

The Great Commandment Vision
1 Samuel 3.1-10; Matthew 22.34-40

Jesus said, “You shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

For the past six months, I’ve joined our parish leaders in a visioning process to discern together God’s direction for our church. These words of Jesus—words that we pray every Sunday—became the refrain of our discussions. We didn’t begin with this theme, yet this is where God led us—to center all our efforts in Christ’s call and command of love. This is our prayer for Apostles: that we would acquire the heart of Christ, a heart aflame with love for God and aflame with love for our neighbor. That is our prayer for each person. That is our prayer for families. That is our living prayer as we serve our neighborhood.

Last week, I shared the background of our visioning process. If you were unable to be here, you may find it helpful to hear last week’s message online when I shared how God led us these past six months in prayer and discernment. But to summarize last week’s emphasis, I sensed God calling us to a season of intentional listening, to follow St. Benedict’s counsel to “listen with the ear of [our] hearts.”

Through prayer, discussion, waiting, and searching, God led us to pursue three priorities to answer this call to love God and love our neighbor. We believe God is calling us: to become a mother church, to deepen our spiritual formation for all ages, and to serve our neighborhood.

Today I will unpack these three priorities, but we’ll meditate on the Great Commandment calling for the next several weeks. Regarding the ingredients of this vision, there’s more thoughts and details beyond what I can share today, and I will be happy to share more details if you’d like to hear more. But for today’s purposes, I want to **connect** these priorities back to the Great Commandment, share **why** these priorities matter and **where** I sense God leading us to go in these three areas.

Let’s begin with the calling to **become a mother church**. What *is* a mother church to begin with? A mother church is an active congregation at a central location that understands her responsibility for ministry in a wider region. A mother church makes it possible for daughter churches to be born.

In the wave of new Anglican church plants in America in the early 2000s, we were one of the first Anglican churches planted in East Tennessee. By the grace of God, we were able to celebrate our 10th anniversary just two weeks ago. With that history comes responsibility, not only for ministry in this location, but for parish ministry beyond 1540 Robinson Rd.

God named us Apostles for a reason—that we would fulfill our calling to be an equipping and sending church. We have the opportunity to become a mother church by commissioning a daughter church for new ministry in this region.

Why do we believe in the importance of church planting? Because we believe sacramental communities of love change lives, change families and their communities. I cannot tell you the number of people over these ten years who have said to me, “it wasn’t all at once, but God began to heal my heart here.” What brought healing? It was the community of friends, the liturgy, the Eucharist, the ancient roots, most of all, the presence of the Holy Spirit. By the grace of God, we have the gift of a loving community here. Yet the Great Commandment leads us to the Great Commission—the people who love God and love their neighbors will be called and sent to new places, new cities. /

Our church membership is spread across 100 miles, but the greatest concentration of Apostles membership outside of west Knoxville is Blount County. That’s a central reason we’ve discerned a church plant in Blount County. But before we had a growing concentration of Apostles members in Blount County, we had an assistant priest who felt a call to church planting in Maryville.

The first conversations I had with Doug Floyd about Anglican ministry were about a church plant in Maryville before discussing ministry at Apostles. It just happened to be God’s good will to have Doug serve as a priest at Apostles first. Doug and I have been patiently listening with God to this question for nearly four years now. But the most important fact about Doug, Kelly, and this core group is their desire to love Maryville with the love of Christ.

Since March, a core group of individuals and families have been consistently meeting on Sunday evenings with Fr. Doug Floyd to discern God’s calling for a church plant based in Maryville. You may remember us speaking during Lent about this group, named the St. Brendan’s Community. There’s been growing interest in a new Anglican

church in Maryville these past six months, but the greatest question has been, “when will you begin worshiping on Sunday mornings?”

With a gathered community discerning God’s calling in Maryville; with an experienced and beloved priest resident in Blount County; and with God’s continued help and guidance, we will support St. Brendan’s Community to begin Sunday morning services by next January. Please pray for Doug and Kelly, the St. Brendan’s Community, and Maryville as they take the next step of faith to begin a church plant from Apostles. //

Planting daughter churches is central to becoming a mother church, but it is not the *only* way we become a mother church. Mother churches also *equip and train the next generation of leaders for ministry in God’s kingdom*. We have tremendous experience in leadership here, but we have to be mindful of another reality. About half of our members are over the age of 60. We are blessed with intergenerational leadership, we *will* continue to encourage intergenerational leadership, but we need to equip and entrust more leadership among younger members as we prepare for the future.

Can you hear God calling the next generation of leaders like he called Samuel? There are young men *and* women who hear God calling right now. You and I may not know about their call right now. Eli couldn’t hear Samuel’s call in his own ears, because Samuel’s calling was different than Eli’s, a calling for a different time than Eli’s times. But God is calling men and women to lead just like he called Samuel. And Samuel needed Eli’s guidance when the Lord was speaking, for Eli perceived the calling of God was upon Samuel.

God is calling leaders even now, men and women that we may not know even at this moment. Samuel lived through some of the most difficult and dark times in Israel’s history. No matter how secular our age becomes, no matter how much our culture rejects God, the Lord *will* raise up his servant leaders in every generation to be faithful to his Kingdom cause. I want us to be ready to serve and equip the next generation of Samuels in Knoxville. //

As we think about becoming a mother church, I’m reminded of the example of motherhood I’ve witnessed in my family. When my family gathered for holidays and birthdays, I saw a pattern through the generations—mothers and grandmothers made

sure their children were fed before they ate themselves. Mothers cared for the needs of the next generation *first* before addressing their own needs. Moms and grandmothers knew there would be plenty for them to eat, too, but they always attended to their children first.

How can we provide spiritual food, spiritual encouragement, and spiritual opportunity for others before we care for ourselves? That's the essence of loving our neighbor as ourself. It's what mothers do so well. And I pray we'll take on the identity of a mother church and love others faithfully and well.

[Spiritual Formation]

The next priority in our Great Commandment Vision is **to deepen our spiritual formation for all ages**. What is spiritual formation? It is the lifelong journey of acquiring Christlikeness by grace.

We desire to be like Jesus, which means acquiring a heart like his—a heart that is aflame with love of God and aflame with love for his neighbor. What does that lifelong journey into Christlikeness look like?

It means building on the foundation of love. I remember what one parent, Jason Bintz, told me about the impact of baptism on his son. His son was baptized as a baby at Apostles. Years later he walked past the font one day and said to his dad, 'Daddy, this is where I got my name!' The beginning of our lifelong journey into Christlikeness begins when God speaks, "You are my beloved child, I love you." //

Everything we do here is building on the foundation of this essential truth, "You are the beloved child of God." But we need to build upon that foundation of love, to fortify the identity of children, students, men and women that God is love and we are called to love as he has loved us.

Last week, I mentioned that becoming a people of spiritual substance and depth is vitally important given the secular age in which we live. Our culture cannot fulfill our greatest longings for transcendence, mystery, and most of all, love. In a shallow and superficial age, we need witnesses of a love that is deep, abiding, and true—the love of Christ. When our shallow culture delivers people to emptiness, they search for what is real and true and lasting. I believe God is calling us to become living witnesses of his deep and abiding love.

Love awaits us when we read the Scriptures and pray together. Love awaits us when we receive the Eucharist together. Love sends us into the world as ambassadors of the Christ.

How are we going to build upon the foundation of Christ's love? We're going to focus on equipping families and groups to grow spiritually in their homes. We believe in the priesthood of all believers, which means we believe mothers and fathers, husbands and wives are the priests of their homes. We believe single persons have a spiritual priesthood in their homes and among their friend groups.

What happens on Sunday morning at Apostles ought to be a catalyst for growing in Christ throughout the week. To equip you for formation beyond Sundays, we need to have more opportunities for group formation on Sunday mornings outside our worship services. Presently we have one Christian formation class meeting after the 9am service. Beginning September 11th, we'll have additional groups of children, youth, and adults gathering an hour before our informal service. And equally important is this need: these new gatherings can create ways for newcomers of Apostles to connect more widely with our church, too.

Right now our Sunday morning schedule isn't configured for both services to meet for spiritual formation, but that is something that we will need to address within the next 6 months. As we grow as a church, we need more opportunities and places where our two services can interact and grow in Christ together. We are called to be one church, not two. So, we'll be designing our *future* Sunday schedule so that both services and all ages can meet for spiritual formation during the same hour. //

But this I also believe this about spiritual formation. Spiritual formation—growing in Christlikeness—isn't something that happens only at scheduled church gatherings. It happens slowly over time in the ordinary routines of our lives. /

Many of you know my grandfather passed away in January of this year. He lived to be 98, married to my grandmother for over 70 years. Last week, my mom showed me his desktop monthly calendar from the early 1990s. Each day, he recorded the time he awoke (usually 4.30am), the weather conditions of the day, and the events of the day in that small calendar square. He was a builder and woodworker; he loved working the land, too. He recorded his projects for the day, noting the hours worked with his helpers. His most reliable hand was a man named Froggie.

But the day wasn't just work and weather. He sought the heart of Christ in the predawn hours, reading the Scriptures and pursuing a life of prayer. Visits with friends appear on weekdays. Bible studies or prayer groups met about one night a week. Work didn't appear on Sundays, the day filled with church and family instead. He helped his family and neighbors with simple chores. He gathered at table with his family each and every day.

The sum of that kind of life was love for God and love for his neighbor. He built upon the foundation of love in his daily routines, became a man mature in Christ, and continues to inspire the generation that follows him in faith. //

Spiritual formation happens in our intentional gatherings, by practicing spiritual disciplines, but it's also a mystery. Let's seek the heart of Christ in the Scriptures, in prayer, in our vocations, in our homes, and in the way we share life together.

[Serve Our Neighborhood]

In the years ahead, we believe it's a great priority for us to **serve our neighborhood** as well. Jesus' commandment calls us to love the one who is near us, our neighbor. So as we embrace that calling, we are considering ways to serve the neighborhood that is within 1-3 miles of our church.

The great missionary Lesslie Newbigin once described this as a key feature Gospel communities. Newbigin says, "[A Gospel congregation] will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood. It will be the church for the specific place where it live...it is God's embassy in a specific place."¹

What does it mean to love this neighborhood? I think the first response to that question ought to be: what are we already doing to serve this neighborhood? That was a conversation that we explored a few weeks ago when I met with about a dozen Apostles folk to see where God is leading us. The central question we discussed was: how can we collectively serve our neighborhood in places of need for a long time? We cannot meet every need. If we tried to take on dozens of outreach ministries as a whole church, we wouldn't serve very well or for very long.

Instead, we desire a consistent presence in a few places. We are committed to a long-term partnership with Restoration House. We want to welcome our neighbors into

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel In a Pluralist Society*, 229.

the joyful mess that is Messy Church. Instead of meeting on Saturday mornings, we'll be welcoming our neighborhood on Wednesday nights this year to reach a wider group of children and families.

But we're also considering new places to serve our neighborhood. It may be that we have bandwidth and energy to serve in some new places. Could it be that we are called to love and serve a local school like Bearden Middle School, just one mile down Middlebrook Pike? Could it be that we are called to welcome and serve international families in some way? We don't have everything mapped out, but those are the questions we're pursuing as a church. Don't be surprised if God leads us into more tangible acts of service in these places.

[Conclusion]

There's more thoughts to share, but that's plenty vision-talk for one day. But I have one final thought to share before I conclude: I can't do this. Yeah, no kidding, right?! Good Americans might say at this point, 'yes, but together we can do this.' No, we can't, not in our own strength. If we can fulfill these callings and dreams with our strength, our smarts, our money, our talent, then I don't want to begin at all. If we can do any of this *without* God, then this is a profoundly bad vision to pursue. The only reason to pursue this vision is that God *is with us*, calling us, leading us to walk by faith, not by sight. Christ in us is the hope of glory. With Christ and his power working in us, God can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.²

It was about two months ago that the vestry felt confident that God clarifying these three priorities. You know what we've been doing since then? We've been talking about our fears and praying about our fears. The presence of fear doesn't mean lack of faith; it might mean you're being honest that you cannot see an outcome you deeply desire. And when you can't see the outcome, you can't control the outcome. You have only one option: trust. //

Most of you know I did a little rappelling yesterday. Everyone said that getting over the edge would be the toughest part and the actual descent would be the easy part. For me, getting over the edge was the easiest part, but my fears didn't go away once I got going like everybody said. That first half of the descent wasn't easy.

² Ephesians 3.20-21

But around the midway point, I still wasn't totally at ease and then I hear this group of voices shouting, 'The Lord be with you!' And suspended about 100 feet in the air, I yelled 'And with thy spirit!'

It made me laugh and loosened me up. It was shot in the arm I needed at just the right time. It was like I could hear the Mission Impossible Theme cueing up in my mind. After that moment it was a lot more fun, especially when I reached the ground! /

You never when or how inspiration will show up. You don't know where provision will come from. But it comes, often when we need it the most.

We are trusting a God who has shown time and again these past 10 years that He is faithful. He inspires, he provides, he fulfills his promises. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Faithful is He who calls you, who also will do it." If we are following God's vision for us, then this is God must fulfill *his* work.

You know what my favorite part of our Great Commandment prayer at the beginning of the service is? 'Lord, have mercy upon us; Christ, have mercy upon us; Lord, have mercy upon us.' This vision is as much about learning dependence on God as it is about *serving* God. It's up to God to fulfill his vision, not us. //

As we embark on this new vision for ministry, it's important to know we aren't in a hurry. Yes, we'll have some new offerings in the coming months, but most of what I've shared with you cannot be accomplished in year, or two, or three. It may take 3-5 years or more to live into these callings and see how these priorities will bear fruit.

And the truth about vision is that God may reveal new things for us to do that are hidden from all of us now. At various stages, we'll have to examine this vision and confirm that God is still leading us in these ways. We'll have to commit and recommit ourselves to these priorities.

But this much is clear regardless of where we are: we are called to be a Gospel church. The Gospel is all about the love of God—becoming lovers of God ourselves, loving our neighbors as Christ has loved us. We don't know where this road will lead, but we aren't called to know the full path of the journey. We're called to begin. And that is what we'll do next. We'll begin following the Lord's leading as he beckons us to serve Him in this time, in this place, for the life of the world he loves. May it be to the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.