Sunday, November 11, 1990
ENDANGERED CHARACTER QUALITIES (No. 4 in a Series: Vision)
Matthew 4:18-22

Vision is one of today's most endangered character qualities. It has been said that "without a vision, the people perish." Other endangered character qualities which I've discussed in previous sermons in this series are integrity, courage, and discipline.

What do I mean by "vision" as a character quality? Here's a story you might have heard before, but I think it helps us understand the concept of vision. Two prisoners were in the same cell, which had only one small window near the top of the wall. As they looked out the window each night, one saw only bars while the other saw stars. One saw the obvious — the iron reminders of their present condition. What he saw led him to have no hope. He was discouraged and continually filled with bitterness and despair. One saw bars, and the other saw stars. The other man saw the possibilities beyond the obvious, and a new hope sprang up inside of him. He began to think of the possibility of starting over, the possibility of a second chance. One saw bars; the other saw stars.

The other day, I was talking with someone who is always searching for new talent in his enterprise, and he was bemoaning the fact that he was having trouble finding people who had the character quality of "vision." He said to me that there are plenty of "nuts and bolts" people coming into the marketplace today, people who will do exactly what they're told to do, exactly the way they are told to do it, no more and no less. But he said there are precious few "idea" people, people with imagination who are always looking beyond the obvious, who see new possibilities — people with vision.

Every now and then, I get a phone call from a Pastoral Search Committee wanting to know if I can suggest a possible candidate or two for the position of Senior Minister in their congregation. Such callers always make it very clear to me that they are looking for someone who will do more than preserve the status quo. They usually say, "We are looking for a minister with a vision who will lead us. We want someone with new ideas and who will help us to question our basic assumptions."

It's not easy to be a person with vision. It's much simpler to go with the flow and only do what's expected of you. It takes courage and imagination to break out of conventional thought patterns, to widen your horizons. So many people are in the ruts of life. It takes courage to risk failure with a new idea or a different approach. It's not easy to be a visionary. Some people choose safety and security instead.

In this sermon about vision as an endangered character quality, I want first to describe further what vision is, then to show that Jesus was truly a person of vision, and finally, to give some direction and suggestions as to how each one of us can become individuals with vision. When we do, our lives take on an added zest, excitement, and joy.

First, to understand the character quality of vision better, let me contrast people who have little or no vision with those who have vision.

People who lack vision are those who make swift, sweeping passes over a proposed idea, scanning it with a sharp, negative eye, looking only for the distasteful aspects. They are always looking for reasons why something won't work instead of visualizing ways in which it could

work. They are people who impetuously react to any positive suggestion with a sweeping, unstudied, irresponsible assortment of reasons why it can't be done, why it is a bad idea, or (and this is usually their clinching argument) how much it will cost!

People without vision are those who create artificial boundaries to avoid larger dimensions of responsibility. It is comforting for them to say, "That is beyond my control," or "That is out of my hands." Until we have the courage to push against our boundaries, we will feel powerless and victimized by our circumstances. People without vision never see the larger picture, only the smaller one.

People who lack vision are poor leaders. Their attitude produces doubt, stimulates fear, and generates a climate of pessimism and fatigue. They are worry creators and confidence squelchers. They are afraid to move beyond the status quo.

People without vision see bars rather than stars. Each one of us makes the choice every single day, in many different ways, whether we are seeing bars or stars.

People with vision, on the other hand, are those who see problems as opportunities. Instead of creating artificial boundaries, they are continually passing through boundaries. They are always seeing new possibilities.

People with vision are open to new ideas and new ways of doing things. They look beyond the obvious. They are creatively dissatisfied with the current state of affairs. A person with vision generates energy and excitement in an organization.

People with vision would rather attempt to do something great and fail than attempt to do nothing and succeed.

People who possess vision are dreamers — they are always dreaming of a better world and are willing to try to make it so. And you know what? God has put within each one of us, from the moment of our birth, the capacity to be a dreamer — the possibility of being a person with vision. God has given each one of us the capability of seeing stars rather than bars. People with vision see possible solutions to the everyday problems of life. People with vision are solution-centered people, not problem-centered people.

Here are seven questions that will help you discover whether or not you are a person with vision or one who lacks vision.

Do you tend to look for reasons why something can't be done instead of searching for ways in which it can be done?

Do you tend to resist new ideas and prefer to do things the way you've always done them?

Do you begin to move ahead only when you have every single fact?

Do you have a tendency to demand a guarantee of success before you begin?

Do you imagine the opposition you will encounter without imagining the support you might expect?

Do you ever turn down an idea simply because you don't like it, because your mind is already made up, or because you've made other plans?

Do you believe that human nature can't really be altered, that an individual's life cannot be changed?

If you have answered "yes" to most of these questions, then the chances are very good that vision is an endangered character quality in your life.

What can we learn from Jesus about vision?

I believe that Jesus was a visionary of the highest order. He was always looking beyond the present boundaries. Over and over again, he said, "You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you," and then he would give a new interpretation, a new understanding of an old tradition. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" But in his teaching, he said, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Jesus gave the people of his time, and us, a new vision of what God is and how God loves the world and us. Many people of his time were always trying to limit God's love to their group. And that happens today too. However, according to the vision of Jesus, God's love knows no boundaries. Jesus gave a new vision of what life is all about. He said, for example, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly." God is a God of blessing. Jesus was a visionary in that he experienced new possibilities with God. He knew and taught that with us, some things are not possible, but with God, all things are possible. Jesus said, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

Jesus was also a true visionary in that he saw possibilities in people that others did not see. The same can be true for us. When we have the character quality of vision, we see potential in individuals that others miss. All good teachers have vision. They see hidden potential in students that others miss or dismiss.

There were a number of people in Jesus' time whom others could only see as sinners. Jesus, however, saw them as children of God. He could see beneath the surface of things as he looked at other people's lives. He saw in a man like Peter not only a fisherman but someone who could become a leader in the early church. Thus, Jesus not only called Peter to become one of his followers, but later on, he changed his name from Simon to Peter because he saw in him the kind of person who could become strong as a rock. He saw in Peter a strength and power that others missed.

The same was true for many other women and men who became his earliest followers. He saw possibilities in each of these people that even they did not see in themselves. He gave them a vision of their self-worth and dignity that has its roots in God. Jesus was always seeing beyond the stereotypes and labels that society placed on people and that we place on ourselves. After all, stereotypes and labels are nothing but artificial boundaries that we put around other human beings. Labels, when applied to others, are always limiting. Jesus had the character quality of vision because he was continually going beyond these false borders. Jesus transformed people's lives because of what he was able to see in them and then call forth from them.

Think about how this applies to us and the way we look at other people. If you have the character quality of vision, then you are able to look beyond the obvious in other people. Many of us, however, tend to limit ourselves to seeing only the obvious. “He’s arrogant,” someone will say. And our comment is, “Yes, I’ve noticed that too.” And you both smile agreeably with one another as if you’ve discovered something unusual.

“She’s domineering.” “Isn’t she, though? I’ve noticed that too.” And then we pat ourselves on the back and think, “Aren’t we insightful people? Maybe we ought to be counselors?” “He’s talented.” “She’s selfish.” “He’s stingy.” “He’s greedy.” “She’s prejudiced.” “He’s a radical.” “She’s conservative.” All these are surface comments about others. We are talking about what seems obvious. That doesn’t take much vision. But to see that there’s a child of God beneath the surface, that often takes vision.

Visionary people don’t settle for recognizing the obvious in people or in problems. They know that there’s always more than meets the eye in each human being whom God has created.

You too can be a person with the character quality of vision. It’s a God-given gift to each one of us; however, in too many people, it is dormant and needs to be reawakened.

How then can you reawaken or strengthen the character quality of vision that is already a part of you so that you approach everyday problems and see people in new ways? Here are four simple steps. They come straight from the life of Jesus. This week, take a problem that has got you stuck and go to work on it using these steps.

First of all, always keep in mind that with us, problems can seem unsolvable, but with God, all things are possible. God is bigger and greater than any problem.

Second, talk with others you trust who are “solution-centered” people. To increase the character quality of vision within us, we need always to be talking and learning from others who are people of vision. God frequently works through others.

If you are dealing with a problem, make a short list of three or four possible solutions to the problem, then choose the one you think best and try it. I believe that God works intimately with us in and through such a process. Keep reminding yourself that you need to continue to look beyond the obvious. See stars instead of bars.

Fourth, keep in touch with the presence and power of God in your life. To do this, you need to participate in public worship regularly. Also, during the week, find a quiet place and continue to ask God for wisdom in finding solutions and in helping you see beyond the obvious in the people you live with and the people you meet. God will not do it for you, but God’s help is always ready and waiting.

There’s a mystical ingredient in vision that is intimately connected with God and God’s will for each one of us. People with true vision are God-centered people. Amen.