The Power of Dreams:  "Living Beyond our Limitations"
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“So, what are you going to do now?” That’s a backwards way to start this message isn’t it? That question usually comes at the end.

If you are writing a legal document, my attorney friends tell me, “Whereas,” is supposed to come before the part that says, “Therefore, be it resolved.”

It’s true in a marriage, too. The outcomes are usually better if there is mutual agreement and discussion before you get to the important decisions. It usually doesn’t work best to begin by saying, “OK baby, here’s the deal.” (You could ask Ann after the service how I know that – but I think maybe you know!)

There’s a theological reason, too. I learned a long time ago that the most important question for a Bible passage is this: “What is God doing in this text?”

Preachers often get confused on this point. Too often, we want to begin with other questions, like “How can I get people motivated in this Church?” Or “How can I nuance the Biblical point here, so I won’t offend anyone?”

But, it’s not just a preacher thing. Our first questions are often “What does this have to do with me?” Or “How will this help me live a better life?” On our worst days, usually not out loud, we ask, “How long is this going to last today?”

In Biblical terms, we forget the instruction from Romans 12:3 not to “…think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think.” 1 It is just not all about us.

I remind myself of that every Sunday morning. At our traditional services, I make the sign of the cross three times every time I go up the stairs to the pulpit area. Once on my forehead, once on my lips, once on my heart, with this ancient prayer: “Christ be in my mind, Christ be on my lips, Christ be in my heart.”

In less formal services like this one, I breathe in and out and pray the prayer. Why do I do that? Why do I pray that prayer? It is an ancient practice, a lost “manual act,” practiced maintained among our Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopal brothers and sisters. So, why do I do it?

1 Romans 12:3  Paraphrased by the author from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
It is a reminder to me that this (hold up Bible) is not my Word but His Word, not my Church but His Church. It is a reminder that I am not the Way He is the way.

Our first question needs to be “What is God doing?”

When our son John was about four, one of the women in the congregation I was serving was from Georgia, and had a wonderful Southern accent. She watched him run down the hall of the Church and said, “That boy is just a mess!” I asked what she meant. She said, “He just looks like he’s up to something!”

Well, God is always up to something, always doing something. That’s Biblical. Too often we just aren’t paying attention, and asking, “What is God doing?”

Our Jewish friends believe that our job as faithful people is one of “Tikkum olam,” joining in what God is doing. It literally means helping God “mend the world.”

In a Biblical sense, to have a full life, we are to apply our energy to God’s agenda. We are to give now, serve now, in the belief that God is always at work, and only in Him will the world one day be whole. That’s “Tikkum olam.”

So let’s open our Bibles to our text to Acts 6:1-7, and see what God is doing.

As you are finding Acts 6, I want to recap briefly where we’ve been as we’ve been finding clues to our vision and dreams for our lives and Old Mission Church.

(I’m serious about you opening those Bibles. You know the number one reason why people don’t get much out of what’s in the Bible? We don’t open them!)

A few weeks ago I shared three things that are part of our DNA at Old Mission.

People love it that they and their children are not lost in the crowd. People matter.

People are hungry for more of us to be engaged in ministry and shaping our future.

People seem to know that we need to go deeper in our spiritual commitment.

I also shared that in a time when the tide of “big box retailers” has turned, people seem to be interested in spirituality that is real more than “plastic” and a church that feels more like a place of faith than a shopping mall.

I also have reminded us that God can be trusted to be at work for good - always! Romans 8:28 “In all things God works for good for those who love him, and are called according to his purpose.”

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2 Information about “Tikkum olam” is from Walter Brueggemann, The Word that Re-describes the World, pp. 96-102.
We also looked at how powerful it was for the early Christians to have faith in God rather than the challenges they faced. Hebrews 11:1 “Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the assurance of things not yet seen.”

We saw how the early Christians, facing opposition, didn’t accept “no” as an answer, they trusted that God would be at work leading them past “no” to “yes.”

OK – everybody have your Bibles open to Acts 6? Good! Let’s go. Acts 6:1: “Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number…”

Let’s just stop there for minute. That’s a good thing, right? We ought not to miss that. God was at work! Things were happening. People were responding. But notice that immediately they began to face some barriers, limitations, or problems. That almost always happens, doesn’t it? As soon as we feel like we are making some progress, we get bogged down in something, or somebody’s upset or anxiety. That’s what was happening here. The rest of verse 1 continues...

“...the Hellenists (Greeks) complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.”

It was a real problem. They were meeting needs, but they had a problem with logistics. The apostles couldn’t handle the traffic. And the new folks complained that the old timers were always in line first. And a scuffle broke out between those attending the 8:30 and the 9:45 service (9:45 and 11:00 service.) OK, I added that last part, but it’s not too far off the mark. Let’s read on, verse 2.

“...And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

We ought not to read that as is the apostles said, “This serving stuff is beneath us.” Clearly that was not the case, if you read Bible - they were all about helping people, healing people. But they couldn’t do everything. They were called to preach and teach, and lead. They needed others to be involved in doing ministry for the Church to prosper. It was a key insight. Still is today. We need Elders like me. And Deacons like Karen and Leslie. We need staff, like Annie and Karen and Gay and others. But God has a ministry for all of us. Look at verse 3 and 4.

“...Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven (members) of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the Word.”

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3 This text and subsequent verses from Acts 6 are from the New Revised Standard Version, Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
There are three things to notice in these two verses. First, notice that those who serve in God’s ministry are to be in good standing and full of “Spirit and wisdom.” Does that mean only the super spiritual should serve? No. If it did, none of us including me would qualify. Instead, it is talking about being active in our faith. Remember that I said in my first few weeks here that God’s desire was for all active Christians to do four things faithfully? Remember what they were? “Worship, Grow spiritually in a class or small group, Serve, and Give.” Like that.

Second the Greek word behind the word “task” in verse 4 is *diakonia* and means ministry, or "one who serves." Not just the office of Deacon, like Karen and Leslie, but the ministry designed for all the people of God, as in Romans 12.

Third, the apostles were called to remember that their responsibility was to teach and preach this Word. If they tried to do everything, and not empower and equip God’s people for ministry, they couldn’t keep the main thing the main thing.

“5 What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.”

There’s something in here that you might not notice right off in the list of names. Don’t get stuck in the fact that at the beginning they were all men. Some Christians get stuck there. They evidently don’t read the whole Bible. Before long there also were women leaders like Lydia, Priscilla, Junia, Phoebe, Chloe and others. No, what is important to notice is that there are both Hebrew and Greek names, old-times and newcomers, Jewish and Gentile Christians. Those who attend at 8:30 and 9:45 (9:45 and 11.) OK, I added that last part again, but you get the point. Young, old; rich, poor; male, female, like that! In the early Church.

“6 They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.” Kind of like being elected at our annual Charge Conference and blessed during the following Sunday’s worship service. And look what happened next!

“7 The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”  

Look at what God did with them, when they involved more people in ministry, when the people said yes to getting more involved, and growing deeper in their faith! God blew off the doors, power-chipped the engine and turbo-charged the future of the Church! OK, that’s a little strong on automotive metaphors!

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But you see what I mean. God was up to something. God was at work as he led them through their logistic problem, their limitations and barriers!

The disciples admitted a hard thing in this passage. They were not gifted and called to do everything. It’s true today! God’s ministry, belongs to us all.

As it says in I Peter 4:11: “Whenever you speak, speak the words of God. Whenever you serve, serve in God’s strength. Let God be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To God be all glory and power forever and ever!”

The early Church continued to grow in leaps and bounds because the leaders were living into their God given gifts and were freed to do what God had placed them on this earth to do. Thanks be to God!

We have only been together a few months, but God is up to something. You might wonder what. I hope you are beginning to notice.

We have had an increase in the number of families and children. We have had an in-rush of Middle School/Junior High students in confirmation, Sunday School and youth. We have had a slight uptick in worship attendance. We are working on a “Big Christmas Worship Sunday” that brings us all together. Small groups are launched. Plan unfolds this week for a restructure of our lay leadership that will ask more of us to become involved in vision and leadership of the Church. A marketing team of guess what – “marketers” – are working on our identity.

And on practical matters? Our Finance Committee reported last week that as of the end of September, we have eliminated our cash deficit, due to people catching up their giving and more than $20K in additional gifts for my “Summer Appeal.” We have a lot of year to go, but that’s pretty good news.

They also approved a plan to completely pay off our building debt that we have been saddled with for twelve years by the end of this December, so you can direct your giving to growing our ministry in the year to come! That’s good news too!

That’s what God has been doing. That’s what He has been up to! How about a little celebration for what God has been doing!

There’s just one question left. “So what are you going to do now?”

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5 I Peter 4:11, paraphrased by author.