

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
February 8, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Re-Focusing Our Future
Psalm 147, I Corinthians 9: 16-23, Mark 1: 29-39

As a congregation, we have been going through the process of Re-Focusing Our Future. We have been exploring what we want to do from now on in our ministry, and more importantly on what God wants us to do as we serve him in Jesus Christ. As we go through this process, it is sometimes stressful and we want to give up in despair. At times we lose the true focus of our future, God's will, and other times we think it is all up to us. When any of these happen we must realize that we need to Re-Focus Our Future, especially upon what God wants us to do.

Rev. R. Craig MacCreary, a United Church of Christ pastor, compares all this refocusing process to his annual visit to his optometrist. "One thing that I don't look forward to is the periodic visit to the optometrist. It is not so much the thought of having air blown into my eye or a day spent in a visual fog from the numbing drops that puts me off. What really irritates me is the process of determining the new lens prescription. As the examiner goes through the run of lenses to find my best prescription, I do my best to determine the answer to the question: 'A or B, which is clearer?' Too much reading, too much exposure to the sun, and just plain spending too much time using my eyes — leave me little choice but to work my way through the exam on an annual basis. I am well acquainted with the procedure. However, having been trained to look on all sides of a question and take into account a number of varied viewpoints, I have a hard time with the forced choices. My medical mentor expects more clarity of conviction as to what is clear than I am able to muster. 'Well, yes ... Oh ... No, not exactly ... I'm not sure,' certainly does not speed things along. He has more patients to see, and I have things to do. But I just can't decide: 'A or B.' I hedge my bets. My frustration builds, and the doctor has his suspicions about ministers once again confirmed. It is a sorry story repeated annually."

"Getting clarity even on the basics of vision is more complex than we think. It always seems like a trade off. One lens brings something into focus leaving other things in a slight blur. Another corrects for astigmatism while not doing much to bring into focus the fine print. Some lenses of study bring into sharp relief the seamier aspects of a congregation's history while leaving the strengths and potential a smudged blur. My glasses, now up to

trifocals, are a miracle of twisted and molded plastic covering a multitude of eye maladies. I say, 'Hats off,' to the men and women in the lab who will bravely put all this together." And the doctors who make sure it is right.

"'A or B,' which is clearer? When it comes to a particular congregation the answer will depend on the day you ask me, and what is in the newspapers that day. Either that congregation and the world are going to hell in a handbasket, or we all live on the cusp of some of the greatest potential in human history." On any given day, I am either "God's gift to the world — a long-suffering saint ... or I am a pimple on the face of progress, which is better, 'A or B'? Of course, the truth is that the best results will come from some combination of the two." But if I need trifocals, it takes a third lens to work with the other two to bring the near, the far, and in-between into focus.

Let us consider the three lectionary texts offered to us for this Sunday as three lenses that function somewhat as a trifocal, three different focal points "attempting to bring into focus human experience and divine reality" as we refocus on our future.

The first lens that helps us to refocus our future is found in Psalm 147. It was written about the time of Nehemiah or 445 B.C. After over 50 years in exile, the Jewish people had returned to find their beloved city of Jerusalem, their former homes and the Temple in ruins. I suspect that they felt what we often feel when our lives appear to be in ruins. "Sometimes life gets to be simply too much. Virtually anyone can nod his or her head in weary agreement to this assertion. People work many more hours and handle more responsibilities than they did only a few years ago. Mention a forty-hour work week to most people, and a bemused smile comes back at you. Irony, it seems, isn't dead after all. Add to this the towering stack of personal and family obligations, community responsibilities, and financial commitments ... and it can cause someone to collapse under the collective weight of it all."

"Clergy and health care professionals see this often in relatives who must care for family members with long-term illnesses. They see it, too, in single parenting situations where the demands of children and career stretch and pull a person to the tearing point. In fact, stress is almost a pandemic. It isn't that love goes away. It's simply that the burden can sometimes be more than even the strongest person can handle."

"That's when it's good to collapse into a pew, and give it all to God." This is the function of the first lens found in Psalm 147, to help us see where to find the hope and help when we are overwhelmed and need to refocus our future. And this is exactly what the Psalmist did for the worshippers in 445

B.C., and still does for us today.

The Psalmist writes, “How good it is to sing praises to our God!’ How wonderful it is to release our cares and burdens in an avalanche of praise to one who can shoulder the things we cannot manage by ourselves. This God can ‘bind up a broken heart.’ This God can ‘heal my wounds and lift me up’ when I’ve been beaten down by life’s demands. In fact, this God can do it all. From ‘numbering the stars, to casting down the wicked; from designing clouds to feeding the livestock,’ this God has it together.”

“No matter how stressed or how tense we get. No matter how tightly wound our lives cause us to feel, there is one who is greater than it all. There is one who can take the burden and lighten the load.”

“Certainly the writer of this psalm didn’t envision the chaos that makes up twenty-first-century life in America,” but I suspect his life in 445 B.C. was not far from it. “Yet in the end, then and now, it’s still God who is in charge. Whether we are downtrodden by invaders and held in exile, or imprisoned in stress-laden work that can, in fact, kill us, God is still God. Creator, Covenant Partner, Healer, Liberator ... God. How good it is indeed to give praise to God!” How good it is to have this God who is always there to refocus our future in order to save our lives! Psalm 147, the first lens helps us see this divine reality as a vital part of our future.

The second lens God gives us to refocus our future is found in what Paul wrote to the Corinthians back in 57 A.D. “Like Jesus, Paul found that in his ministry he had to endure the attack of those who did not respect his authority and felt that his message was more threatening than liberating.” Along with these attacks, Paul realized that his whole life had a double focus to it because he was a Christian. He was a citizen of Rome, yet a citizen of God’s kingdom; he was the very best expert in Jewish law, yet he was able to live beyond the law, live by grace — Paul lived with a double focus in his life and ministry. This is true for us as Christians in today’s world. We are citizens of countries, yet citizens of God’s Kingdom; we are people of many laws, but are to live by God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. How could Paul refocus his future life and ministry to give it more authority and clarity? He was able to refocus his future life and ministry by focusing it on the cross of Christ. He wrote that though the crucified Jesus was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, it is for Christians, both Jews and Greeks, “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” It was by focusing on the cross that Paul’s life and ministry came into focus. It is the same for us.

When the cross of Christ became Paul’s focus he began to see other people in a different way. He began to treat them as Christ would treat

them. At one time Paul was a Pharisee who authoritatively classified “people, as worthy and unworthy, clean and unclean, free or slave, Jew or Gentile.” But because the cross of Jesus is now the focus of his life and future he no longer sees nor treats others this way.

“Of course, our world today wreaks of the authority to classify people by putting them in their assigned place in the various scheme of things. The sketch “Two Wild and Crazy Guys” performed by Steve Martin and Dan Akroyd on *Saturday Night Live* captured the pathetic attempt of two eastern European immigrants to slot themselves into the swingy lifestyle of the modern American empire. Teen magazines portray the clean and unclean body types of thinness and obesity. We all carry around a hefty bag of slots in which to put people. Some sociologists suggest that we have something like upward of thirty seconds or so before we are slotted in place by others first impression of us. For example, we do not “gravitate to the teacher that knows all, but to the teacher who knows us; who is willing to enter into and appreciate and learn from our world. We appreciate the physician who knows not only the latest medical protocols, but who knows what it is to be sick. In a world of ‘Donald Trump and Martha Stewart wannabes,’ we relish people who have the common touch over and above the Midas touch.

Paul demonstrates this common touch and his focus on the cross of Christ in today’s Epistle lesson. “Though he is a man of considerable strength and theological knowledge, he can enter into other people’s world in redemptive ways.” In his ministry, when Paul shared the gospel in word or deed with anyone, he set aside his early training on judging others by taking up the cross of Christ, and putting himself in their place. “I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.” Paul found himself sharing in the blessings of the gospel by taking up the cross of Jesus in this manner. In some sense clarity has come to Paul through the lens of being “cross eyed.” In the second lens found in I Corinthians 9, we are invited to join Paul in the refocusing of our future by focusing on the cross of Christ, and thereby refocusing how we relate to others.

The third lens for refocusing our future is found in Mark. The gospel writer indicates that Jesus and the disciples “are headed toward serious success. With the curing of many diseases, the silencing of demons, and the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, the early Christian movement is about to become a player in the affairs of Jesus’ world. At least that is what would seem to be the focus. For Mark, success of this kind is fraught with the danger of mistaking the surface appearance for the deeper reality. At the height of this early success, Jesus withdraws, leaving Simon searching

for him and the rest wondering if” Jesus has quit already. “Just when things are falling into place, Jesus takes off to be alone and pray.” Most quotes in the sermon are from “Emphasis,” Jan./Feb., 2006

By going off alone to pray, Jesus was refocusing the disciples away from the thinking that he was acting on self-sufficient power to do miracles back to where it belonged, back to the source of his strength and power to change lives, back to God. The future of Jesus’ life and ministry, that of the disciples and our own ministry fully rested and rests upon God. Jesus, who was God with us, shows us the way to the third lens that works with the other two lenses to refocus our future. This lens is prayer, talking with God and hearing God speak to correct our vision and refocus our future.

The optical prescription for the refocusing of our future has come to us today through three scriptural lenses: We need to turn over the enormous burdens we carry about the future to God: We can gain a better understanding of and relationship to others who are part of our future by focusing on the cross of Christ: And, the true source of strength and power to do any future ministry only comes as we pray to God and listen to his voice. As we do all this, we can join the Psalmist in proclaiming, “Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding (of us) is beyond measure.” (vs. 5)