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First Christian Church
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“Tents and Stars”

(Proverbs 29:18) Where there is no vision, the people perish, but blessed are those who keep God's teachings.

(Luke 14:28-30 NRSV) [Jesus asked them] ...”which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'”

A few months ago, I shared this story with you in our church newsletter, The Visitor. But as I was thinking about this Thanksgiving Sunday and finding myself singing those glorious Thanksgiving songs, the story just kept coming back to me. So I am going to share it again: It seems that once upon a time, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. As they lay down for the night, Holmes said, "*Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see.*" Watson answered, "*I see millions and millions of stars.*" "*And what does that tell you?*" Holmes asked. "*Astronomically,*" Watson replied, "*it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?*" Holmes answered, "*Elementary, my dear Watson. Somebody stole our tent.*" The friend who first sent me this story had this to say about it:

Indeed there is a "tent" view and a "star" view in which to survey life's wonders and circumstances.... The story reminds me that both [the tent-view and the star-view] are important. Somebody better notice the tent is gone and do something about it or we are going to be vulnerable to the forces of nature. And somebody also better help us keep in mind that there is more to life than [just] the tent roof over our heads – for goodness' sake there are stars to see!¹

¹From private correspondence from the late Dr. Karl Irvin, Regional Minister-President Emeritus, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Northern California-Nevada.

The “star-view” and the “tent-view.” The Bible speaks of both. Both are crucial. **Both** are needed – both as individuals and as a congregation – if we are to faithfully respond to where God is calling us to go and what God is wanting us to do. Our scriptures for this morning, in fact, reflect this dual emphasis, both “star view” and “tent view.” The first, from Proverbs, conveys the “star-view”: *“without vision, the people perish.”* Now, we sometimes think that “the vision thing,” as the first President Bush used to put it, is a luxury, and that we can only afford to worry about vision when all the nuts-and-bolts, all the practicalities are taken care of. I once knew of a church in a tiny town in the Midwest which had more than \$300,000 in a savings account but would not use any of it for mission efforts that might have transformed both that church and that little community; instead, year after year, decade after decade, the church insisted that they needed to hang onto that money because “someday” the furnace might give out. And yet while that would indeed be a scary prospect in the middle of an Indiana sub-zero winter’s day, you and I both know that if that furnace were to fail, this would be the easiest money in the world to raise.

The irony was that that congregation – made up of some wonderfully warm-hearted people – was in fact slowly freezing spiritually. That is, because they could seldom see further than the needs of their building and their desire to take care of themselves they more and more lacked any fire, any passion, for doing for others, for sharing the Good News, for risking new things. For too many of them the vision that they once had instead become a nearsighted myopia. And, it will not surprise you to know, no one who wandered their way into that congregation from time to time found it particularly enticing because the people were indeed on fire for nothing, had a passion for nothing, and one couldn’t tell how their love of Jesus Christ made a difference in their little town. *Where there is no vision, the people perish.* Where there is no “star-view,” life and faith are far, far less than they could be.

But the “tent-view” is also essential. And again, scripture attests to that. Our second scripture for today is that curious little parable where Jesus applauds those who indeed are cognizant of the nuts-and-bolts of their situation, who are able to look at things with a clear-eyed appraisal of the resources available for a project. If you start to build a tower, Jesus says, and don’t “count the costs,” then you might end up the subject of ridicule when you are unable to finish what you started. And, of course, there is hardly anything that is more dispiriting than beginning a project with enthusiasm and excitement but finding down the line that something crucial was missing, some resource for completing the task that just wasn’t there. Now, just as every church needs its “vision” people, its “star-view” people so that its aims won’t become parochial and much too puny, at the same time every church needs its “tent-view” people too. I am so grateful in our congregation that we have faithful, dedicated, clear-eyed Christians who remind us of that “tent-view,” who ask good questions about particularities and practicalities and who do so not because they want to stifle and stymie mission, but because, indeed, they want it to succeed.

So, the trick in the life of this or any church that allows it to remain faithful to what God is calling it to be and to do is this: the church must have and honor and value **both** the “star-view,” the “vision thing,” **and** the “tent-view.” But neither one must ever subsume the other. For an over-emphasis on one or the other will **stop** the mission that the church is called to do. For, on the one hand, if a church has *only* those who are visionaries, *only* those who look up and see the immense stars of plenteous possibility then it is very likely that none of those visions will get realized because no practical steps will ever get undertaken to achieve any of them! And, maybe even more importantly, the various visions will compete, as it were, with one another and the result will be the same as if there were no vision – the church is stymied and stunted. But, on

the other hand, if a church has *only* those who are “tent-view” people, *only* those who see what is the case, *only* those who see the things that limit what can be, then a church risks turning inward, becoming scared, finding reasons never to risk, never to try, never to countenance that God may be calling for a new thing. And the result here is also the same: the church is stymied and stunted.

But when both “star-people” and “tent-people” can combine their talents, when neither ever insists that theirs is the only way, when both sorts of folks, both sorts of temperaments, express themselves openly and honestly and respectfully, and when – and this is the crucial one – when both realize that the church is never, ever just about ourselves, but always about those whom we can reach out to who don’t know the good news of the Gospel – then the church can do incredible things. It has happened time and time again here at First Christian Church when new occasions, new opportunities for mission and ministry presented themselves and star-people and tent-people worked together to respond well to the challenges that God was offering. And, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, I am very grateful for that. I am very thankful that God has placed and continues to place folks in our midst who have a variety of gifts and talents whom we continue to welcome for all that they can do and for how they can help change us. We are “star-view” people **and** we are “tent-view” people – and together we are committed to putting our perspectives, our points of view, our talents to work to do what needs doing, to serve those who need us, to show Christ to those who know Him not, and to show those whose experience of “church” has been harsh and hurtful that there is another way, a gentler way, a more gracious way that reflects a God of gentleness and grace.

But you know, it’s not just about churches; let me leave you with this thought: Every single life has in it both its tent-view and its star-view. Each one of you in this

room is lured, I hope, by big things, vision-things, but you are also formed and shaped by the realities of what is, the tent-things. We all are mixtures of star-view and tent-view. The question I would leave you with this morning is this: Has either of these gotten out of whack in your life? Do you find yourself frustrated and vaguely dissatisfied because there are, as it were, too many stars, too many things that you feel called to do or be or think about or aspire to? Does the very wideness of those possibilities leave you immobilized? Then you need to ask God to give you some more tent-view, to give you the courage to pick one of those star-views and give yourself to it, wholeheartedly and passionately, so that you won't be stuck and stymied anymore. Or maybe, for you, it's not the star-view that looms largest, but the tent-view. Maybe you are finding that all you can see these days is the roof of some tent enshrouding your life, all you can see are the practicalities and not the possibilities. Maybe you are fearful to poke your head outside of your tent and pick a star to follow. If so, then pray to God to give you more resolve to not let yourself be trapped by what is, but to know the power of what could be, what might be. Just like every church, every person's life too needs a mix, a balance of "star-view" and "tent-view," so that what **could** be is always in creative tension with what **is**, and what **might** be is in creative synergy with what **isn't**.

Our friends in our sister church family, the United Church of Christ, started an emphasis this month that has caught on in all kinds of places: 30 days of thanksgiving, a month of gratitude. It has been fascinating to see all the folks posting each day on Facebook what they are grateful for that day. It has been inspiring to see folks who have gone through some pretty hard and hurtful things nonetheless post their reasons for being thankful. It has been intriguing to see folks write of their gratitude for things that are both the same and very different from the list I would write. It has been instructive to be reminded of new ways to be thankful for things that I sometimes have

taken for granted. It's a good discipline in this month, or any month, isn't it? For it reminds me of the remark of African American preacher Gardner Taylor, that I've shared with you before, but it too just seems so apt in this Thanksgiving season, on a day when we reflect on and give thanks for both "star-people" and "tent-people." Here's what Taylor said: *"I have never known anyone who was truly grateful who was at the same time small or petty or bitter or mean or greedy or selfish or who could take any pleasure in anyone else's pain."*

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, my resolve is this: may I indeed be more aware of opportunities for gratitude, may I indeed name and give thanks for those in my life who have and continue to help me see both the stars and the tent, may it indeed be ever more true of me that I want, with God's help, to be one of those people who is not bitter or mean or petty or selfish or small because I am so very aware of, so very grateful for, how I have been blessed. And may God then help me to be a blessing to those God puts in my path. Those are my resolves this day. Will you join me?