

“Turnaround Team”

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 18, 27-31 ¹

It was good indeed to be able to worship with Matt & Anna, Hadley & Afton at The Baptist Church of Beaufort for the last two Sundays. The sermons were excellent, the music was inspiring (in both the traditional and “convergent” services), and I enjoyed getting to spend some time with their staff and with a number of their members at various special events.

I appreciated Jim Wooten’s messages in Beaufort and I appreciated listening to the fine messages brought to you by Rob Littleton and Chuck Thompson while I was away. I believe I feel more rested than I can remember after any recent vacation, and on the way back, I happily watched the altimeter on my GPS climb from sea level to the nearly 3,700 foot elevation of Sam’s Gap as we crossed over to “our side” of the mountains. I’m very glad to be back in Bristol with you!

As I return to our pulpit, I’m going to continue our previous journey through the Scripture for a while, but with some changes. Between here and our renewal services on September 12-14, I’m going to continue preaching a sermon or two from each book of the Bible in turn, but I’m not always going to choose texts I’ve never used before. Instead, I’m going to choose texts that seem especially helpful in preparing our hearts for our renewal services, and such is the case today.

The change of pace that vacation provides also makes it possible to gain new perspectives on coming home. As I noted in this week’s *First Word*, after doing an analysis of our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in this present moment (S.W.O.T. Analysis), it’s becoming more and more clear to me—and to many of us, I think—that our congregation is in a time of transition.

Many of our long-time members have become and are becoming physically challenged and are no longer able to “carry the ball” as they once did. While a number of our younger members have jumped onto the field and are carrying the ball, there are not yet enough of them on the field to be victorious. Many of our younger members seem uncommitted, and our older middle-age folks seem weary and stand-offish. Sunday School and Wednesday night activities are struggling badly. There is a general sense of fatigue among us, a lack of fire and fervor that many of us find troubling. And the larger economic troubles of our nation are certainly having their effect on us, too.

While we’ve been in similar situations before during my nearly nine years with you, I’ve found myself wondering in recent months whether these circumstances are signs that the congregation needs a fresh start with new leadership. I thought about that quite a bit in Beaufort.

I’ll soon be sixty years old, and I imagine that if health allows, I have something like ten years of full-time ministry left to go. I don’t want to coast my way to 2020, and I don’t want to be in the way of what God plans to do, either. At the same time, while the second decade is a struggle for many—maybe most—marriages, many studies have indicated that the second decade frequently marks the most productive years of pastor-parish relationships—often beginning somewhere about the ninth year.

I’ve told you before that from the very beginning of our relationship, I’ve had the sense that serving as your pastor is the role for which God has been preparing me all my life. I’ve considered other options along the way, but I really do not feel released from that reality. As best I know my heart, I don’t want to start over at zero for the last decade of my full-time ministry. I want to go farther in and higher up with you. I want to keep growing, stretching, learning, and changing as your pastor so that I can lead you to places we’ve not been before.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on July 11, 2010.

Having said that, it's still the case that we're in a time of transition as a congregation. We live in a world that is changing much faster than many of us realize, and our Great Commission continues to be to reach that world with the Good News of Jesus, making disciples of all the nations, starting at 1 Virginia Street, Bristol, Virginia.

You and I are going to have to decide what we really want to have happen during the next ten years. Do we want to get from 2010 to 2020 "somehow," as Luella puts it, or do we want to get there triumphantly? We need to ask ourselves rigorously and honestly why we seem so tired at the moment, so lackluster, so uncommitted to the work of God's Kingdom.

Systems analysts are fond of pointing out that systems are always perfectly designed to achieve the results they are currently producing. If different results are desired, then a different system must be designed. And, given the evidence at hand, the odds are pretty strong that we, like many other congregations these days, are well prepared to minister to a world that no longer exists. We are not well prepared to minister to the world that already is or to the world that is being born.

My own journey of discernment about the next decade has caused me to employ a leadership coach in Charlottesville whom our Virginia Baptist leaders recommended to me. Dr. Dan Elash serves as consultant to many Virginia Baptist congregations, and his client list also includes such people as Admiral Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In my conversation with Dan last Friday about these very issues, I was talking about my sense of identity as a shepherd of God's flock, and Dan commented that "What you're telling me is that the pasture you're in is overgrazed. The nourishment there is depleted. Your job as shepherd is to help your flock move to another pasture where nourishment for the next season is already growing."

That comment reminded me of my long-ago encounter with Spencer Johnson's little book, *Who Moved My Cheese?* in the Denver airport.² I've told you about it before. The whole premise of the book has to do with living joyfully and triumphantly into changing circumstances, and the question that changed my life and that brought me to Bristol was this: "**What would you do if you weren't afraid?**"

I don't yet know the answer to that question for 2010, but I do believe that we are in an excellent position to ask it. Hockey champion Wayne Gretsky is famous for his comment that "I don't skate to where the puck is. I skate toward where the puck is going to be." "Skating toward where the puck is going to be" is the task that is before us.

Yes, we have many challenges, many opportunities . . . and we are well positioned to engage them. We have a great history, a good foundation, an iconic location, a beautiful sanctuary, a faithful core, increasing baptisms, increasing new members, a large cadre of wise saints, a significant number of younger believers, a capable staff, a streamlined structure, increasing missional involvement, an absence of conflict, an abundance of affection, durability of relationships . . . and the list goes on and on. These are significant assets that many congregations do not possess, and we give hearty thanks to God for them!

At the same time, the fact remains that many of us are tired, and the fire of our commitment is flagging. We need a new sense of a future story that will capture our imaginations, compel our commitment, and advance the Kingdom of God in ways that we in this congregation are uniquely prepared to do.

² Spencer Johnson, M.D., foreword by Kenneth Blanchard, *Who Moved My Cheese? An A-mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1998, 2002).

I attended several workshops in Charlotte on that very topic. Dr. George Bullard, the leader of those workshops, talked about future stories in terms of congregational vitality and vibrancy: “Congregational **vitality**,” George said, “is the capacity to create and sustain meaningful Christ-centered, faith-based existence that focuses more on being on mission than on maintenance.”

“Many congregations struggle with vitality,” George said. “Rather than being clear about their mission, purpose, values, and vision, they are stuck on the ritual habits or patterns of doing church. They act like cultural enclaves or hospice ministries. While the quality of what they do may be acceptable, the vast majority of their decisions and actions are based on their past-to-present culture rather than a sense of the new thing God is doing in their midst.”

“Congregational **vibrancy** exists,” George said, “when a congregation expresses obvious passion around its vision for a future that captivates its spiritual imagination. This vision energizes the discipling processes and missional actions of these congregations. They know who they are under God, where God is leading them, and they are intentionally moving in the direction of their current spiritual discernment.”

Using George’s language, we might say that part of our challenge at the moment has to do with congregational vitality and vibrancy. We serve a BIG GOD who has BIG PLANS for a BIG KINGDOM, and what we need is a FRESH VISION of our part in the Great Commission work of winning the lost and making disciples in the world that is being born around us.

Jesus told us that our love for one another would be a sign to the world of the Truth of His message (John 13:34-35). We’re doing pretty well in the “love department.” Even in such times as these, we’re refreshingly free from interpersonal issues and congregational conflict. But the Bible also tells us that *“the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God’s **power**”* (1 Corinthians 4:20). And we’re struggling in the “power department.” That’s one of the chief reasons we’ve asked Daniel Vestal and Jeremy Poplin to lead us in four services of refreshing, renewal, recharging, and rekindling in September.

Taking all this together, three things need to happen as I see it. First, if a new pasture is going to be cultivated and harvested, then the trees and rocks that are currently in that field have got to be removed so new crops can be planted. That’s the kind of thing we see happening on King College Road these days. As the ground is prepared for the new Academy building, huge boulders and other kinds of junk have been uncovered that have to be removed before the new can come. The first thing that lies before us is a process of personal and corporate self-examination that will, by God’s grace, prepare us for our services of renewal during which God will plant new seed in our hearts.

To put that another way, Jill and I have an invisible electric fence around our yard that keeps Gypsy, our Border Collie, from getting out. It works well, and that’s a good thing. But one of the reasons for our fatigue and lack of power as a congregation is that we’ve got an invisible fence of some sort that’s keeping us stuck in our overgrazed pasture rather than out finding new food. We need to find out what’s energizing that invisible barrier and turn it off.

The second thing we need is a compelling vision that pulls us into the future with strength and enthusiasm. We need a process that will help us discern together the vital and vibrant future God intends for the next chapter of our congregational life, and I believe that I’ve discovered it.

There are actually two parts to this futuring process. The first part involves a workshop in October to which I’ve invited our Deacon Officers to go with me. This CBF-sponsored workshop is on the subject of “Hopeful Imagination,” and it will be held at the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina.

First Wilmington has been where we are as a tired, downtown, moderate Baptist congregation. When Mike Queen became their pastor more than twenty-five years ago, they were in much worse shape than we're in now. But today, First Wilmington is the "poster child" for vital and vibrant downtown moderate Baptist churches, and we're going to learn as much as we can of what they have to teach us. If others of you want to go, just let me know.

The second part of this futuring process is a year-long journey that George Bullard described in Charlotte. I'm not yet sufficiently up to speed on the process to begin to describe it to you, but I think that you'll find it enormously encouraging, as I already have.

The first thing we need is **cultivated hearts**. The second thing we need is a **compelling vision**. And the third thing we need is a commitment to follow God's leading wherever it takes us and whatever it costs. We need a **commitment to victory**.

Jill and I watched the movie *Invictus* Friday night. *Invictus* tells the true story of Nelson Mandela's leadership of South Africa into a new chapter of hope after apartheid, focusing on how he encouraged the South African Rugby team from discouragement and defeat to winning the World Cup in 1995, a feat that energized and unified their nation.³

Invictus is a moving story of courage and commitment, the kind of story that inspires those who hear it or see it to aspire to greater things themselves. It's the same kind of story that *Remember the Titans* told about the T.C. Williams High School football team in Alexandria, Virginia, during the days of desegregation.⁴ It's the same kind of story that *We are Marshall* told about Marshall University's football team after the awful plane crash that killed so many athletes.⁵ It's the same kind of story that *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, tells about the turnaround at Chrysler in the 1980's.⁶

There are three lessons in these stories. The first lesson is that turnaround teams are composed of men and women of uncommon courage who have an unwavering commitment to an improbable vision.

Turnaround teams are not made up of people who simply want to be on a winning team. Turnaround teams are made up of people who are willing to do whatever it takes for victory to be won, and who will stop at nothing short of that victory. As François Pienaar, the Captain of the South African team, said of New Zealand's apparently invincible champion, "He may break my arm. He may break my leg. He may break my neck. But he is not going to get past me."

The second lesson in these stories is that what works in one situation may not work in another. South Africa lost the next World Cup, and the one after that . . . but they are currently the reigning champions once again. So the third lesson in these stories is that teams can be champions more than once—if they're able to assemble teams whose members have the hearts of champions. First Baptist Bristol has been a championship team before, and we can be a championship team again.

Many of us in this church are fans who are passionate about the success of the "Hoos," the "Cavs," the "Vols," and many other athletic teams. We know that those teams don't achieve success unless the players on those teams get beyond simply wanting to be on a winning team. Victorious

³ *Invictus*, by John Carlin & Anthony Peckham, produced and directed by Clint Eastwood, Spyglass Entertainment, 2009.

⁴ *Remember the Titans*, by Gregory Allen Howard, directed by Boaz Yakin, produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, Walt Disney Films, 2000.

⁵ *We are Marshall*, by Jamie Linden, produced and directed by McG, Legendary Pictures, 2006.

⁶ Lee Iacocca, with William Novak, *Iacocca: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam, 1986).

teams are composed of players who show up for every practice, on time, dressed out, warmed up, and willing to endure the pain of practice and scrimmage and battle. **No excuses. No whining. No schedule conflicts. No weather woes. No outcome but victory.** That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, too. Are you up to the challenge?

A disciple is a player, not a spectator. And a disciple is a player who plays his or her assigned position with heart, depending on the other players to play their positions with heart as well. In the end, all that I've said this morning boils down to these three things: **cultivated hearts, compelling vision**, and **commitment to victory**.

As you examine your own heart this morning, do you want to be on a turnaround team at First Bristol, or do you not? Are you a player on the field, or are you just in the stands, watching? If you're a player, do you know where the goal is, and do you have what it takes to be a champion?

And so we come once again to a time of decision. Our Heavenly Father is a God who heals the sick and raises the dead. Our Lord Christ is building a Kingdom against which the powers of hell will have no victory. The Spirit of God has given us the abilities and the power to conquer in every contest. But building God's Turnaround Team on this corner has to begin with you; and it has to begin with me.

What we need in this moment is not fans who have a vague interest in sport, sufficient only for being in the stands on occasional Sunday mornings. What is called for this day is a team of champions, sweaty players out on the field, willing to do whatever it takes to achieve victory. Do you have what it takes? And are you in, or are you not?