"A Vision for Mission"
Acts 1:6-9 2:38-47

Keys are an important part of our lives, whether hanging from a key chain, on a rack, or tucked away into purses or pockets. They give us access to homes, buildings, cars, though keyless entry and car ignition by fobs has become a new standard. Through the years I have had some interesting experiences involving keys. At one house I misplaced my key and had to climb in through a bathroom window with some interesting contortions. That is why at my present house I have hidden a key outside. At the first church I pastored, a few times I forgot my church key, but discovered I could pull out a ladder from behind the church, climb up to the roof, pull the ladder up behind me, and put it down into a courtyard that had an open door to the church. At another church I pastored, I forgot my key a time or two, and climbed in through a old window that wouldn't lock properly, trying to make sure the sheriff's car was not going by on the nearby street. When the lock was replaced and I forgot my key another time, I had to go next door to a District Office, swallow my pride, and ask for a key to my own church, a key that had been provided for them as renters. And then there were the times I locked my car keys in the trunk, once necessitating a mechanic trying to tear out whole back seat to gain access because the trunk key was different than the ignition key. I finally hid a spare key on my bumper.

Keys unlock many things in life, and have become a symbol of that which unlocks the rooms, doors, and mysteries of human existence. When Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" and Simon Peter responded, "You are the messiah, the son of the living God," Jesus then said, "Peter, you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even

death will ever be able to overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom." (Matthew 16:19) Peter, as the leader of the first disciples, through faith, was to represent all Christians. Thus all of us as followers of Jesus, have been given the keys of the kingdom, a kingdom which is holy kinship in the spirit of Jesus. But we don't always understand the doors the keys fit, and the rooms they are to open in the church and in the world.

A longstanding church consultant, Kenneth Callahan, once wrote a classic little book entitled *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*. These keys are delineated throughout the NT, but perhaps most vividly in the Book of Acts, which contains the story of the early church. This consultant identified the 12 keys as an envisioned mission, deliberate connection with others, meaningful worship, close fellowship in small groups, solid leadership, good decision making, at least one unique program, accessibility, visibility, adequate land, well kept facilities, and generous giving.

In these moments, let's focus on just the one key, the key of vision, a vision for mission. When Jesus ceased his days as an earthly rabbi located in a particular place, and was revealed as the risen Christ present throughout the heavens and universe, he gave the first disciples a vision for mission. Jesus told them God's Holy Spirit of love would fill them with such power that they would be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This love would bring healing and wholeness, as people turned from their struggles and brokenness to the love of God, a love we know as the Holy Spirit. So the early church began with this vision for mission, given to them by their teacher Jesus.

The story is told of a young man apprenticed to a master artist, a master who produced beautiful stained glass windows. The

apprentice could not seem to approach the master's genius, so he decided to borrow his master's tools thinking the tools were the problem. After several weeks the young man said to his teacher, "I'm not doing any better with your tools than mine." The teacher replied, "So it's not the tools that you need from me, but a vision."

A vision for mission is not something to be given momentarily or from a once a year reflection or solely by a committee. It is to be a basic, enduring glimpse of things that lead to movement, action, and mission. The word "mission" comes from a root word meaning, "something capable of being sent, let go of, thrown." From this root we get such words as "message, missile, promise, commit, transmit."

Those who have studied churches and other organizations tell us that groups typically go through 30 year cycles of health. In smaller churches or groups the cycles take longer. At 5 years, deep relationships and fellowship grow out of a spirit of enthusiasm, though program and structure may still lag. At 10 years, significant program is added to the spirit of enthusiasm. At 15 years, the group is at its prime, with lots of enthusiastic spirit, program, and structure. At 20 years, the enthusiastic spirit begins to wane, and at 25 years, both enthusiasm and program dwindle. At 30 years, the group begins to wane, leaving behind mostly structure and institution, meaning that many churches today spend 97% of their resources on maintaining their present institution. The only thing that can turn back this 30 year cycle is a periodically renewed vision for mission.

According to church consultant Kenneth Callahan, this vision for mission needs to be focused, not just on a general stated purpose, but on one or several core things. Note in the Book of

Acts that the early believers focused on sharing Jesus love by studying with the apostles, fellowshipping and praying with each other, healing and sharing possessions with each other. I once had a mentor, a Presbyterian minister named Robert Hudnut, who expressed this vision as being the love of Jesus in the world, by studying or thinking Jesus, by sharing or feeling Jesus, and by serving or acting Jesus.

Many years ago, more than 40, the Church of the Brethren denomination hired an advertising group to help them come up with a vision for mission statement, a statement that turned out to be so incisive that it is still on our church signs, materials, and bulletins today. Church consultant Lyle Schaller called it the most concise and focused statement for a church that he had ever come across, with its words, "Continuing the work of Jesus, peacefully, simply, together." If we would interpret the statement, we could say the "work of Jesus" is witnessing to and living out a Holy Spirit of love. This is something we are to do "continually," moment by moment, in our everyday acts. "Peacefully" means being at peace with God, self, and others. "Simply" implies making peace with the world through gentle living. And "together" suggests taking everything and everyone else in the world into consideration, seeing all as one community. We here at West Richmond have expanded this vision for mission a little, saying, "Seeking to be God's voice and hands of love, we continue the work of Jesus peacefully, simply together."

Above an old church in Sussex, England, are these words dating from 1730. "A vision without a task is but a dream; a task without a vision is drudgery; a vision with a task is the hope of the world." Vision for mission is an essential key to any effective church. Sometimes that vision is fragile, but it must always be there.

The story is told of some Jewish women who survived the horrors of WW II concentration camps. They had to use their fingernails as shovels, their skirts as wheelbarrows, cardboard for shoes as relief from bitter cold. One woman was asked, "How did you survive?" She replied, "I don't know completely, but I do remember one day as we marched to work. I saw a house that had a window flower box. In the box was a tulip blooming. I thought all day long, if I can endure today, maybe on the way home I'll get to see that tulip again!" The vision of one little tulip. Just one little tulip gave hope.

Famed preacher and Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, a man named Thomas Long, tells how he and his wife live in the Chesapeake Bay in rural Maryland. For many years they attended a small church down the lane from their house. On a good Sunday there would be about 20 in worship. The congregation was so few in number that they had no educational program, no youth group, no committees, no choir, only Sunday worship, and a tiny group of saints trying their best to show hospitality and grace to each other and to the rare visitors. The outreach was modest, serving meals at the Salvation Army overnight shelter in town, and gathering socks and bath items for residents.

The church had a long standing and cherished practice of leaving the building open all the time for anyone who wished to come in and pray. When the church's insurance company cracked down and insisted that the church building had to be locked during the week, the congregation had no choice but to comply. So they installed a padlock and put the key under a rock beside the door with the word "key" painted on it. Guess they had read the book *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church.*

Every summer though, the little congregation held its annual Peach Festival, with the women staying up all night to bake gorgeous peach pies and cakes, the men sitting up folding chairs and wooden tables as they churned gallons of fresh peach ice cream, all to be served with peach fritters, a local delicacy of crab cake sandwiches, and a delicious chicken salad made from a recipe handed down through generations. Bushels of ripe peaches were sold, along with items at booths set up by dozens of local artisans.

One year, Tom Long was dishing up ice cream in the cinderblock fellowship hall, about a 100 feet from the wooden sanctuary, separated by the church cemetery. Wooden picnic tables had been placed on the green spaces between the graves. Two vans from the residential center for adults with intellectual disabilities had just arrived, told by the staff that generous servings of ice cream were available. At one point the church's pastor came over to Tom and said, "Come, look." He did, and there sitting in the cemetery at the wooden tables among the tombs, shaded by live oak trees, were a couple dozen folks, quietly eating peach ice cream. They were rich, poor, and very poor; Black, Asian, Hispanic, and white; young and old; men and women; oystermen in bib overalls and women in faded flower print dresses; people able and infirmed; children, the stain of ice cream around their mouths, playing among the gravestones; the living and the dead.

"Do you see what I see?" the pastor asked. "I think I do," Tom said. "Yes, I do." What she saw and Tom saw was a vision of the beloved community, the peaceable kingdom of God breaking through and making itself known. Only to eyes focused by the vision of the gospel was this a revelation. In that moment

they understood the meaning of the visionary Catholic priest and scientist Teilhard de Chardin's words, when he said, "The whole of life lies in the word seeing." The pastor and Tom were "on hand" for that which is always "at hand," knowing that it was by no means "in hand." The vision was a gift, a fleeting glimpse of the holy kinship of God, shown in the hope of a greater feast to come, in which "people would come from east and west, from north and south, and take their places at the banquet in the kingdom of God," as the writer of Luke's gospel puts it. (Luke 3:29) West Richmond has always had a rich history of connecting to this vision, finding ways to share the love of Jesus with others. May we continue to do so, whether few or many. Let us make sure that we keep the love of Jesus, the kindness of Jesus, the forgiveness of Jesus, the mercy of Jesus, the acts of Jesus, at the heart of our vision and mission, bringing holy kinship to all, what has been called the kingdom of God.

CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER (July 13'25)

O God, there is to be a vision to our being in this place, a vision that deepens and strengthens our lives. This vision is to point to a mystery we do not always understand. We have only to feel this mystery to know it is real. It is like a fountain in a dry land, sunshine after days and days of clouds, like the arms of a loved one or a friend after a long journey. Teach us to daily seek the wonderful unknown, in our work, in our play, when we shop, when we eat, wherever we are. Let the joy and serenity of our lives bless those who need holy kinship in you. We breathe prayers for friends who are ill, for those who have had loved ones pass on, for persons who have lost jobs, struggled in school, or experienced brokenness in relationships. Minister to our hurts, embarrassments, struggles, regrets that we might find new purpose and direction in life, even church life. Inspire the young, strengthen our leaders in both the church and our nation with

humility, bring peace amid conflicts, heal our often damaged Mother Earth. Let our community of faith here at West Richmond be a home to the wounded, a beacon of light to neighborhoods near and far, a stable foundation in times of change and uncertainty. May the Holy Spirit of Jesus love and goodwill continue to flow through us. Amen,