

## ***Where Are We Going? When Will We Get There?***

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, MN**

**Pastor Bill Chadwick June 7, 2009**

**Psalm 51: 10-12**

**Matthew 5:13-16**

Long car ride on a summer vacation: “How many more miles?” “When will we get there?” Kids, have you ever been on a long car trip and asked those questions? (Hands raise.) “How loooooong ‘til we get there?”

Several people I talked to over the past few months, including no less an authority than Interim Pastor Gale Robb, told me that they believed Oak Grove is on the verge of something exciting, ready to bust out. Poised and waiting to move forward in new directions with vigor and enthusiasm.

For a new pastor what could be more exciting!?

Where are we going as we begin our ministry together? Let’s ponder that this morning.

In a phone interview the search committee asked, “How do you envision the first year? What sorts of changes do you envision making?” That may be a question you are asking, perhaps with eager anticipation or perhaps with dread. “What kind of changes can we expect with this new guy?”

My answer to the search committee was, “I don’t plan to suggest any big changes in the first year. Someone once said that a new pastor coming into a church and making lots of changes is akin to inviting someone over for dinner and then rearranging the living room furniture. I plan to spend the first year listening.”

**I want to listen to you.** Over the next six to eight months I plan to meet with the congregation (including kids) in small groups, asking questions such as, “How did you come to be a member of Oak Grove?” “What’s your favorite thing about Oak Grove?” “What is your vision for Oak Grove?” “What do you need from Oak Grove?” “What is God calling YOU to do/be?”

A couple days after the phone interview I thought, “I do have lots of ideas of some small things that I might recommend to the Session for their consideration” and so I sent them a list. Five page list.

But these are minor things, not change of direction things.

**Second. In this first year I am also going to be listening to the voices of the community.** Lunch with pastors of every church in Bloomington in small groups of 3-4. “What does your congregation do really well? What is the hole in our community that the Church is not addressing?” Meet with the school superintendent, principals, police chief, representatives of different ethnic groups. If you have suggestions of specific people you think it would be helpful to meet, please give them to me.

The third aspect of listening is to lead the session in a process of **listening to the Holy Spirit**.

I remember reading many years ago the reflections of a very successful pastor as he neared retirement. He stated, "If I had it to do over again I would not rely so much on my own animal heat (that was the phrase he used and that made it memorable) and hard work. I would pray more and rely on the Spirit's power."

Today is Trinity Sunday in which the church celebrates the three aspects in which God has revealed herself/himself, God being way beyond human gender—three aspects: God the Creator, God made known in Jesus and God the Holy Spirit, which in Biblical Greek is a feminine word, *pneuma*. The Holy Spirit is for most the hardest member of the Trinity to get our minds around. The apostle Paul uses several phrases virtually interchangeably: "The Spirit of God," "The Spirit of the Risen Christ" and "The Holy Spirit."

I like to think of the Holy Spirit as "God in the present tense."

We are in the season of Pentecost in which we especially emphasize the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. My goal is for us to be in synch with what the Spirit is already doing in the world, and in synch with God's timing. My natural temperament is to be straining forward eagerly and sometimes I get impatient, with people and with God. But let us aim to be neither ahead nor behind the Spirit.

I have already learned much about you this week and the most thrilling thing I have learned is how **seriously you take prayer**.

I visited Rollie DeLapp on Tuesday and had a great conversation with him. As I was leaving he said to me, "I have quite a prayer list and you're right at the top of it." That brought tears to my eyes. I am so grateful.

Then I was invited to the Men's Prayer Breakfast on Thursday morning. Now other churches I've served have had Men's Breakfast groups. They would meet at 7 o'clock. People would amble in at 7:15 and there would be no prayer. Oak Grove's Men's Breakfast meets at 6 o'clock. I show up at the Denny's at three minutes to six and there are already a dozen men there. And they do nothing but pray, sharing concerns and then offering intercessory prayer. My feet didn't touch the ground for the rest of the day.

This is a strong church and will remain a strong church, as long as we remember where our strength lies.

So. We need to figure out what God is calling us to do in this community as we move into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What is our identity?

Being the first church in Bloomington is interesting to some of us, but not terribly important to very many people outside these walls and some inside these walls. As most of you know, my family has been an important part of this congregation's life from the very beginning, and I think Oak Grove's long history in this community is very cool.

I am sure that you will agree with me that it is good to  
     remember the past,  
         cherish the past,  
             learn from the past,  
                 but not live in the past.

I don't know what the future will look like, but I expect it will be a refreshing blend of tradition and innovation.

We'll see where the spirit leads.

In broad terms we do have a clear foundation from the scriptures, as Jesus tells his followers in Matthew 5 that they are salt and light.

Salt and light were precious commodities in Jesus' day. Salt was used as we do as a cooking spice, but much more important, it was a preservative. In pre-refrigeration days the value of salt cannot be overestimated. It was used to preserve the tasty perch that came out of the sea of Galilee and virtually all other meats as well. Salt was so highly valued that Roman soldiers received part of their pay in salt. Salt is where our English word "salary" comes from. And the word "salvation." To be called "salt" was high praise to these folks listening to Jesus, most from the wrong side of the tracks, by and large the losers of society. It would be like when commentators refer to an athlete on a hot streak with the phrase, "She's golden."

For Jesus to say to us, his followers, that we are salt, is to say that we are highly valued, and we have an important job, to preserve the integrity of the surrounding society, to restore meaning to a culture that has lost its way. (Some ideas from William Ritter.) To bring the shalom of God to a violent and broken world.

We are salt and light. Think for a moment how Jesus' first-century audience would have understood his words. The typical home in Palestine was very dark with only one circular window perhaps (about) eighteen inches across. Lamps were essential. The typical lamp was nothing more than a bowl of oil with a wick floating in it. It was not easy to light lamps; remember, this was before the age of matches. Therefore, lamps were kept burning continuously. And, when the family was sleeping or was out, a clay bushel container was placed over the lamp so that nothing would catch on fire. But when the family was at home and awake, the lamp was placed high on a stand so that all corners of the room would have some light.

We ourselves are, of course, not the source of Light, that is Jesus. But we are to be bearers of the light, to an often dark and dreary world.

Let me conclude with one of Tony Campolo's stories. Tony is a retired sociology professor and a marvelous preacher.

In the opening of his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, Tony Campolo tells of a trip to Hawaii. When you travel from the east coast to Honolulu, your internal clock runs wild for a day or so, and the first night there, Campolo was both hungry and awake at 3:00 a.m. He went off to find an open restaurant but the only thing open was a greasy spoon diner run by a guy named Harry. So he sat down and ordered a donut.

As he was beginning to eat, a group of prostitutes entered the diner and sat at the counter, trapping Campolo among them. One of the prostitutes mentioned to her friend that the next day was her birthday. Her friend said cynically, "Why are you telling me? Do you want a party and cake; is that what you want?" The first prostitute, named Agnes, said, "Why do you have to be so nasty? I was just telling you. No, I don't expect a cake and a party; I've never have had a birthday cake in my life!" There was something about this woman that touched Campolo. After they left, he asked Harry if these girls came in every night. When he found out that they did, Campolo and Harry decided to give Agnes a party. Harry did the cake, Campolo did the decorations and Harry's wife got the word out.

The next morning at 3:15 there were crepe-paper decorations, a huge birthday cake and about thirty prostitutes and street people in the diner. When Agnes walked in, everybody yelled "Surprise" and they sang happy birthday. Agnes almost collapsed, and she began to cry uncontrollably. She was at her very first birthday party, and the party was for her! She didn't even want to cut the cake; she took it back to her apartment so she could look at it for a couple of days.

After Agnes left to take her cake home, something just prompted Campolo to say, "What do you say; let's have a prayer for Agnes." It just seemed like the thing to do at the time. After the prayer, Harry said, "Hey, you didn't tell us you were a preacher. Why kind of church do you belong to anyway?" In one of those flashes of inspiration where you say exactly the right thing at the right time, Campolo answered, "I belong to a church that throws parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning!" But it was Harry who told the punch line to this story; he said, "No you don't. There are no churches like that. If there was, I'd join. Yessir, I'd join a church like that."

Amen!