

All Saints Presbyterian – Mission, Strategy, and Vision by Tim Frickenschmidt, 8/5/12

In order to understand who All Saints is as a church and what our calling is in Austin and the world, three terms must be defined – mission, strategy, vision. Mission is what we strive by God’s grace to be and do everyday, as a community, as individuals, and as families; mission is oriented in the present. Strategies are the practical decisions and commitments by which our mission is accomplished; they are past-oriented because they are the means or avenues we have committed ourselves to in order to achieve our purpose in the present. Vision is future-oriented and imaginary; it is a picture, an imaginary description of what our purpose and strategies will eventually become. Vision is the long-term goal on the horizon we are moving and working toward.

This paper is an apologetic of sorts, outlining and arguing for some basic concepts behind a renewed articulation of All Saints’ mission as a church. Subsequent papers will outline the contours of a comprehensive church vision and the strategies necessary to take us there.

All organizations have a mission to accomplish or purpose for why they exist; it may be implicit and unstated (as it has generally been at All Saints) or it may be clearly defined, but a common mission is at the center of any and all organizations in their daily life and work, the church included and especially. So what is All Saints’ mission? How do we conceive of and articulate what we are striving everyday to be and do?

I think the answer to this notoriously complicated and slippery question of mission has been embedded within the Eucharist portion of our worship liturgy, spoken and prayed weekly by us for years. The very last prayer we offer prior to the elements being served is: “Send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.” That is the final and climatic prayer of not only the Communion portion of our service, but also of our service as a whole. It is also, I believe, our mission as a church – ***To Live as the Body of Christ in Austin for the World.***

God has redeemed his church in Christ and by the Spirit to live; this is our mission – to live a particular and unique life where God has planted us corporately and individually. “Life” is one the great and foundational themes of Bible. “In the beginning God created...” (Gen 1:1) What did He create? Life. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” (John 1:1-4) Jesus was born, lived, died, rose, and ascended for more than just intellectual assent to his teachings or for his followers to have satisfying relationships with one another or for them to perform acts of mercy and justice.

Jesus came to impart life – a life of faith, hope, and love in an intimate relationship with Him of such mysterious depth that the Apostle Paul describes it as analogous to the relationship between a person's head and the rest of his or her body. This means that to be a Christian and to be the Church is to share one life with God.

Consider one of Paul's summary statements about the Christian faith: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me." (Gal. 2:20) Elsewhere he also writes: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Rom. 5:1,5) The Church's primary mission is simple: to live - to live out Jesus' life and love for God, others, and this world where and with whom we find ourselves. God redeems us, imparts the new life of His Spirit to us, and places in His world for the blessing and service of others and the glory and honor God.

So how do we do this? How do we live as Christ's Body in this world? What does it mean to live as people in union with Jesus and one another, as people sharing the same life? What does life in Christ and for Christ look like? Very briefly, we live as the Body of Christ on a tri-fold path: through worship, spiritual formation, and service. If our calling as the church is life, then these are the three means by which life is found, embraced, fostered, and employed.

First, in order to live as the body of Christ in Austin for the world, we gather together with one another to **worship** the Triune God each week. Our life in Christ as his people begins in corporate worship and is renewed during this time Sunday after Sunday, season after season, year after year. Worship is the most vital part of the Christian life – not the only part to be sure, but the most important part. In worship we listen to God's word read and preached, we receive the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and we pray in response to that which we hear and receive through liturgy and song. We do this because these are God's means of administering his redeeming grace to us – Word, Sacraments, and prayer. Through these means God gives new spiritual life to people, creating and renewing faith in the hearts of worshipping participants, and then he sends those same worshippers out into his world to serve others in their daily lives as his people. In order to be sent out to live in the world as Christ's church we have to come together in worship as Christ's church – without the coming in there is no going out; without the gathering together for worship there can be no sending out for formation and service. Our life as Christians begins in corporate worship.

Secondly, we live as the Body of Christ through **spiritual formation**. Again, the Apostle Paul: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slave you want to be once more... my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed

in you!" (Gal 4:8-10, 19) What does it mean to have Christ "formed" in us? It means, at least, that our individual interior lives and characters, as well our relationships and common corporate character, are "conformed to the image of Jesus" (Rom 8:29). It means that from the inside out – from our hearts to our actions, and our thoughts to our speech, and our emotions to our behavior – we resemble Jesus, so much so that our lives smell like him! Seriously? Yes! Paul also writes: "We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing..." (2nd Cor 2:15)

The question is "How?" How do we as followers of Jesus become conformed to Christ in our spiritual lives so much so that we embrace the same obedience to God the Father in which He lived while on earth? Dallas Willard attempts to answer this question in an essay entitled, "Spiritual Formation in Christ, A Perspective On What It Is and How It Might Be Done." He writes,

"The spiritual side of the human being, Christian and non-Christian alike, develops into the reality which it becomes, for good or ill. Everyone receives spiritual formation, just as everyone gets an education. The only question is whether it is a good one or a bad one. We need to take a conscious, intentional hand in the developmental process... We have counted on preaching, teaching, and knowledge or information to form faith in the hearer, and have counted on faith to form the inner life and outward behavior of the Christian. But for whatever reason, this strategy has not turned out well. The result is that we have multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to life, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less with others."

Does this sound familiar? Are Willard's words a description of your spiritual journey? Do they summarize your story? They do for many. So what are we to do? Doing, or better yet, *practicing* is a major part of the answer. Christian spiritual formation can be conceived of as the re-shaping of the inner life – the spiritual side of our humanity – by the Holy Spirit through God's means of administering His grace, especially the Word of God, the Sacraments of the Church, and prayer. And the Church for centuries has recognized the role of certain practices, or spiritual disciplines, that help massage the grace of God received in worship into the hearts of believers during their daily lives between Sundays. These practices center upon two of the three primary means of grace: Scripture and prayer. Christian disciplines, such as meditating on Scripture, confession, prayer, fellowship, sabbath, fasting, solitude, silence, and the like are nothing more than tools to help people listen to God speak to them from the Scriptures and then lead them in answering God as personally and honestly as they can in lives of prayer.

Two errors must be avoided as we think about Christian spiritual formation. First, it is not a "works-righteous" attempt to earn God's favor; our formation is not meritorious. Again, Dallas Willard:

“We must stop using the fact that we cannot *earn* grace (whether for justification or for sanctification) as an excuse for not energetically seeking to *receive* grace. Having been found by God, we then become seekers of ever fuller life in him. Grace is opposed to earning, but not to effort. The realities of Christian spiritual formation are that we will not be transformed “into his likeness” by more information, or by infusion, inspiration, or ministrations alone. Though all of these have an important place, they never suffice, and reliance upon them alone explains the now common failure of committed Christians to rise much above a certain level of decency.”

Also, Christian spiritual formation is not individualistic. God is our Father; Jesus is our Elder Brother; the Holy Spirit lives in all believers as the guarantee of our common inheritance as members of God’s family. We are not alone in our discipleship to Christ. God places us in a church, in friendships, in a marriage, in a family so that we will have others to walk with in the Christian pilgrimage. We need others to read the scriptures with and help us understand and apply them; we need others to confess our sins to and encourage us onto to fuller obedience to God; we need the wisdom of others, who will gaze into our lives and counsel us how to faithfully live out our common life in the particular callings we have been given. This is a major reason why All Saints has had, and will maintain, an emphasis upon participation in small groups that meet regularly for study, discussion, and prayer. The formation of our individual interior lives only happens in and through a community committed to sharing the life and practice of the Christian faith together.

Thirdly, we live as the Body of Christ through *service*. Service, or self-giving, is probably the “avenue” that needs the least description (which is good, because it’s the third), because it is so plainly and regularly spoken of in the Scriptures. For example, when James and John ask Jesus to put them in charge of all of the people in his kingdom, second in command behind only him, Jesus responds: “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be a slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk 10:42-45) James and John conceived of Christianity as *for* them, of discipleship as consumerism, of Jesus and the Church as existing to make them happy and great. They come to Jesus attempting to force him into a “your-life-poured-out-for-me” mold, and he refuses, insisting that he came to give his life away, to pour it out for others and their redemption. Why? Because Jesus is the revelation of God in the flesh and, as John learned and later taught, “God is love.” (1st Jn 4:8) What is central to God’s character is self-giving, self-donation, self-sacrifice - love, in other words. The God of the Bible is first and foremost a God who gives and serves; he is a God of grace. And the people who have come to know him, experienced his grace, and share in the fellowship of his Triune life and love will be a giving and serving people, a people of grace.

This is the reality behind Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats in Mt 25, where Jesus speaks about his followers feeding him, giving him a drink, welcoming him as a stranger, clothing him, and visiting him when he was sick and in prison. Jesus followers in the parable are confused and ask when they did these acts of service to him. And he tells them, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Mt 25:40) The Apostle Paul speaks similarly when he issues the command "Serve the Lord" in the context of loving others with a "brotherly affection" by giving money, showing hospitality, and offering enemies food and drink. (Rom 12:9-21)

Though this aspect of living in Christ probably needs the least description, it typically needs the most exhortation. Christian Smith, in his book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, has described the dominant view of God in our culture as "moralistic, therapeutic deism." The "therapeutic" aspect of that description arises from the rampant social assumption that the goal of life is not self-denial, sacrifice, or service, but to be happy and successful so that people may feel good about themselves. According to Smith God's job description in the minds of many of us is to restore our lost self-esteem, while we consume the offerings of others.

But Jesus desires more from his Church; he desires life for us. This, however, requires that we "deny (ourselves) and take up (our) cross daily and follow (Christ). For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for (Jesus') sake will save it." (Lk 9:23-24) Christ is calling us to serve him in word and deed, inside the church and outside the church, locally in Austin and internationally around the world, through giving money and through giving labor, in our individual vocations and in corporate initiatives, by making food and by making art, and more. By God's grace may we answer his call. And may we begin with those near to us: our neighbors and neighborhoods, with our co-workers and our classmates. May All Saints live as salt and light in Austin, as a city within a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden.

