

CHAPTER 11

Rejecting the Bishop as Sole Visionary

Kym Lucas

O, de blin' man stood on de road and cried
 Cryin' O, my Lord, save-a me
 De blin' man stood on de road and cried
 Cryin' what kind o' shoes am dose you wear
 Cryin' what kind o' shoes am dose you wear
 Cryin' O, my Lord
 Save-a me
 De blin' man stood on de road an' cried
 Cryin' dat he might receib his sight
 Cryin' dat he might receib his sight
 Cryin' O, my Lord, save-a me
 De blin' man stood on de road an' cried
 Cryin' dese shoes I wear am de Gospel shoes
 Cryin' dese shoes I wear am de Gospel shoes
 Cryin' O, my Lord
 Save-a me
 De blin' man stood on de road an' cried

Traditional spiritual

Having been an ordained church leader for most of my adult life, I must confess growing increasingly agitated when people quote Proverbs 29:18 to me regarding congregational life. My agitation chiefly centers around the supposition that “vision” comes from the professional Christian (the clergy) and is visited upon the people.

At every job interview, I have been asked, “What is your vision for our church?” And as bishop, in most every meeting with clergy and lay leaders I am asked, “What is your vision for the diocese?” Those questions assume that I have been given some secret *gnosis* about the community or been infused with divinely

imparted ideas about who they should be and what they should do. Surely, as a bishop, I would have “The Vision” for the diocese. And while I was not surprised, I confess some disappointment that the pointy hat did not improve my powers of prognostication or open a 5G line to the divine. On the contrary, these days, I find myself even more annoyed by the expectation.

My typical rejoinder is quoting the prophet Micah: “And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?”; or reciting 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their sinful ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

For the church, vision cannot be about an individual’s great idea or new and improved marketing strategy. The church’s vision must be centered on faithful living and leaning into our call to reconcile and heal our broken world. Vision is about recognizing how blind we are, striving to see what God is doing in our context, and aligning ourselves with God’s purposes. “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

When it comes to seeing clearly, the story of Saul on the road to Damascus serves as a powerful example. In that story, Saul has received credentials and direction from religious authorities and is heading out to arrest followers of Jesus and bring them to Jerusalem in chains. On the way, Saul sees a bright light; he falls to the ground and a voice, identifying as Jesus, speaks to him. When Saul gets up, he can “see nothing.” For three days he waits, until fearful but faithful Ananias comes, lays hands on him, and prays for him: that he might once again see and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

In many contexts, the assumption is that the bright light blinded Saul, but that is not what the text says. The text says Saul sees the light, falls on the ground, and gets up seeing nothing. The underlying reality is that Saul was already blind to so much. He was blind to his own self-righteousness and blind to the suffering of those around him. He was convinced that by defending his religious institution and violently enforcing his beliefs, he was serving God. Saul was even blind to his own self-destructive tendencies; Jesus says (in a verse sometimes omitted in translations) that “it is hard for thee to kick against the goads,” intimating that Saul was damaging himself with his persecution crusade (Acts 26:14 *KJV* after Eccles. 12:11—“goads” meaning a sharp stick used for herding).

For the church to faithfully participate in God's vision, we must recognize our blindness. There is much in our communities, and in our world, we have turned a blind eye to: children in cages at our border, the continued legacy of white supremacy, unjust economic structures and growing economic disparity, the rise in homelessness and rates of suicide, just to name a few. We church folks have been much more concerned with sheltering in our buildings, debating about who "deserves" to be at God's table, and wringing our hands at our decreases in attendance and in political power. At our Baptism, we Episcopalians vow to renounce the "evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God," but we have spent precious little time examining the ways in which we participate and reinforce the systems that continue corrupting our lives and destroying our planet. We cut ourselves off from God if we are searching for a "vision" without rigorous examination of our hearts and the condition of our community. Ironically, vision often becomes the trope we hide behind to try to prevent the light of the Christ from exposing our blindness.

The Johari Window Model

Another critical piece in understanding the role of vision in the church requires acknowledgment of an individual's inability to see everything. The model of the Johari window can be helpful in understanding the limits of our field of vision. In this model there are four spaces: (1) the open space, where things are obvious to everyone; (2) the hidden space, where we know things that others don't know, (3) the blind space, where others know things that we don't know, and (4) the unknown space, which for me is the space only God knows. The church cannot have any faithful vision until we are willing to address our blind space and strive to see from the perspective of the other.

In the Road to Damascus story, Ananias sees Saul as a murderous persecutor of the faithful, which is so far from Saul's view of himself, but Ananias's view matures (with a little divine persuasion) to where he sees Saul as a child of God, beloved by Jesus. He lays hands on Saul, without a word of reproof or derision, and "something like scales" falls from Saul's eyes. Saul is healed, restored, and made whole because a man beneath his notice, a man for whom he had nothing but disdain, enabled him to see differently.

Being a near lifelong Episcopalian, I have often fallen into the trap of believing that this "branch of the Jesus Movement" is the best. We have the best words and the best music. We have the prettiest buildings and the most progressive theology. And we are a church built with blood money: from the slave trade and "captains of industry." We are steeped in the false belief that our Anglocentric culture is intrinsically more valuable and more faithful than other cultures.

Talking to others about The Episcopal Church, I've heard our faith described as anemic, our worship called boring, our culture designated exclusive, elitist, and snobbish. It is difficult to hear yourself described in ways that you don't recognize, but God reveals deep truths to us embedded in the vision of others.

In his book *Canoeing the Mountains*, author Tod Bolsinger points out how when Lewis and Clark found themselves way "off the map," they began seeking counsel from those who were ordinarily beneath their notice: an indigenous nursing mother and a slave descended from Africans. These voices contributed to the success of the mission in ways that neither Meriwether Lewis nor William Clark could have anticipated when they set out to find a route to the Pacific Ocean.

No vision will be faithful if we refuse to listen to the most marginalized voices in our context. The church must be willing to see the truth of its failures, its faithlessness, and all it has ignored before we can see the alternate path to which we are called.

In so many cases, what church folk call "vision" is rooted in self-absorption. A church has a "vision" to grow their attendance; a church has a "vision" to build an addition on their current edifice. "Vision" in this context is simply a strategy for perpetuating and sustaining our institutions. If the "vision" is only about self-aggrandizement and filling our coffers, if the "vision" is not chiefly about love of God and neighbor, it is just another sort of blindness.

Vision must be rooted in the first and greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37, 39). The church has often behaved as if this is an either/or proposition: you can love God (through prayer and praise) *or* you can love your neighbor (through service and advocacy), all the while placing your own needs first. This false

dichotomy skews our vision, because it denies reality. As Saul learned, we cannot love God without loving our neighbor, nor can we love our neighbor or ourselves rightly without encountering the one who is love and relationship.

A vision rooted in love will be characterized by justice, mercy, and humility. Our understanding of justice comes from the Hebrew *mishpat*, which means to act with fairness, equity, and impartiality in any situation. *Mishpat* is connected to *hesed* (loving-kindness) and *tsadek* (righteousness) because justice is the result of right relationship: "Justice is love in street clothes," as the Rt. Rev. Robert White of Atlanta is fond of saying.

The church has too often been on the side of injustice in our world. From the Crusades to the enslavement of Africans for profit, from the oppression of women to the abuse of children, the church has chosen the world over the gospel again and again. We cannot live faithfully unless we reject the systems that corrupt, oppress, and exploit.

Clear vision can never be severed from truth—that is, the being of the triune God. Vision disconnected from truth is illusion. Again, listening to disenfranchised people speak their truth challenges our view; truth from the margins shows how far the truths that we live by vary from the divine truth to which we are called. Tough discussions and vulnerable conversations help create awareness of our blindness. Sometimes we can hear what we cannot see. Creating space and being committed to hard conversations provide the groundwork for a clearer, more faithful view.

A faithful vision must also reflect mercy (loving-kindness) and humility. We only know of God what God reveals to us. And our vision will never be perfect in this life: "now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV). Still, we must commit to following where our Lord leads, proclaiming and demonstrating that the kingdom of God has come near to us.

The church has spent an inordinate amount of time maintaining our institutional structures as if we were in the "survival" business and not the business of "abundant life." And while the institution offers stability and structure of accountability, it cannot be the rock on which we stand. We must stand on our confession and witness of a life transformed by our encounter with God through Christ. "On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand."¹

Bishop, I represent the institution and not necessarily the most faithful part I serve as administrator, theologian, pastor, and prophet. Those roles are difficult to tease apart, and my husband often reminds me that a theologian's primary job is pointing out that which is not God. This is not an easy task in a culture that expects clergy not only to have all the answers but also to make everyone feel good about themselves.

In this context, it is incredibly hard to say, "Your building is not God," "Your liturgy is not God," "Your political ideology is not God," "That Bible you're wielding as weapon? Not God," "Your bank account? Also, not God." While these maybe useful tools to help us seek, find, and serve God, they are not, in fact, the God we have come to know in Christ, through the Spirit. The triune God is so much more and calls us to a life and a love that are so much more than we can possibly imagine.

And in the time of pandemic our imaginations have been particularly challenged. The advent of COVID-19 exposed us: our vulnerability and our brokenness. Congregations found themselves exiled from their buildings, and as a nation we found ourselves watching Derek Chauvin's dispassionate expression as he squeezed the life out of George Floyd. Communities of faith were forced to ask themselves what they actually believed about God, about grace, about redemption. Many in leadership looked to me, their bishop, to tell them what to do, to offer them a vision. But I suspect that most of the discussion around "vision" was primarily a request for certainty. It was a desire for someone to foretell the future, to assure them that a life in faith provided exemption from pain and sacrifice. But discipleship is neither pain- nor sacrifice-free. Following Jesus is costly, because real relationship is costly. Faithful vision includes this hard truth: if we are following Jesus, the cross we are called to pick up and carry soon comes into view.

The vision of church hasn't really changed in two thousand years. We build communities that form each other in faith. We worship together and empower each other to strive for justice; we form communities centered on Christ and call them church, and we seek to bring about the kingdom of God. But we must never conflate the kingdom of church with the kingdom of God (as Leonardo Boff frequently reminds us). We must constantly strive to peel away the blinders and truly see *imago Dei* in each and every person we encounter, because our goal is full

communion with each other around the table of Christ. The path to vision is an ongoing process:

1. Have difficult and vulnerable conversations
2. Listen to those around us
3. Recognize our blind spaces
4. Repent and seek healing and reconciliation
5. Pray a lot
6. Take the next faithful step
7. Rinse and repeat

As bishop, I serve my people and remind them of that to which we are all called. My episcopal task is not coming up with the next great scheme or figuring out how to “fix” my congregations or my diocese. I have no secret gnosis. The vision that God is revealing for The Episcopal Church in Colorado will come as we humble ourselves, as we seek God’s face, as we follow our Lord and Savior. The vision, the real, divine vision, will come as we take the next faithful step as the body of Christ, acknowledging our blindness and shining the light of Christ into every dark corner of our world.