

Joel 2:23-32
2 Timothy 4:6-8

“Priming the Pump”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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30th Ordinary

The prophet Joel tells Good News to the Israelites who had been in exile in Babylon: “In those days I will pour out my spirit (says God), and you will see the signs of it in sky and earth.” He’s speaking to a people who had been in captivity for more than a generation, who return home to Jerusalem to rebuild. God is pouring out grace and care on the heads of these folks. God poured down rain, early and late rain for both kinds of crops, the right kind of rain at the right time; grain, wine, oil overflow and those who had thought there would never again be goodness, never be enough, find themselves living in the midst of abundance. The Lord gives abundance to end drought, crops to replace what the locusts have eaten.

It is more than a physical deliverance. God says to them: “My people shall never again be put to shame.” The “pouring out” imagery continues – “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your old shall dream dreams and your young shall see visions.”

This passage from Joel is the Hebrew Scripture that Peter quoted in Acts 2, the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church. “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your old shall dream dreams and your young shall see visions.”

Dreams and Visions...

Take your bulletin and look on the front cover. I know you see this all the time, but let’s look at it again very intentionally today. This is how this congregation has described its vision – long before I came to be among you.

First Presbyterian Church
A Home in the Heart of the City

A Community of the Presbyterian Church (USA) where:

- The Needs of the People Meet the Power of God
- All are Welcomed and Valued
- Children are Cherished
- Strangers Become Friends
- The Gospel Speaks to Heart and Mind
- Worship Lifts the Spirit
- Serving Changes Lives
- A Vibrant People Make a Difference

Last week I promised to say some more about the Leadership Development Retreat that happened this weekend. The Session, Ministry Team Leaders and Staff spend Friday evening and all day Saturday in retreat – Friday evening away and Saturday here at the church – revisiting our vision statement, the *Raising the Roof* strategic plan which you went through fairly recently, and thinking

about how we implement those. We considered some next steps for the future, and I think made stronger our relationships as a leadership team. We brought in a facilitator – Rev. Pam Driesell of Athens, GA, and she was great fun and a great leader.

One of the things we realized was that the Holy Spirit surely *has* been poured out on this church, and that we have been given dreams and visions. When you see that in your elected leadership, you know it is going to benefit the whole congregation. But sometimes you have to prime that pump, to get water out of it, and that’s what the weekend was about.

After I had decided to use that metaphor for the sermon – “priming the pump” – I realized our younger members may not know about that. Any pumps they’ve seen these days are self-priming! So, for their edification: the old hand pumps for water wells had a lever that moved up and down, creating a suction that brought water to the surface. When they weren’t in use there would be air in the pipe, and you could not create the vacuum to get water to travel up the pipe. If the leather washer got dry, it would shrink and let air in the pipe. So you had to make sure the washer was wet, and then pour water into the pump, which was called priming. Then you would have the necessary suction to pump water. But you had to put water *in* it to get water *out*.

When I was young there was an old song by Billy Edd Wheeler called “*Desert Pete*”, about a fellow traveling across a blistering desert who came upon a water pump in a cactus patch. At the base of the pump was a bitters jar with water in it, and a baking soda can with a note that said:

“There’s just enough to prime it with, so don’t you go drinkin’ it first.
Just pour it in an pump like mad, and buddy you’ll quench your thirst.
You’ve got to prime the pump, you must have faith and believe.
You’ve got to give of yourself, ‘fore you’re worthy to receive.
Drink all the water you can hold, wash your face to your feet.
Leave the bottle full for others. Thank you kindly, Desert Pete.”

Of course he wanted to drink the bottle, but he didn’t, used it for priming, and got water. And it ends: “I thanked the Lord, and I thanked the pump, and I thanked old Desert Pete.”

This retreat was a sort of pump priming, and I think there will be water – and spirit – for all of us as a result. One of the first things we did was celebrate and reclaim the ethos, the history of this great church. Who we have been becomes a tremendous resource for who we will become. This is a congregation that is not afraid of much. This church came out of the Civil Rights movement maybe not on the front lines exactly, but having figured out how to do the right thing and be the church. When the city declined and all looked bleak, the perseverance of the saints kept this church in ministry on this corner – declining all invitations from well-meaning sister congregations to join them in the suburbs. And now that the city is coming back, here we are in the right place. Against all odds, when many said it couldn’t be done, this church started First Light shelter. When many said it couldn’t be done, started the Child Development Center. And so on. Who we have *been* is a clue to who we may *become*.

We also realized that the present crossroads is not so easy to define. When we have beaten the odds before, we rose to an external challenge that presented itself tangibly - Civil Rights, Homelessness,

Workers in the City, Orphaned Adults, etc. We know how to do that. “We’re all about that,” as one of our Elders said. Now we are working on our congregational identity and future, though, and we may have an even greater challenge looking internally and having to deal with our own self. It is time to put legs and strength under us for the next chapter of our corporate life, and the *Raising the Roof* report which this church adopted last year calls us to make that transition from a pastoral sized congregation to a program sized congregation. That will be a good thing, and it will give us more clout for telling the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world that needs it, for doing justice in a world that has not enough of that.

Here are just a few things your Elders and team Leaders saw as challenges or weaknesses:

- Our financial situation is dicey.
- Communication within the church needs to improve.
- Our building – which is a strength and asset – is aged and high maintenance.
- Times of transition are scary for some of our folks.
- We are scattered geographically.
- A significant number of our members are aging.
- We live in a world where societal norms have changed, a world that doesn’t share our values and thinks us not relevant, where drugs, sex and materialism seem to reign, and everything is for sale.
- We want to be open, yet due to location the church has to be locked much of the time.
- We need ways to bond more closely to each other and to God.

(Pam reminded us: “It’s not being a small church we love... it is intimacy, care and closeness. There are ways to maintain that while we grow.”)

Here are just a few of the things your Elders and Team Leaders saw as our strengths:

- We have a mission orientation and are fairly fearless about that.
- There are no gatekeepers here, and little church politics.
- We are inclusive and diverse, and there’s a place for everyone.
- We have intellectual curiosity, deep spirituality, and a sense of humor.
- Our church members are like no others, are here on purpose, passing other places to be here.
- We do worship well, have a growing number of young children, room to grow.
- We have the staff in place to grow into our next incarnation.
- One said something like: “We have cleared the debris from the flowing river of the Holy Spirit.”

Here are a few of the opportunities they talked about:

- The influx of people back into the city, and the growth of UAB.
- An opportunity to become a more integral part of that community.
- New members are bringing us new skills, ideas and their own vision.
- We can build friendships and connect in a variety of different settings.
- We can fill a void in the spiritual landscape.
- We can be an antidote to despair.

- We can be a seed of goodness in the redevelopment of Birmingham.

Toward the end of the Retreat, we tried to prioritize. We can't do all at once everything that would be good to do. But we did focus in on three areas which, in every Ministry Team and grouping within which we work we will try to keep as mission targets.

One of those is the building of community and relationships, which may include being together in small groups for faith formation, spiritual development, mission activity, who knows what. That is fostering of relationships, encouraging openness and fellowship together. Another is to improve our communications and the sharing of information, especially using newer technologies to do that. Another is to increase our visible presence in the downtown community – with such ideas proffered as using the building for more community events, starting a monthly music venue in the fellowship hall, or forming an Alley Task Force to somehow engage the reality that hundreds upon hundreds of people walk down our alley from the parking deck every week. Surely that is some sort of ministry opportunity (we just don't know what, yet.) So whatever ministries we are doing over the next year and a half, we are going to try to see that those three priorities are a part of it.

I tell you all this because we wanted to find ways to keep the whole congregation in some ways in relationship to what was developed on the Retreat. It's a way to draw the circle wider. And since the sermons are accessible on the internet, you can go to the congregational website and download today's message and have those (partial) lists of things I talked about.

This was important to do, because those among you, who are your *own*, who you have chosen to lead, are themselves a resource for the common life of all of us. In the passage from 2 Timothy, Paul is realizing his life is nearing his end, and writes to his protégé who is pastor in Ephesus. He says, "I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith." While in the Joel passage we read about God's Spirit being poured out in the metaphor of rain, here we see that God's grace has been poured onto the church through the life of the Apostle. And, as my friend Houston Hodges wrote on this text, Paul is "good to the last drop."

Sometimes we get tired, even exhausted both physically and spiritually. But in some ways that is life. We can be poured out for something important, or we can be poured out for something trivial. We have those choices. Paul himself is the text Timothy reads. Just as we, in planning for the future, read those who left this church here for us, who shaped it and formed it, who gave it the fearless character, sense of mission, passion for justice – those very same thing that drew many of us here. We found Jesus Christ here, because those who preceded us, who cared about this community of people and this place, poured out their lives to water this ground. They primed the pump. We read those who left this for us here, not just to say what *was*, but so we can know what God can *do*... what God *will* do, if we choose to believe it and follow.

Praise be to God.