

**May 23, 2021 –**

**David's three-pronged vision for Greenfield Hill Church**

That last verse is the clincher:

“People without a vision perish”

If you don't know where you're headed, or why,

Or what's important, in anything,

You're not going to make it.

You're dead in the water.

I saw my first Connecticut Challenge Bike Ride sign this week.

I was so happy.

They're back!

The CT Challenge is back!!

Hundreds and hundreds of bike riders will be up here on top of this hill, at our church, starting and ending their rides right where it all began years ago.

And I loved the sign, it couldn't be clearer:

“Our Mission: Beat Cancer”

Jeff Keith and his friend have a clear vision.

Twice in my life I was in line to become pastor of historic churches, famous churches,

At each church there was an active debate about what their church was.

Were they a museum?

A holder of artifacts?

A treasure of historical significance?

A keeper of an ancient flame?

An architectural gem?

One church was at the forefront of American politics, and sordid justice in the 1800's. A hotbed of the abolitionist movement. With Tiffany-stained glass windows in the kitchen!!

The other church was a seedbed of American values, long before there was an America, on the frontlines of religious liberty and individual freedom; back in the 1600's.

Both had giants in their pulpits, preachers of great fame and renown. And both had a strong contingent of members who believed they were best suited to be a museum. A place devoted to the good old days.

Their future was their past.

Churches all across America are dying, or dead,  
Being closed or sold,  
Dismantled.

“Desacralized” is the official word, meaning “to take the Holy out of it,” proof of that Bible verse. “People, without a vision, perish.” Native American spirituality includes “the vision quest,” what a great concept: The vision quest.

In many ways it parallels Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness.

In each case,       No Food  
                          Complete fasting.  
                          Alone. Silent.  
                          Contemplative  
                          Meditating  
                          Waiting...for God to implant a purpose in their mind,  
                          A spirited experience of such power that it forever shaped  
                          their lives.  
                          A vision quest.

Because without a vision you're going nowhere.

Today, I'm going to ruminate a little bit, laying out some vision for our church. Our 300th “anniversary” is around the corner, 4 years.

When I launched it with one of my infamous verbose “White Papers,” I said point blank that I don't want us looking back saying “boy, we used to be a great

church!” I want us proud of where we are, and excited about where we’re headed.

Look back with gratitude, not envy

As one church member said, “Let’s use our 300<sup>th</sup> to be ready for the next 300.” That’s where vision comes in, and I’ll start the conversation.

This might not be what you expect. There’s not much obvious theology, or church growth planning or even Jesus in this sermon. My 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary “White Paper” tackles some of that, and I have a 250-page book on Jesus coming out in September; and I’ve written a whole ‘nother book just about Church. It’s called “Church”!!

Instead, today, I’m putting my head up in the clouds. I’m reaching for ideals, “big picture” stuff to connect with our hearts. To get there, I have a 3-pronged vision worthy of our best.

I yearn for us to be

A Church of Reconciliation

A Church of Healing: Racial Healing

And Emotional Healing

I first mentioned being A Church of Reconciliation maybe three years ago when I trotted out that other essay of mine, “My America.” Half memoir and half a prescription for healing divisions, I urged us to be a church that doesn’t harbor un-Christlike attitudes and words and behavior that drive a wedge between us.

Jesus’ ministry,

Jesus’ life bridged every divide of his time:

Gender,

Class,

Politics,

Religion

Power.

Jesus constantly lifted people’s vision above the pettiness, and etched in stone bigotries, hide-bound traditions that kept people split apart.

“Lift up your eyes and see,” was one of our verses in today’s scripture.

“Lift up your eyes and see...” see more clearly, see differently, see with a fresh perspective. See a new world view.

The us vs. them politics of contemporary America, the us vs. them religion of most of world history, it hasn’t served us well, or them well.

The Christ of Christlikeness overrides negative stuff. And if we have any hope for society, or America, or this town, then we ought to be able to model right here within these walls, on these old town greens around us, under these lovely shade trees – we need to show it can be done.

Reconciliation.

Togetherness.

True Communion.

What is the one verse in the Bible spoken more in church than any other verse? No other verse is even close!!

“Our Father, who art in heaven

hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

thy will be done.

done.

on earth

right here,

done on earth AS it is in heaven”

Sunday after Sunday after Sunday we say the same doggone prayer telling God to help us make our daily life more like God’s life;

our streets

our neighborhood

our place more like God’s. That should be us.

(PAUSE)

My vision of us as a Church of Healing is 2-pronged: racial and emotional.

What would it mean to be a Church of Racial Healing? How can we model that? How the heck can a mostly white church in a mostly white town have even the slightest, itsy, bitsy, teeniest impact on racism?

Well, we start with having the slightest, itsy, bitsy, teeniest impact where we can. Now, don't go humble on me, you're all successes in your lives. And you all got there NOT in one fell swoop. You got there by making the most of that slightest, itsy, bitsy, teeniest impact you could have. Then you built on it.

Maybe you worked harder on your homework.

OR stayed longer after practice.

OR asked for help.

OR helped out.

OR tackled a project no one wanted.

OR worked later.

OR changed course.

OR listened well.

OR spoke up.

And one step became two; and then larger

And broader

And deeper impactful steps.

Until you were doing what nobody thought you could do. Let's apply that to society's ills, including racism.

Fifty years from now, when we're warming up for our 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I'll be 124 years old. And do you really want me up here at 124 years of age?

Saying,

"I've just written a new essay on racism, and it's available in our narthex, please read it and we'll have a Zoom discussion on it next month!?"

Please, God, no!!

Literally,

For Christ's sake, no.

For America's sake, no.

We used to have smallpox.

We used to have polio.

We used to have child labor.

We used to have polluted rivers running rampant.

Until we found the will and way to stop it.

Since my essay on race came out, so many of you have asked, pushed, demanded

“What can we do?

What steps?

What...something?”

Our deacons joined in, coalescing our common yearning to seek some steps.

You know Pivot House, right?

That's the Christian drug and alcohol rehab ministry we've supported for 10 years or more. And supported is the right word.

Their Gospel Choir of mostly black and brown men came here two or three times a year. They sing. We support them. Generously.

We applaud.

We give them money.

We bring them food, clothing.

We all say 'hi' and 'thank you'

All well and good.

But what if we took it deeper? What if we became friends? What if we created a working, personal, practical relationship?

What if, Pivot and us,

We got to know one another and be known,

To give and to receive.

To listen and to talk?

On Wednesday I had lunch with four Pivot people to plot this out. Four black and brown people, from

Maryland,  
New Haven,  
Norwalk,  
New Jersey

Plus me, and Deacon Matt Prohaska, on speaker phone from Los Angeles.

It was intense, everybody leaning in, thinking together: what to do? How to make it work?

One man said,

“This is the first business meeting I’ve ever been in in my life.”

Another said,

“When we are with Greenfield Hill Church people I like it because there are no suppositions. Nobody’s thinking this or that about me.”

A third said,

“Now we can know each other’s life experiences.”

To make it work, I need maybe people spread out our time, different ways. But always real. Personal.

The third piece of my vision is to be a Church of Healing, healing of the mind, the spirit. This isn’t a lecture on mental health and I’m not an expert – this is about ministry, and a vision for ministry that can transform lives, save lives.

Three weeks ago, we lost a brilliant light in our lives, Pierce Fulton,

A dynamic,  
creative  
spiritual musical genius.  
Beloved. Acclaimed.

A loss beyond comprehension:

yet one of many,  
many right here,

all around here.

all around.

All beyond comprehension.

The toll of depression,

Discouragement

Stress

Suicide.

The full range of human hurt challenging the very preciousness of life itself-  
it is here, all around us, now.

Pierce's Dad told me straight out

this church

our ministry

we are the "walk-in clinic," he said,

we are the frontline

for a heart that's aching.

a brain that's swirling

a soul that's breaking.

Within moments of Pierce's death his family began a movement to create a  
world of healing within the world of mental health.

To change the language

To end the stigma

To strengthen family and friends

To heal the mind,

The brain,

The hurts and fears inside that overwhelm

Their God,

Our God,

Our vision

Is to allow Pierce's life



To be a bedrock,  
A foundation  
A calling for healing.

A few years ago, some friends took Alida and me out to dinner. Then, sitting in our driveway, they handed us an envelope with a check for \$10,000.

“Here,” they said, “use it to help any kid you can. Any way you want.”

What does that mean?

It means,

If there’s some program we want to bring to our young people and it costs \$500, we can do it.

It means,

If someone needs to talk and the best way to do it is to go out for dinner, we do it.

It means,

If some young person finds a passion after never being interested in anything, we help push that passion along.

It means,

Never saying “no,” or “later.”

Strange sermon, isn’t it. Usually, we’re talking about how to be better people, or getting you to sign up for Appalachia, or look deeper to see God at work, or apply some teaching of Jesus to daily life, or building our church in strength and numbers.

Today,

I’m asking you to ‘look up.’

To ‘see’ that ‘new Jerusalem’ from today’s scriptures, that ‘kingdom of God’ ‘coming down’ right here among us

To become that 'blessing' promised to Abraham  
To have a 'vision.'

Today,

I've brought you a vision for reconciliation,  
And healing.

Touching upon the most urgent issues of our day.

Touching upon our heart,

our mind,

our spirit;

Touching upon our nation,

our neighbor

our young people.

Jews already have a word for it: Shalom.

We cheapen it by translating it as "peace," and peace gets cheapened by  
being the mere absences of hostility.

Shalom is so much more.

Shalom is a wish for total well-being.

For fullness of health and daily joy

The Bible says when God created the world, God stepped back and said, "it's  
good."

That's shalom.

That's the vision I have for our church

That each day we will be able to look around

Emotionally

Physically

Personally

Spiritually,

And say "it's good"

That across all the differences that are there, that are obvious and real and clear, that we can look at one another and say:

“You’re good”

That every young person,

Every young adult

On this challenging journey through life, will be able to look at this day,

And the next

And all the days down the road

and say,

I believe,

and know “it’s good”

Shalom.

The fullness of well-being.

A vision for our church.