. It is hard to remember for some of us, but the truth is, we were all new to church at some point. I've been appointed here for three years now, and even I sometimes forget what it feels like to be new.

When I was a freshman in college, everything was new to me. I especially enjoyed playing in the marching band. It was exciting to play before tens of thousands of people. My sophomore year, I was privileged to march in the Rose Bowl Game, and to this day, I consider that halftime show to be the best we ever did. However, I remember something our band director said the night before the game. "Don't settle on your laurels. Go out there like no one has ever seen you before. Give a little extra air, a little higher kick." He did not want us to settle for anything less than our very best.

Following those years, it was hard not to compare every other half-time show with the Rose Bowl. But the band continued to perform, and still does today, with excellence. We could have said, "Hey, the Rose Bowl was our golden era. The band will never be as good again." But instead, the band approached the next year, and every year, as a new opportunity to provide excellent halftime shows for the crowds.

The reason the band continues to perform the way it does is that the members are united in their vision. They know that each one of them has a place in the formation and a part to play. Their purpose is the same every year, but the vision is renewed each year, with new music and new students.

All organizations have lifecycles. Bands, clubs, and especially churches. I

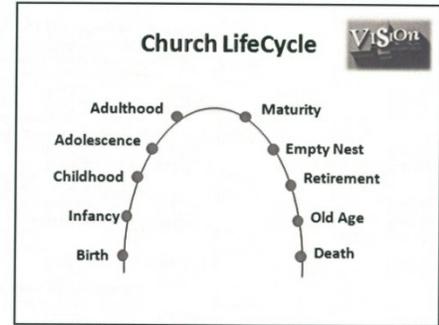
want you to look at this graphic for a moment and ask yourself, where do you see our church today?

I believe our church is at maturity, trending towards an empty nest. I have taken a look at our statistics over the last ten years, and while I believe there are some excellent things happening in this church, but I also believe that we need a renewal of vision to start a new lifecycle.

It's pretty easy to figure out when we were born. This church was founded in 1880 by nine members. This building was dedicated on Christmas Day, 1887. Through the years, the congregation grew and changed. They added an electric organ in 1948, did a building expansion in 1956. In 1963 they renovated the sanctuary. In the 1970's, they added side entrances to make access to the building easier. In the 1980's and 90's they added air conditioning and purchased land behind our lot.

Imagine if that first group of Methodists in 1880 had decided that their vision was to double their membership. They would have stopped at 18 people! But they did not. They had a vision to bring people to Jesus that has continued to this day.

There are some great things happening at Bellaire Community UMC. We have paid our ministry shares to the United Methodist Church in full for basically our entire history. (Ministry shares are the first priority of missional giving for the local church.) We have had baptisms and professions of faith over the last three years. The door is open for new people to join our church, and people have



Our challenge wherever we are today on the cycle...

...START A NEW LIFECYCLE!

responded to that invitation. These are things to celebrate.



There are some stats, however, that show our current trends. Our Sunday School attendance has grown in the last two years, but you can see it is not at the level it once was. The same is true of our giving. We are certainly meeting expenses and gaining ground, but we are not at the level of previous years.

The last two graphs honestly cause me to be concerned. Our membership and worship attendance are on downward trends. Those trends are not as steep

as the District and the Conference, but we are not heading in the right direction.

Let me ask you this question. Do you honestly believe that the best days of the church are ahead of us, or behind us? Some look at our history and say, yup, in the 1950's, we were really cooking, with all those building projects. Others might say, it was the 1990's, when we changed up our music style and worship was growing. But it doesn't really matter what year you pick, if it's in the past.

Let me be clear. Dwelling in the past does not help you move forward into the future. If someone gives me directions and says, "Drive by where Glen's used to be," that's not helpful. In the same way, these pictures tell us where we have been, but not necessarily where we are going. That is up to the decisions we make now, even today.

When I marched in the band, I was always given a drill chart for each show. It detailed every position in the formation. It was our vision – this is what we want our band to look like. And here is the thing – we had a new drill chart for each show.

For a church to grow in the future, we need to embrace a new vision. When I started in 2014, no one from this church told me, "Pastor, I want this church to be smaller!" So how do we get on a new lifecycle? We need a rejuvenation of vision.

Jesus gave the vision for the church in Matthew 22 and 28. These two passages are commonly known as the "Great Commandment" and the "Great Commission." So let's look at each one.

The Great Commandment is to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37 & 39) The great commandment was Jesus' answer to the Pharisees, when they tried to trip

him up. But Jesus gave them a simple yet profound answer. Love God and love people. That's it.

It is ironic that Jesus was telling the Pharisees what the greatest commandment was. They were the experts in the bible and tradition. But Jesus did not build his church on the Pharisees, the so-called "experts." Jesus built his kingdom on the fishermen, zealots, and tax collectors that made up his twelve disciples. Brash, uneducated men, and a handful of women who supported them. The Pharisees never learned to love God with all their heart, or to love their neighbors (and their enemies) as themselves. If we are to grow this church, we must have an unwavering commitment to loving God and loving others. Period. In everything we do and say. There can be no compromise.

Jesus also gave the disciples specific instructions before he ascended into heaven. This other scripture is what we call the Great Commission. It starts with "Go." Jesus told them to "Go 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 I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20) There are lots of good verbs in this commission: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. Jesus gave the disciples authority to do this and promised to never leave them. And that commission is for us, as well.

Pastor Rick Warren wrote, "A great commitment to the great commandment and the great commission will grow a great church." (Purpose Driven Church, p. 102) These two scriptures are the basis for the vision of any church, including ours. We don't suffer from a lack of vision. The bible gives us a vision. Instead, we suffer from a lack of commitment to that vision.

The truth is, a vision is costly. A vision challenges. The disciples were

scared. Matthew says, some doubted. They did not know if they had the strength, the energy, or the skills to accomplish Jesus' mission. But they tried, and with God's help, they succeeded. It's OK to have doubt. God is strong enough to deal with our doubt, if we will be faithful.

Let me ask you again, are our best years behind us or yet to come? Because this is a matter for the church members, not the pastor, to decide. I can walk with you – but I can't be the church for you. That's your job. I am only on loan from the conference. If the church is pastor-driven, what happens when you get a new pastor? The vision will fall apart. But if the church is purpose-driven, driven by the members, the congregation, it won't matter who the pastor is. Everyone will be part of the vision.

There is tremendous opportunity here at Bellaire Community. In the next few years, we could experience tremendous growth, or we could experience steep decline. The choice is ours.

So here is what I am going to do, as your pastor. I will challenge you. How can we make ministry and mission a greater percentage of our finances in the church? How can we claim the great commandment and great commission as part of our church's DNA?

This fall, I will use the Futurecasting materials I was given by the conference to lead a discussion on the future of the church. I invite every one of you, members and non-members, to be a part of that discussion. The Futurecasting team will meet twice for three hours each. During that time, we will consider our core values, our hopes for the future of the church, and outline some steps to achieve those goals. These meetings will be held in the last weeks of August, at a time the team will set themselves.

The important thing is for the members of the church to be invested in the vision of the church. Someday, when the bishop calls me to serve somewhere else, I want to leave this church healthier than when I started, so that no matter who the pastor is, you, the congregation, will know what your purpose is.

I pray that you will join me and pray for this church, this community, and this world. We can do this. We must do this, for this is the reason God created us.

### Memory verse

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” Psalm 127:1a

### Reflection questions

1. Do you think the best years of the church are behind us or ahead of us?  
Why?
2. As a smaller percentage of our society identifies themselves as Christian, what challenges and opportunities does that present to the church?
3. What is your greatest hope for God’s church? Your greatest fear?
4. How do you pursue the Great Commission and the Great Commandment in your own life?
5. What are you willing to commit to see the church enter a new lifecycle?