

## **Being Myself in Community: Our Common Vision**

**Presented by Jack Heppner at Gospel Fellowship Church,  
Steinbach, Manitoba, October 17, 2004**

### **Introduction**

During the past six weeks or so various ones of our leaders have spoken about their vision for our Church.

Pete Blatz stated that his vision is that we recognize that we are “It” – that we have been touched and now we are engaged in touching others. He foresaw us promoting each other’s gifts and committing ourselves to a process of finding out together what God is calling us to. But he did warn that this process will require openness, honesty, love and vulnerability.

Garry Blatz envisioned a church in which we develop our listening abilities more intentionally. He said it is not enough to know about God, or even know God, but we must actively listen to the Spirit as he helps us interpret the scriptures and our times in order to discover appropriate responses to them, both personally and as a church. He did warn though that God will speak most clearly to those who are broken and earnestly seek him.

Ben Unrau held before us a vision of a community in which relationships receive a high priority. We are all needed, he said, both young and old – and invited us to enter into active participation in the community of faith no matter who we are. In the end we want to be remembered as grandpas and grandmas who cared about and related well to others.

Gerald Brandt saw in his binoculars a community in which we as individuals are true to ourselves. As we learn to be true to ourselves, he suggested, our relationships with each other will deepen and we will find ourselves naturally impacting the community in which we live.

At our Congregational meeting on October 5 Gerald encouraged us to recognize that we all see things from our unique perspectives. He encouraged us to listen to each other – to find out what the other person is seeing and experiencing without being judgmental. And we practiced doing that without making any decisions that evening.

I have been asked to draw together what has been said during these weeks – to identify any common threads there might be with respect to our common vision and to bring them into sharper focus. On the one hand this is a big challenge. On the other hand, as I began to lay out before me what has all been said, it was not that hard to find some common denominators to our vision for our church.

First, I find it of great interest, and of huge importance, that very little of what has been said has to do with precisely what kind of programs we will have. It was customary in the 70's and 80s to state vision in terms of specific programs, each with its own mission, goals and objectives. Already beginning in the 90s vision statements began speaking more to the issues of the heart – to the desires of the soul – to our needs to be whole together. So what I heard did not surprise me that much. And it did affirm for me that our church is reflecting the spirit of our times in what I consider to be a healthy way.

Almost everything I heard had to do with the kind of individuals we want to become and the kind of community we hope to be. We are very aware that we are a people belonging to God, but that we still have a lot to learn about living fully as individuals and as a body of Christ. And I think it is also significant that in the Sunday School class I attend we have talked openly about our fears that keep us from becoming what we envision we should be.

So to sum it all up, I think it is fair to say that our vision is to truly be ourselves in the context of a caring and committed community. Hence the title of this sermon, **“Being Myself in Community: Our Common Vision”**

### **Is This a Biblical Vision?**

I believe it is. I believe that the scriptures are clear on this point. Everyone of us has a built in desire both to be true to ourselves and to belong to a community. Both to fly free and to build a nest. Sometimes these twin desires seem to be miles apart, like two separate poles on a long continuum. And depending on our various experiences, personalities and life situations, we all find ourselves somewhere on that continuum between belonging and being free. We all find it hard to find a good balance. Some of us are afraid of truly belonging to a community, so we hold back from entering fully. Others are afraid of being truly free so they draw tight circles around themselves and their communities in order to feel safe. It is not as easy as we might have thought to both be free and to belong at the same time.

But, in case you fall asleep before I am done this morning, I will declare my conclusion at this point with a good deal of confidence. It is simply this: **that both the desire to be true to yourself and to belong somewhere are God-given and that we can begin to experience a synthesis of these two longings in the context of the Community of the Spirit.** This is a prize worth fighting for! If you knew this crown jewel to be buried in a field, it would be worth selling all that you have to buy that field and retrieve that diamond. I desire that you believe this passionately with me, no matter where you are right now on this continuum between having a sense of belonging and being free.

**There are scripture texts that support the vision to be true to ourselves:**

That is to say that Jesus cares about you personally.

*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt. 11:28-30).*

Wherever Jesus went he healed the sick with careful attention to the individual.

*And behold, a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment; for she said, If only I can touch his garment I shall be made well. Jesus turned and seeing her said, Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well (Mt. 9:20-22)*

Take heart Jack! Take heart Mary! Take heart John! Take heart Sue! Take heart! I care about your personal welfare and I am here for you. I want you to be all you can be!

On another occasion Jesus' disciples were trying to keep children away from him.

*But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter. And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them (Mk. 10:14-16).*

Each one of us, like little children, can feel the hand of God's blessing on our heads.

*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (Jn. 8:12)* Jesus wants you to be able to walk in the light and not keep on stumbling in the dark.

There are so many more passages we could quote, but perhaps this is enough. The message is clear. **Jesus cares about you personally.** He is interested in you becoming all you were created to be. He wants to see you fly free – to mount up with wings like eagles, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint!

Does Jesus care? For you? For me? Oh yes he cares. I know he cares. His heart is touched with my grief. Though the way be dreary, the long night weary, I know my Savior cares. This is a cornerstone of the gospel. God cares about you! So it is safe to say that the vision to be true to ourselves is a foundational, biblical principle.

**But, there are also scriptures to support our vision to belong:**

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep...I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father...So there shall be one flock, one shepherd (John 10:11-16).*

I am one sheep among many in the flock of God. One among many. But that is where I belong.

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).*

Together in one place. Together receiving the Spirit. Together experiencing the miraculous.

*For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Romans 12:4-5).*

We each have our individual place and uniqueness, but in the end a finger by itself is quite useless, if not absurd. We belong together.

*For you were called to freedom brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another (Gal. 5:13).*

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6).*

Again we must allow these few passages to represent that wide body of writing in the scriptures that affirm our innate desire, longing and need to belong – to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Taken together, these passages mirror for us the visions and desires that we have expressed to each other these last few weeks and months. Someone said to me recently, “I long so terribly much to be free, but something is keeping me back!” And I also have heard in one form or another recently that “I long so desperately to belong somewhere – to be a true part of something bigger than myself.”

The truth is that we find ourselves all over the map on this continuum between belonging and being free. And often the desires of our hearts are under the surface - hidden even from ourselves. For some of us our places of belonging are shallow places where we can not afford to be free, to be ourselves. And on the other hand, for some of us our individual flights toward freedom have left us lonely and longing for a place to truly belong. In both cases, fear keeps us from entering *that holy place where belonging and being true to yourself blend together into a mysterious whole*. But it is that place that I want to hold before us this morning.

**This dual desire – to belong and to be free - whether acknowledged or not, plays itself out on at least three fronts, as I see it: in society, in our families, and in our church.**

## **Belonging and Freedom in Society**

In our society we are bombarded with two contradictory messages all the time.

On the one hand the rhetoric of politicians, radio talk shows, and newspaper editorials want us to believe that we are in fact a real community. Government programs are there for the purpose of building and strengthening communities. My, how we feel we belong as the mile-long parade winds through our city and we all go to the museum to eat vereneki. And how proud we are to be Canadians who drink Tim Horton's coffee. That we are not Mexican or Iraqis, for that matter. Our flag speaks to us of a place of belonging.

Coming from the other end of this continuum we hear an entirely different message. It is a message of hard-core individualism. And it is nowhere so evident as in our advertising. It tells us to take charge of our lives. Be independent. To save to be free at 55 to do what you want no matter what happens to others. It tells us that our happiness depends on buying more products and services designed to meet our personal needs, wants and desires. And too often the very people that speak so eloquently about building a grand community line up like pigs at a trough to look out for their own interests.

So as we listen to the evening news we are forced on the one hand to meditate on fear – stories that threaten the security of our communities are the ones that make the headlines. On the other hand, we are forced to meditate on greed, as we imagine how the right tool, the latest skin lotion or the new toffee-glazed donuts will make us happier individuals.

The voices come from both ends of the spectrum. They swirl around us until we are all confused. Do I belong? Does being Canadian give me a place of belonging? Am I free? Can I really be fulfilled if I don't respond to all the advertisements that promise heaven on earth? Political scandals keep blurring our vision of a Canadian home, strong and free – a place of safety where I belong. And the obvious emptiness of the lives of the rich and famous around us whisper, and not too softly at that, that the end of your personal flight leaves you lonely without a true home. You have heard it said, and I think it is true, that the western world today is the loneliest society the world has ever seen.

On a few, rare occasions in our society we catch a glimpse of someone or some group that holds the desires of belonging and being true to oneself together. When that happens it is like a breath of fresh air. Personally I saw that in David Iftody. I see it also in some Alcoholic Anonymous communities. You may see it in somewhere else. But such sightings are rare indeed. And so in society we live most of our lives yanked back and forth between the elusive promises of belonging to a safe and secure community and the lure of spending your way into personal freedom. Seldom, at a societal level, do we see these twin desires to belong and to be true to ourselves working together in a holistic way. That is why so much of society is fragmented, no matter what we try to do about it.

## **Belonging and Freedom in the Family**

I want to declare right at the outset that God's vision for the family is that it be a place where we can find both a sense of belonging and freedom. God's dream for the family is that it be a loving community that nurtures responsibility and freedom for both parents and children. I say both parents and children because I believe that most parents have as much to learn about belonging and freedom as do their children. Many of us as family members – fathers, mothers, boys and girls – find it hard to embrace God's dream for the family as a place of belonging and freedom at the same time.

Some of us come from family systems where belonging meant everything. This invariably led to a sense that to belong meant to conform. In such rigid family structures you had to obey rules if you wanted to belong. It was often said by well-meaning but insecure fathers, that "...as long as you live under my roof you will do as I say or you are out. You will not belong here!" In such cases there is little room for being true to yourself. Any differences of opinion or action signals a crisis. Belonging means conformity – fitting into a box, untrue to yourself.

When this happens in such a home there are basically two options. Either the child conforms fully, or he or she bolts toward freedom - to escape the clutches of what is perceived to be a repressive community. Too often, in such cases, the one who conforms to preserve a sense of belonging becomes an inward prodigal – performing his or her duties, but bitter about the imprisonment he or she feels. In other cases the child bolts to become an outward prodigal, or in fact is driven away. My father was driven off the farmyard with a pitchfork by his father in a fit of rage. And how well I remember my father pounding his fist on the table and yelling at my older brother to conform or else. He bolted at age sixteen.

Now for those who leave oppressive family structures their first experience is often exhilarating. I can do what I want. I am free! I can be true to myself. I can make my own choices. But the agony of such freedom is that the God-given desire to belong never leaves. Often people who flee toward the freedom pole of the continuum become promiscuous in an attempt to find a place of belonging even while they think they are simply exercising their freedom. In the end they become lonely but are afraid to re-attach themselves to a family structure where belonging means total conformity.

So much more needs to be said about belonging and freedom in our families. But all I can do within the timeframe I have here is to affirm what I said at the outset, that in God's vision of the family it is a community where belonging and freedom kiss each other. Where we are accepted for who we are and loved unconditionally. It is a place where each one – father, mother, child – finds the freedom to be true to his or her self while in the embrace of each other. To the extent to which this happens we are living out the foundational relational principle set out for us in Ephesians 4:21 to "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

I will say one more thing about this vision for families. It is largely fear that keeps us from becoming families of belonging and freedom. On the one hand it is fear of losing control, on the other it is the fear of losing your sense of freedom. But if we can by God's grace overcome these fears, we can get to experience at least a measure of family as God designed it to be – a place of belonging and a place to be true to yourself. Is your family a place of belonging and freedom?

### **Belonging and Freedom in the Church**

What we have said about society and the family also holds true for our life in the church. When all is stripped away to the bare minimum, whether we admit it or not, what we want most desperately in our heart of hearts is to experience in our church a place of belonging and a place to be true to ourselves. It is my firm conviction that these are God-given desires. And I am delighted to have heard us tell this to each other in the past number of weeks. It is both a sign of courage and of hope that we have articulated our vision, not in terms of programs, activities and numbers, but in terms of being a community of belonging and freedom.

Like in society and family, so in church, we tend to find ourselves near one of the extremes. Either belonging is everything or freedom is everything. When this is the case we tend to lose sight of what God has in store for us at the place where belonging and freedom embrace each other. But I will declare, without a shadow of doubt, that what we have expressed to each other about our vision for the church is in fact the biblical vision of what the Community of the Spirit is all about.

But like in society and family, this place at the center with respect to church is both elusive and scary. It is like a treasure hidden in a field and no one seems to know where. But once you hear a rumor of where it is to be found it is worth selling all that you have to buy that field and dig up that treasure. But when you find it you will find it scary because seldom have you seen belonging and freedom kiss each other. So having seen this treasure you will be tempted to rebury it in the ground and pretend you never saw it. But the vision won't leave you. It will follow you wherever you go. It will nip at the heels of your every dream – this treasure! At least that is what happens to me.

This treasure is the Community of the Spirit as God envisioned it. It is found in Kingdom Country, where up is down and down is up – this upside down Kingdom of God, as Donald Kraybill calls it. It is a place where grace is actually lived out in relationships. It is a place of mystery because what happens among us can not be explained rationally. It is a place where honesty, openness and vulnerability are the norm. It is a place where masks are removed so that we can look directly into each other's eyes and see the living Christ. It is a place that celebrates differences instead of fighting over them. It is a place where people take priority over programs. It is a place where we ask for and receive forgiveness from each other without blushing. It is a place where strength is measured in terms of weakness. It is the City of God, a foretaste of heaven. And I have the audacity to

believe in it! And I am blessed to be surrounded by brothers and sisters who believe in it too.

But this gem, this treasure, is not found at either end of the continuum where we usually look for it. It is not found in churches where order, discipline, structure and programs have the highest priority. It is not found in those communities where everything is always black and white and where differences of interest, opinion and conviction lead directly to crisis. It is not found in places where leaders are afraid to let their people tread close to their hearts where they will discover their fears, weaknesses and failures. It is not found in places where people are more concerned about keeping their reputations than about being honest. In short, it is often not found in the established systems of Christianity because the treasure we are talking about has long been buried, who knows where, in the rubble of our shallow communities.

Nor is this treasure found at the other end of the continuum where people assert that they do not need the community. That they can live their lives of faith without thought for this Community of the Spirit, thank you very much. Total freedom may seem to fill a God-given desire for a time, but in the end the other God-given desire to belong will creep up on them even while they are denying it to be a valid desire.

So I would say that in talking to each other these past weeks about our visions, we have unearthed an awesome treasure. It reminds me of the story in 2 Kings 22 where workmen cleaning up the temple found the book of the law under the rubble. They brought it to the High Priest who in turn brought it to the King. When the king heard it read he rent his clothes in agony because he recognized what he and his people had missed for many years. Maybe, in spite of ourselves, we have spoken to each other about what our hearts cry out for most. If there is one thing I would like to say to all of us, it is simply this, "Don't be afraid!" All of us are afraid when suddenly we hold in our hands a gem of priceless value. It's like holding a cheque for a million dollars! What do you do with it? How will it change your life?

To those on the right – those still hoping to find life by keeping a semblance of community where you can hide behind programs, structures and control without letting others get close to your heart, I say, "Don't be afraid!" While the true community of the Spirit may be scary, it won't hurt you – it will heal you.

And to those on the left – those who have flown to freedom and are afraid to re-enter any place of belonging because of bad experiences of the past in communities that stifled you as an individual, I say, "Don't be afraid!" The true community of the Spirit is indeed a place where you can find your deepest personal longings fulfilled.

## Conclusion

I grew up on the bald prairies south of Kane, that is about fifteen miles west of Morris. There were few trees in sight for miles around. I remember that on occasion a phenomenon occurred in which far away places seemed to be lifted up. Does this ever happen in Steinbach? I have never seen it here, perhaps because I live in town and there are too many obstacles in the way. But when this happened on the prairies I could see the elevators at Plum Coulee ten miles to the south and the Pembina Hills twenty miles to the west. There they were shimmering in the bright summer sun. Yesterday I could not see them and probably I wouldn't be able to see them the next day. But for that special day, for perhaps a few hours, I saw this far-away reality as though it were close to home. It was unusual and very mysterious at the time. I was filled with awe and wonder at this vision.

That is how I feel this morning. I see a vision of the Community of the Spirit at Gospel Fellowship Church where belonging and freedom blend together. Do you see it too? Once you see it you will never be able to forget it.

Wherever you are today on the continuum between belonging and freedom, I invite you to embrace the Community of the Spirit we have, perhaps unwittingly, unearthed in these past weeks. Let's hold hands and move forward into a future where we both belong and are free at the same time. Does this sound like a fairy tale to you? If it does, then talk to someone else in our church who has caught a glimpse of the priceless treasure we hold in our hands – someone who has seen the vision beyond the horizon - a community of the Spirit where belonging and freedom kiss each other.

Amen.

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