

God's Priorities – Joshua 24:15, 21-25 - August 23, 2009

I would like to start out this morning with two stories. They are not original to me and some of you may have heard them before. But I invite you this morning to listen to them with open hearts and minds as we strive to be certain that we are following God's vision and priorities in our lives and particularly this morning - in our church. The first one goes like this:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little life-saving station grew.

Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now, the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired life-boat crews to do this work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in this club's decoration, and there was a symbolic life-boat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

I don't want to insult anyone's intelligence this morning by interpreting this story or should I say parable but I also don't want any of you to miss the basic point. My brothers and sisters in Christ, there are people out there drowning and God desires, expects, and even demands that his church – his followers to do something about it. Unfortunately, too many churches have become elite, exclusive social clubs meeting in big beautiful buildings without any sense of God's mission, vision or priorities. How and

why have they lost their way? I believe that there are many, many reasons but would like to tell you the second story as my way of explaining what I believe is the number one reason.

In the darkest part of the night, a ship's captain cautiously piloted his warship through the fog-shrouded waters. With straining eyes he scanned the hazy darkness, searching for dangers lurking just out of sight. Then his worst fears were realized when he saw a bright light straight ahead. It appeared to be a vessel on a collision course with his ship. To avert disaster he quickly radioed the oncoming vessel.

"This is Captain Jeremiah Smith," his voice crackled over the radio. "Please alter your course 10 degrees south! Over." To the captain's amazement, the foggy image did not move. Instead, he heard back on the radio, "Captain Smith. This is Private Thomas Johnson. Please alter your course 10 degrees north! Over."

Appalled at the audacity of the message, the captain shouted back over the radio, "Private Johnson, this is Captain Smith, and I order you to immediately alter your course 10 degree south! Over." A second time the oncoming light did not budge. "With all due respect Captain Smith," came the private's voice again, "I order you to alter your course immediately 10 degrees north! Over."

Angered and frustrated that this impudent sailor would endanger the lives of his men and crew, the captain growled back over the radio, "Private Johnson. I can have you court-marshaled for this! For the last time, I command you on the authority of the United States government to alter your course 10 degrees to the South! I am a battleship!" The private's final transmission was chilling: "Captain Smith, sir. Once again

with all due respect, I command you to alter your course 10 degrees to the North! I am a lighthouse!"

Unfortunately, many people in today's world – and church – struggle with arrogance. I suspect that is a hard word to digest this morning but if we are honest with ourselves we all struggle with arrogance or self-centeredness from time to time. And why not? Society is forever telling us to change things to fit our personal needs and desires. Commercials egg us on: "Have it your way." But in reality, we can't always have it our way. We have to conform our lives to a higher truth, a higher authority. Truth is not going to change to accommodate us. We are the ones who must conform our lives to what is true.

Joshua gave the people a clear-cut challenge to set their priorities. Were they going to serve God or not? They were about to enter the Promised Land where they would be offered many other things to serve. They had better be intentional about deciding to make following and serving God a priority in their lives. And I would like to think I have done some of the same with you here at St. John's in my first two years as your pastor.

The good news – no the great news - is that you have made deliberate and significant choices to be a community of faith that is guided by God, empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the work of Jesus Christ with all people. Instead of arguing with the lighthouse – in this case Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior – you have committed to being beacons of faith and serve by reflecting his light and love into a drowning, hurting world.

Through our visioning process well over a year ago you overwhelmingly demanded that we exist not just for ourselves but also for the least, the last and the lost outside of this church who are drowning. You came up with five priorities that I believe are driven by a true desire to follow and serve God first and foremost as the people of God called St. John's. And not only did you come up with them, you have been following them, implementing them and I believe reaping the benefits of your faithful service as a result.

For example, Priority One is to expand education and spiritual growth opportunities for all ages. Thanks to the hard work of our program staff and many volunteers the new Sunday school year begins today. If you are not in a class already, be sure to stop by the back tables and talk with Denise – who is on the staff because of our visioning process – and find a class that meets your needs no matter what your age.

Priority Two is to provide more local, national and global mission opportunities to support and serve. Some of you may remember the all-church work day last year where over 120 people of all ages helped serve the Glen-Ed Pantry. Well this year, we are taking that one step further and asking all of you to sign up for a four-week study that we are calling Rethink Church . . . Be the Church. At the culmination of the study on the weekend of October 10 and 11th we will have service opportunities again with the Pantry but also with Habitat for Humanity and the Edwardsville Nursing Home right next door to name just a few. Be sure to stop up front and check it out along with the other ongoing mission opportunities at St. John's. And stay tuned, we are researching and exploring ways we can be in ministry with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Ghana.

Priority Three is a biggie for us this year which is to become a more visible church leader in the community through outreach and support. Thanks to the hard work of basically all volunteers from our church on Saturday, September 12 we are hosting the first of what I hope will be many Family Fun Fairs. This is a huge undertaking that will help us reach out to the community and share the beautiful grounds God has blessed us with. This event will only be successful with everyone's help so please go first to the tables to your right – of course after you get your goodies and coffee and be sure to find a place to serve on September 12 or even before as we work hard to offer and communicate this amazing event with as many people as possible.

Priority Four is that we must find ways for people to connect, belong and serve within the church. This ministry fair is a huge part of that priority so we hope you will take advantage of the many different things represented this morning on your left and find at least one place to connect, belong and serve here at St. John's. And please remember, we didn't have room for every small group or ministry this year because of our focus on the Family Fun Fair and the Rethink Church – Be the Church mission study and work day. If you do not find what you are looking for here this morning, don't forget all the wonderful brochures we have outside the ministry center and of course don't hesitate to ask me or any of our program, music or support staff as well as team and committee leaders of the church. Their names, emails and/or phone numbers are found on the back of your bulletin.

And finally, Priority Five is a desire to better educate and motivate our membership to be good stewards of the budget, the staff and the building. Of course all these things – including the staff and building cost money. This fall, after the mission

study and before the holidays on Wednesday evenings, I am going to offer a five-week study entitled Enough – Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity. We all know these are economically difficult times but you continue to graciously and faithfully give and support the budget of this church and help reduce the substantial debt of this building which we would love to cut in half by the year 2015. You will hear lots more about that in our stewardship campaign this fall which is called Continuing the Journey.

It is an amazing and wonderful journey that we are on together with each other and with God. Thanks to all of you for responding to God with the faithful response – as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Amen.