

“Visions”

Acts 2:1-21

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I have an image running through my mind. It is an image of a lonely bicycle rider slowly making his way across the United States. He started in Camden, New Jersey. He took nothing with him. His goal was to tell a story along the way, and to listen to others tell their stories.

I called the man lonely, but that isn't exactly true. He is riding alone, but along the way he is confident he will meet many new and old friends. He is a Christian. He is traveling telling about the work God is doing among some ordinary radicals, mostly young men and women of faith, although not all young. Some older people have joined them as they seek to live an authentic Christian life of discipleship, living in community, attending to their spiritual growth, looking out for the needs of the vulnerable, standing against injustice and standing up for the one who gave his life for the least, the last, and the lost.

This solitary bicyclist took nothing with him, but along the way he is trusting that fellow Christians will open their homes to him, allowing him a place to lodge and providing food to eat. He is trusting that fellow Christians will open their hearts to him, listening to his story. He is trusting that fellow Christians will testify to how they are seeking to follow Christ faithfully, so that he can return with good news of how God is at work all over our nation.

Maybe the most encouraging thing about this bicyclist is that many people who see him, or talk to him, or hear about this strange odyssey will roll their eyes and say, “He has had too much wine.” What else would cause a person to do something like set off on a bicycle with nothing but faith? Some might say he has had too much wine. I say, “Thank God the winds of Pentecost continue to blow.”

Do people really do radical things like set off on a bicycle to witness about Jesus Christ? In *The Irresistible Revolution*, Shane Claiborne tells the story of how God is forming disciples who do these kinds of radical things. His particular story took shape when he was a student in Philadelphia. As he tells it, “We were sitting in the college cafeteria eating dinner, complaining as usual about the food and going back for more (the woes of college students). Suddenly, a friend walked up to our table and threw down a newspaper, muttering, ‘You guys are not going to believe this.’ The top story was about a group of forty homeless families who were being evicted from an abandoned cathedral in North Philadelphia.”¹

What could a group of college students do who loved Jesus and were offended that a group of homeless people were being evicted from an abandoned cathedral? They formed a yacht club. Sometimes the church really misses the mark. Homeless people are being evicted and these college aged Christians formed a yacht club. But their YACHT club was an acronym for Youth Against Complacency and Homelessness Today. They stood with and came to love the homeless people living in the abandoned cathedral, and when that crisis was resolved, Shane and some others decided to move into one of the poor sections of Philadelphia and make a home, a home that was Christ centered, and a home that was filled with Christ's compassion.

¹ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 55.

When they began this adventure of living among the poor in Philadelphia they called themselves ordinary radicals. Their daily lives would be filled with ordinary things, meals and laundry, homework with kids and games at a park, hospitals and hospitality. But they sensed there was something radical in actually offering themselves to Jesus Christ as living sacrifices. And they believed other ordinary people were longing to find ways to live as authentic disciples of Jesus Christ. So they sent out this letter.

“Once, there was a small group of kids who decided to go to a park in the middle of the city, and dance and play, laugh and twirl. As they played in the park, they thought that maybe another child would pass by and see them. Maybe that child would think it looked fun and even decide to join them. Then maybe another would. Then maybe a businessman would hear them from his skyscraper. Maybe he would look out the window. Maybe he would see them playing and lay down his papers and come down. Maybe they could teach him to dance. Then maybe another businessman would walk by, a nostalgic man, and he would take off his tie and toss aside his briefcase and dance and play. Maybe the whole city would join the dance. Maybe even the world. Maybe... Regardless, they decided to enjoy the dance.”² Maybe a businessman would look out his window and see these ordinary radicals and say, “They have had too much wine.” And maybe he would say, “Thank God the winds of Pentecost continue to blow.”

Come to think of it, there are always some ordinary radicals in our midst. An older woman named Lois Baker was active in our presbytery when we moved to Houston in 1995. One day I opened up the paper and saw that she was doing something radical. She had a deep concern for the landmines that were injuring children in some of the war torn areas of Europe. She wanted those landmines removed, so the children would be safe to play and laugh and run. So Lois took a walk.

She walked on the Appalachian Trail. But before she walked, she went among her friends and got pledges of financial support for her walk. For every mile she walked, she raised money to send to organizations that were removing the land mines. Over 70 years old and Lois Baker did something ordinary. She took a walk. But she did something radical. She walked for her love of Jesus, and because she knew Jesus loved all the children of the world. Lois did not have too much wine to drink. She just felt the winds of Pentecost blow in her life.

Do Presbyterians believe in Pentecost? Do Presbyterians believe the winds of the Holy Spirit still blow? Do Presbyterians believe businessmen might actually leave their office and join ordinary radicals in a new dance? Do Presbyterians ever consider taking a walk for Jesus? Do Presbyterians remember how to ride a bicycle?

The expected answer is no. We are a part of denomination that has suffered significant declines over the years, and some equally painful divisions. So you might expect me to say no, Presbyterians have completely forgotten how to ride a bicycle.

But this past week I was given applications for 11 different projects in our Presbytery. These applications are part of the Vision Initiative for our Presbytery. As I read these applications, I was struck by how ordinary they were. And at the same time, I was struck by how radical they were. Each project represented a congregation, or a person, who had some vision. In some way, whether great or small, they wanted to further the kingdom of God. These 11 projects reminded me Presbyterians do remember

² Claiborne, 121, 122.

how to ride a bicycle. These projects reminded me the winds of Pentecost still blow in the Presbyterian Church.

The First African Presbyterian Church, made up primarily of Nigerians, has a vision called Reach out to Houston and beyond Evangelism Project. Listen to a portion of their vision. “The Reach out to Houston and beyond Evangelism Project will enable the church to blanket the greater Houston area with enough information about the church. The church will use a weekly radio broadcast, Christian and local newspaper ads, spot mentions in local community organization brochures, and self-produced CD ministry containing motivational, devotional, and bible-based messages by the Pastor to get the message out. The flagship of the media blitz is the acquisition and utilization of a CD recorder-burner. It is hoped that each service, all sermon messages will be recorded and passed out in the 14 major African Grocers stores in and around Houston. The pastor will preach live on Nigerian wed radio, a favorite among Africans, especially Nigerians in and around Houston. This web radio records over 15,000 hits per day.” What do they hope to accomplish? “The goal of this project is to “reach-out” and win back our back-sliding members, raise more disciples for Christ and ultimately show more souls to the ways of Jesus Christ. The objective is that by the end of the year our congregation will have reached at least 75,000 people with the gospel as well as increased the membership of our church astronomically.”

Do Presbyterians remember how to ride a bicycle? Some brothers and sisters from Nigeria are going to 14 grocery stores to pass out CD’s of their worship services. Their goals are astronomical. I love that vision. Astronomical! The winds of Pentecost continue to blow.

And talk about ordinary. The First Presbyterian Church in Wharton wants to build a wheelchair ramp and a handicap access restroom. Huh? Has Pentecost for Presbyterians come down to wheelchair ramps and handicap access to restrooms? Yes. And praise the Lord. I read about the vision of this small church in Wharton and I wanted to cry...with joy and with gratitude. They wrote, “This activity will provide the ability for First Presbyterian Wharton to reach out to the following groups within the community...those person that are handicapped and needing a place to worship...community organizations and individuals who desire to utilize the church facilities and can not because of handicapped restrictions that exist.” There is a mustard seed in this proposal. A church that starts asking how they can reach out to one group of folks, those in wheelchairs, might just start asking how they can reach out to other groups. They might start dreaming of a church where everyone has access, and when access is available, they might go out and start asking people to join them. Can Presbyterians remember how to ride a bicycle? Shoot, we even know how to ride a wheelchair! Let the good times roll!

One project that made me smile was submitted by Mary Marcotte, who along with being a member of Pines is on staff at our Presbytery. Her proposal is to fund scholarships for 10 people to attend a conference for church educators. She wants to send volunteers, people who give their time without pay, who give their time as a gift, people like you who are the backbone of every church. Her proposal reminded me that when just one person in a congregation has a vision, a vision for education and discipleship, amazing things can happen. Sending these volunteers to the conference might “energize and equip those who serve as volunteers in their particular congregation.” How ordinary can you get? And how radical to believe that just one person in just one church can be the

spark for renewal and revival. Mary's proposal reminds me of the saying that one person plus God makes a majority. Get on that bicycle and take a ride, and feel the winds of Pentecost blow through your hair and awaken dreams and visions in your heart.

I'm thinking today of Karen Ward, who stood up before you a few months ago with a plate. It was a plate for cookies. She baked cookies, put them on the plate, gave them to someone and attached a note. Pass this plate and some cookies on to someone else. I have no idea where that plate is. But every time a door opens to a home and those cookies are delivered to yet another family, with the invitation to be a neighbor to someone else, to practice the hospitality that is at the core of being a Christian, every time a door is opened the winds of Pentecost blow into that house. Here's an idea. If you have that plate and it's your turn to deliver, why not deliver them on a bicycle? We need more bicycles in our lives.

Ordinary radicals are people like you and me who don't settle for life as it is offered by our culture. We have not been called to be individuals who are self sufficient and isolated by our gadgets and electronic equipment. We have been called to ride bicycles, to dance, to walk among the people who make up our city and get to know others, welcome others, reach out to others, love others, and create a community.

Ali Barton will never understand how my heart jumped for joy the other night. I was walking on the Terry Hershey trail with Julie late in the evening, when Ali and her mom Betsy passed us on their bicycles. Ali had a canvas bag...not plastic, canvas...reusable. It was filled with dewberries. She had been up on the Addicks Reservoir picking wild dewberries. Her hands were stained with the juice. A junior in high school, riding her bicycle...with her mom...picking berries...wild berries...in a canvas tote bag. How ordinary. How radical. How awesome. I was so overcome I told Ali and Betsy that if they washed up the berries I would make them a pie. The problem with being a pastor is people actually think you mean what you say. At 8 that night there was a knock on our door. Betsy was there, with her other daughter Casey, and the dewberries, all washed up. What could I do? I grabbed some shortening and a few other ingredients, headed over to the Bartons, and with the help of this precious family we made a pie together. The only problem was we needed to batten the hatches. The winds of Pentecost were blowing strong as we had a fresh experience of the Holy Spirit.

We have a few less radicals among us than we did. Alastair and Catherine Rundle have moved on, along with their apprentices in radical living, Zoe and Peter. As amazing as the Rundles are, living in the low-income apartment near Sherwood Elementary, choosing to live a simple and sacrificial life, choosing to embrace risk rather than seeking safety, as amazing as the Rundles are, as radical as they are, the lesson they taught us is that they lived an ordinary life. They simply lived among people with some needs and made friends with them. These friendships stretched them, tested and tried them, but it was all really very ordinary, meals and laundry, homework with kids and games at a park, hospitals and hospitality. The Rundles did the ordinary thing of loving their neighbor. The Rundles left, but in leaving they left me this book about ordinary radicals. The last line on their note reads, "This comes with a deep desire that your passion for Jubilee be stirred in all its fullness."

Ah yes, Jubilee, that 50th year in the bible where freedom is proclaimed and debts are forgiven. Jubilee, the incredible testimony that every single person on this earth has the inalienable right of belonging. Jubilee, that 50th year that is set in motion with a deep

and cleansing celebration of God's atonement, God's healing gift of forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ. Jubilee, that 50th year that is grounded and rooted in something as ordinary...and as radical...as the Sabbath, that weekly routine that reminds us we are created in the image of God...that weekly routine that reminds us every single person is created in the image of God...that weekly routine that shapes our spirits and restores our souls...that weekly routine that equips us to rest so deeply in God that our work that follows is woven through and through with the incredible sense of God's presence. Jubilee, which really does nothing more than put into practice the old saying from Leviticus, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jubilee, the 50th year. Pentecost, the 50th day after the resurrection.

Today the Spirit is calling. Pines Presbyterian Church, do you remember how to walk? Pines Presbyterian Church, do you remember how to dance? And as a lone...but certainly not lonely bicyclist rides around being just another ordinary and radical disciple, the Holy Spirit is calling to each of us, "Do you remember how to ride a bicycle?" It is Pentecost. The winds of the Spirit are moving, they're blowing, they are powerful, and pure, and sweet, and inviting. Do we remember how to ride a bicycle? Come, Holy Spirit, come. We want to walk, we want to dance, and we want to ride our bicycles. Come Holy Spirit. Let the good times roll!