

We are starting a new sermon series that continues a focus we started last year on our ten-year vision as a church. Someone has said vision is "hope with a blueprint." The Bible says, "*Where there is no vision the people perish*" (Proverbs 29:18). We all need to have a vision of where we're going and how to get there. About a year ago, our elders felt God was putting a new vision for our church on our hearts.

Why would we need a new vision? It's not that we felt we were off track. It's not that we're changing our mission or core values. Our mission is still to make and mature more followers of Christ. Our core values are still the centrality of God's word, worship, community, grace, evangelism, and the leadership of elders. Our new vision is simply a way to provide focus and invest our resources for the next ten years.

The most important thing is the why. Our vision emerged out of a huge need. We live in one of the most spiritually barren places in America. An organization called Gloo recently gave me some data that says twenty-six percent of the population within a ten-mile radius of us identify as "religious nones," meaning they see themselves as either atheist, agnostics, or just "nothing in particular." This compares with a national average of eight percent. Also, only one percent describe themselves as "committed to faith," meaning faith satisfies their desires, and they're part of a church. This is compared with nine percent nationally. There are so many wonderful things about the Bay Area, but it's still a region where the vast majority aren't experiencing the abundant life Jesus came to give us.

Out of this need has emerged our vision. We believe Jesus loves this place and the people who live here. This is our mission field. He's called us, his people, to be the salt and light right here where we live! But we also know for that to happen, we have to BE transformed people. If we're going to bring transformation, we have to be transformed! So our vision is to engage in spiritual formation in such a way that will propel us into thoughtful and gracious engagement with lost people here on the Peninsula. Through that, we want to ignite transformation. Simply put, our vision is to be transformed people who are transforming the Peninsula.

To accomplish that, we've created four pillars. These pillars are strategic focuses for the first three years. Two of the pillars, worship, and spiritual formation, are centered on allowing God to transform us. Worship is our God-glorifying response to who

God is and what he's done. Spiritual formation is intentionally opening our lives to the work of the Spirit to be more like Christ. We focused on those two pillars last year. Hopefully, we're continuing to engage at a deep level in both. But this year, we're focusing on the two other pillars, equipping and cultural engagement. These are all about us being agents of transformation to those around us.

We are starting a six-week series on the equipping pillar. This pillar is all about preparing each of us to serve both inside and outside the walls of the church. We want to create a culture in CPC that enables every person to identify and use their gifts and to fulfill their calling. Here's the truth for you to consider, God has called you into ministry. Here's that truth stated more clearly than by the apostle Peter.

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 1 Peter 2:4, 5, 9, 10

Notice Peter repeatedly speaks of a priesthood. Collectively, we're a holy and royal priesthood. And, individually, we're priests as well. Revelation 5:10 says we're "*a kingdom and priests to serve our God.*"

I want to talk to you about what's called the priesthood of all believers. Honestly, when I first heard that phrase, it stunned me. Like many of you, I grew up in the Catholic Church, so I know what a priest is. In my mind, a priest was usually very old, very out of touch with everyday life, and a little bit scary. He wore a robe and a collar. Sometimes he hid behind a screen while I confessed my sins. I mean, he didn't even get married! I never even considered the fact they were regular guys. I remember seeing my priest once at a golf course, smoking a cigarette. I almost fainted. How could my priest play golf and smoke? The last thing I'd ever want to be as a kid was a priest!

Background on the idea of priesthood

But let's go back for a moment and try to understand this idea of priesthood from a biblical perspective. The Hebrew word for priest, *kohen*, always denotes one who offers sacrifices. In the days of the patriarchs, and even before, the head of each household exercised the priestly function of sacrifice. Noah built an altar (Gen. 8:20), and so did Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:4; 22:9), Isaac (Gen. 26:25), and Jacob (Gen. 33:20; 35:1-3). In Exodus 19:6, God says to Moses that the entire Israelite nation, "*will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*" Somehow the Israelites would mediate God to the rest of the world.

But then something different happened. Under the old covenant God made with Israel through Moses, the office of the priesthood was limited to the tribe of Levi and to only one family in that tribe - Aaron. The priest's duties were manifold. Primarily, they represented the people before God and offered a variety of sacrifices prescribed in the law. There was also a High Priest, who was the religious leader of the Israelites. The High Priest had to be without any physical defects and holy in his conduct. His most important duty was on the annual Day of Atonement when he entered the Most Holy Place in the temple to make a sacrifice for himself and the people as an atonement for their sins.

But then Jesus came, and he established what he called the New Covenant. The book of Hebrews calls Jesus the ultimate High Priest who offered, not an animal, but himself to God as a perfect, once-and-for-all sacrifice for our sins (Hebrews 9:23-28). And now, as Peter says, the church is a holy and royal priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus. So through Jesus, we all share in the priesthood. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any indication of a special class of Christian leaders set apart from others, called priests. In the New Testament, we're collectively what Israel once was: a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. And, individually, we each have the prerogatives and responsibilities of a priests. Let me take a few minutes to unpack what that actually means for us.

We all have direct access to God

First of all, it means we all have direct access to God. In the Old Testament, only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies. But through Christ, we can barge right into the throne of grace. The apostle Paul says, because of Christ, "*...we may approach God with freedom and confidence*" (Ephesians 3:12). Why? Because "*For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus*" (1 Timothy 2:5). Hebrews says,

...we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus," so "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Hebrews 10:19, 22

We don't have to go through an obstacle course of rites and rituals or appeal to a priest or prophet or minister to intercede for us. We have one great high priest who was tempted in every way as we are but without sin. I can't be that priest for you. In fact, I need Him to be my priest every bit as much as you do. So, go directly to him.

We all can offer spiritual sacrifices to God

Second, it means each of us can offer spiritual sacrifices to God. The New Testament describes what these sacrifices are. In Philippians 4:18, Paul thanks the church for their financial support, and he says of their gifts, "*They're a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.*" So, when you give generously to the Lord and his work, you're offering a spiritual sacrifice to God. But that's not all. Hebrews 13:15 says, "*Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.*" When we come here and worship God, or when you sing a worship song in your car, you're offering him a sacrifice of praise. Finally, the greatest sacrifice we can offer is that of our entire being. Romans 12:1 encourages us, "*to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*" The first offering we should make is of ourselves. We can offer nothing until we offer to him ourselves as a sacrifice.

All our work is priestly work

Third, our priesthood means that all of our work is priestly work. Martin Luther often spoke of the priesthood of all believers. In his day, he said it meant the plowboy and the milkmaid could do priestly work. In fact, their plowing and milking was priestly work. There's no hierarchy where the priesthood is a "spiritual calling" and milking the cow is not. Both are tasks God calls his followers to do, each according to their gifts.

Do you view your job like that? Whatever your job is, see it as priestly work. See it as an opportunity to serve others and extend God's mission in the world. In his book, *Every Good Endeavor*, Tim Keller writes, "Our daily work can be a calling only if it is reconceived as God's assignment to serve others." Before this, he wrote,

"A job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it, and you do it for them rather than for yourself. And so our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests. ...Thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person..."

This has enormous implications for how we live our daily lives. If working in business, technology, communications, politics, or any other profession is just as impactful as being a pastor, it forces everyone in the church to connect their beliefs to their everyday actions. It gives purpose in what you do Monday through Friday as you serve others and improve society through your daily work.

On the other hand, if we say "the ministry" is a higher calling than other professions, what you do really matters very little.

We're all agents of reconciliation

Finally, the priesthood of all believers means we're all agents of reconciliation. We're all called to mediate Christ's love into a dark and troubled world. Again, Peter says, you're a royal priesthood "*that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9). We all have this privilege of declaring his praises in a dark world.

We're not all evangelists, but we're all witnesses. Paul calls us "Christ's ambassadors" who've been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. We have a new title as priest so that we might have the status to carry that message. We're to use this status to minister to others in a way that leads people in the Church and in the world to be reconciled to God and to each other. If we weren't appointed, chosen, or ordained to this role of priest, we might be reluctant to take on this responsibility. Henri Nouwen, who ironically was himself a Catholic priest, wrote this,

"Those who can sit in silence with their fellow man not knowing what to say but knowing that they should be there can bring new life in a dying heart. Those who are not afraid to hold a hand in gratitude, to shed tears in grief, and to let a sigh of distress arise straight from the heart, can break through paralyzing boundaries and witness the birth of a new fellowship, the fellowship of the broken."

Why is this not lived out?

These are the four implications of the priesthood of all believers, but why is it that even outside of the Catholic church, even in churches like ours, there's still this underlying assumption those in "full-time ministry" are a cut above everyone else in terms of importance to the work of the Kingdom?

Some of the problems can be traced historically. For the first couple of hundred years after Jesus ascended into heaven, the church operated according to the biblical pattern that we're all priests. But at the start of the third century after Christ, the church began to reinstitute the priesthood of the Old Testament. It was believed a special class of Christians was needed to offer the sacraments of the church, like Communion and baptism. In a sense, it was like the church re-instituted and Christianized the priesthood of the Old Covenant. Priests were the only ones who could interpret Scripture, serve communion, baptize, marry people, and offer last rites to the dying.

Fortunately, about 1,200 years later, a movement began called the Reformation. Its leaders were guys like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli. They weren't perfect men, but each, in their way tried to recover the biblical idea that all Christians are priests. Luther criticized the traditional distinction

between the laity and the clergy, arguing that all who belong to Christ through faith, baptism, and the Gospel shared in the priesthood of Jesus. He wrote, "For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope..."

A later reformer, Philipp Spener wrote,

"Every Christian is bound to offer himself and what he has, his prayer, thanksgiving, good works, alms, etc., but also industriously to study the word of the Lord, with the grace that is given him to teach others, especially those under his own roof, to chastise, exhort, convert and edify them, to observe their life, pray for all, and insofar as possible be concerned for their salvation."

So, this was a wonderful movement of God. But here's the deal. It didn't go far enough because the Reformers were hard-pressed to define what the church is, and they came up with this definition: "The congregation of the saints in which the gospel is rightly preached, and the sacraments are rightly administered." Now, whose job was it to make sure the gospel was rightly preached and the sacraments were rightly administered? It was the job of the ordained clergy. So, once again, the clergy became elevated to a status that's unheard of in the New Testament.

Our misuse of keywords

The result of that has been a longstanding confusion about who is really in the ministry. Notice I used the word clergy. That word, and other words, help us understand both the old mindset and the new mindset. Consider how we think about four different words.

Priest: Let's start again with the word priest. In the old mindset, a priest is someone set apart to act as a mediator between God and man. He takes vows and is ordained to have the right to do that. In the New Testament, Jesus is the (only) High Priest; the entire body of believers is a priesthood, and the office of priest is eliminated as a special group.

Saints: The popular usage is this is an exclusive group set apart from ordinary sinners with some kind of exceptional personal holiness. We talk of St. Paul and St. Theresa, but the biblical usages of this refer to all ordinary Christ-followers. If you know Christ, you're a saint!

Minister: In popular usage, this pertains to those ordained and set apart into a higher class of Christian. Ministers even have special status with the Federal Government as we can exempt ourselves from paying into SSI. But the biblical usage of "minister" rarely refers to a specific group of people, but rather to acts of service. Sometimes the word refers to Deacons in the church, but, still, the word just means servant. If you're a servant, you're a minister.

Clergy: In popular usage, this is an exclusive leadership group. Clergy are specialists in the things of God. But in the Bible, this word is never used like that. The Greek word for clergy is *kleros*. It was used to refer to municipal administrators who ruled. But in the twelfth century, a guy named Hugo Grotius said the clergy were those who'd totally devoted themselves to God's work while everyone else was less spiritual because they got married and had regular jobs.

Laity: In popular usage, this word is used for those who aren't clergy; it has a less than connotation. The best we can expect to get out of laity is for them to volunteer a bit of the time to help in the work of the church. But God's word uses this word to speak of God's called out, special people, which is all of us. This word is used right here in our passage. Peter says, *"Once you were not a people (laos), but now you are the people of God" (1 Peter 2:10).*

What all this confusion amounts to is an institutional mindset where the church is defined from a top-down perspective, which is catastrophic to the life of the church. Richard Lovelace, a professor of church history, wrote,

"But it is still true that the model of congregational life in the minds of most clergy and laity is one in which the minister is the dominant pastoral superstar who specializes in the spiritual concerns of the Christian community, while the laity are spectators, critics and recipients of pastoral care, free to go about their own business because the pastor is taking care of the business of the kingdom."

By the way, one of the consequences of this kind of thinking is burnout amongst pastors. Many pastors just can't take the pressure of being that special, holy person on whom everyone depends for so much. One pastor said, "My people expect me to work sixty hours a week, preach brilliant sermons on a weekly basis, be good with the youth, visit the old people, and still never lose my temper at a church meeting." What mere human being can fulfill such demands of perfection? Add to that the thought that pastors are required to have a couple of children, but not too many because people just don't like to think of their pastor involved in that sort of thing. People like to believe if a pastor has children, they've somehow arrived through immaculate conception! Now I admit sometimes it's nice to be put up on a pedestal. I mean, the great thing about being a pastor is most people you're out with don't let you buy lunch. But, then, it can also be hard because most people don't want their pastor to show up at a party — kind of puts a damper on things!

I'm grateful for my calling as a pastor. I'm grateful that for over three decades, this church has allowed me to devote my time to the study and preaching of God's word. I don't take that lightly, and neither does the rest of our staff. But we're not the only ones here called to ministry. The ministry belongs to all of us.

The most effective pastor I've ever known in my life was a guy named Ray Stedman. About 40 years ago, the church I was working at wanted to ordain me. I didn't really know much about what that meant, but I agreed. I asked Ray to come and speak at my ordination service, which he did. I'll never forget what he said when he got up to speak. He said, "I find it kind of strange that I'm speaking at Mark's ordination because I've never been ordained!" Here he was, a very well-known pastor of a huge church, but he didn't have the credentials to be a minister. He didn't need them. And you don't need them either because God has called you and me alike into ministry.

I leave you with a few questions. Are you fulfilling your ministry? Do you see yourself as one who's been called - a minister, a priest even? And what would you do differently in your life if you did?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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