

Pentecost 3, 6.13.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

“Christ’s love urges us on”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Good morning. “*For we walk by faith, not by sight*” is one of Paul’s most visionary phrases. The gift of eyesight is a profound aspect of our humanity, so it may seem a bit strange to say that walking has very little to do with sight. But Paul isn’t simply talking about being able to see; Paul is really writing about “insight” into, and even “vision” for the human journey.

“*For we walk by faith, not by sight,*” is a profound description of the Christian life and journey. A vision for living has a lot more to do with our faith than simply seeing with our eyes. To say it another way, we finally begin “to see” – to see what is possible, to see what is valuable, to see what is true – only when we walk by faith. When we prayerfully follow Jesus, seeking to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit, only then, can we make sense of and understand the present moment, and envision the future. Faith is the lens through which we see the present and envision future possibility. With the words, “*For we walk by faith not by sight,*” Paul is expressing hope and certainty that God is present in this world and in our lives.

As human beings we have been given eyes to see and observe, minds to think and problem solve. Rationality and modern science have deepened our understanding of the natural world and our identity as human beings. However, we also know that rational observation is limited by our perspective, culture, language and ideologies. As human beings we also possess, feeling, emotion, imagination, creativity, and yes, faith. These are also aspects of our personhood that are always in conversation with our rationality.

When Paul says, “*We walk by faith, not by sight,*” he is saying that faith is another way of knowing. Faith is another way of knowing about ourselves and the world. Faith is how we understand *why* we are alive and *who* we might become as human beings. For Paul, faith is about *our identity* as human beings; faith allows us to envision ourselves as new creations in Christ. Through faith we envision our shared humanity with all nations as members of God’s family.

Most of us have read certain passages of the Bible so many times that we not only have them memorized, we also may forget that early Christians like Paul, were also struggling to describe the new thing that Christ was doing in their lives. In Christ, they realized the past was gone, and so they strained ahead following Jesus into the future.

This was certainly the case with Paul, who had violently persecuted Christ and the church. Yet Paul was encountered by the risen Jesus on that road to Damascus, and changed from a person who persecuted Jesus and the church into a new person – a new creation – who built up the church. Paul even temporarily lost his eyesight, and when he regained it, he now “saw” in a new way through faith. Saul became Paul, a new creation in Christ.

So when Paul writes, “*For we walk by faith not by sight,*” he is witnessing to his own journey from death to life, from sin to grace, from hatred to faith, from a limited view of the world, to an unlimited vision for Christ and his body the church.

Unlike us, early Christians like Paul did not yet have a copy of the New Testament. However, the good news was written upon their hearts, and they walked by faith, not by sight. Paul is describing faith as the power that will lead, encourage and urge us on in mission. In Christ Jesus, we too have access to the same faith that that Paul is describing.

To walk by faith, therefore, means expecting see Christ’s new creation and possibility in the present moment. Faith is not simply a spiritualized or private possession; rather, faith is the engine of mission; it is the vision to follow Jesus wherever he leads his church. *We walk by faith* – this is our visionary journey as Christ’s body, St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.

“*For we walk by faith not by sight*” is, therefore, a description of the Christian journey that is always moving forward, never backwards. Just as human life moves forward, so then our faith propels us forward to meet the needs of our day and the times in which we live. Paul writes, “*For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all... so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*” Because Christ lives, we live, and our lives now bear the marks of Christ for all people. This is very countercultural in a world that constantly tells us to live for ourselves – with an attitude of “my way or the highway.”

Faith is given to us for a purpose, which is to become like that mustard seed Jesus described in today’s gospel. Jesus asked, “*With what can we compare the kingdom of God?*” What does the reign of God’s kingdom look like? Jesus says, “*It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.*”

God’s kingdom seems puny and powerless in the world. The mighty, the powerful, the loud and

aggressive battle their way to top. Yet the Messiah, Jesus, emptied himself of all power and authority becoming weak, becoming a servant. As Jesus reveals the kingdom of God, so too, the church reveals God's kingdom. The kingdom that Jesus describes is a place of refuge, safety and sanctuary. It is a place of growth, renewal and new creation. The kingdom is also within you through faith, and through faith, the kingdom grows outward into a new creation, the church.

As a church we are the branches of that tiny mustard seed, growing, bearing good fruit, and offering a place of shelter and hope for everyone who comes into this building. St. Mark's is a church that reaches outward with compassion, like branches, so that the world might know shelter, hope and love.

Like that mustard seed, the church is always growing and changing, responding to human need in the midst of the world. Therefore, Jesus speaks about planting, growth and harvest in today's gospel. As the church we plant the seed of God's kingdom, anticipating a harvest. We walk by faith planning seeds of grace and hope knowing that in Christ there will always be a new creation.

St. Mark's is in its 162nd year of God giving us vision for mission. Our challenge is, "Are we anticipating the new creation that Jesus is working in us?" Are we anticipating a new harvest? Is our faith forward looking? The love of Christ urges us on, propelling us forward with joy into God's future.

Like everyone, I long to get "the new normal." I resist saying, "back to normal." I long to get the new place where the Spirit is leading us. I long to walk in the direction of Jesus and his kingdom. We walk by faith not by sight, and faith is the lens through which we see and understand the present and through which we envision the future possibility of God's kingdom at St. Mark's.

There is no going back to February 2020. We have been through too much. We have experienced hardship and isolation, we have been in exile; and we have experienced division and disunity of our own making. Yet at St. Mark's we have grown in faith and service to Jesus and the world.

Fifteen months ago, we quickly developed an online service with the help and faithful leadership of many members of St. Mark's church family. This will continue into the new normal. We have offered excellence in music and worship even when we could only have online services - and some of you have been kind enough to say that, even then, "it still felt like church." It felt like church because Jesus is in this place making us into "a new creation."

Our trouble as human beings is that we want to play it safe. We want things so stay the same. But we know that is not reality. We grow, mature and change. Careers and work push us to change and

even move to new places. Our bodies age and often illness brings new challenges. Life brings change and yet we walk by faith and not by sight because the love of Christ urges us on. Life moves forward, and faith is the grace that allows us to envision our forward looking journey with Jesus.

This year St. Mark's Congregation Council is doing a number of things that will help us envision our future in mission together. We are revising the Church Constitution and Bylaws so that we are poised for mission for another 15 or even 20 years. We are restarting a team for Global Mission so that we might anticipate God's grace among all people. We are planning a program of Music Outreach to create new community and a wider circle of friends around St. Mark's. We are envisioning an new emphasis on Family Ministry, and as you know, have already begun the search for a person who will help build upon the marvelous work Alex English has done and continues to do in our midst.

These are just a few of the "big picture" pieces that we are planting this year – that we are using this year for - so that we might anticipate a time of growth and harvest. We are moving forward at St. Mark's, living into "a new normal." As we walk by faith, we carry not only our past, but also envision and anticipate the new creation God is already working among us.

Paul writes of the church as a "new creation": *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

We are the living stones of this church. The building is, of course, bricks and mortar; it is a building and a place to gather, but we are the church, the new creation that Christ is always renewing with a vision toward the world of God's harvest of love, compassion and abundance.

We are the church, and we walk by faith because the love of Christ urges us on. As we long for "a new normal" - anticipate and envision the new creation Christ is already working among us. Amen.