

Preached by Paul Jacob
Men's Sunday
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
June 15, 2008

Psalm 100
Proverbs 3:1–7
Matthew 7:7–12

VISION

The sermon today is on Vision—about having a vision for your life. Rather than share something general about vision and our faith; instead, I'm going to share my own vision that I believe God has given me. I am going to share with you how I got it, what it is, what it means to me, and some lessons learned about what a vision can mean to you.

To know how I came to my own vision, I need to tell you about the most unforgettable person I've ever known. The story actually begins almost 40 years ago. When I was in High School in suburban Chicago, I belonged to a teen youth group at a Presbyterian church. Our pastor was good friends with a street minister working with the poor, the gangs, and prostitutes in the inner city. His name was Akira Makino, Aki for short. Aki never married. No one called him father or husband. But in a very real way, his family was the gangs and street people of Chicago. You've likely never heard of him and, outside of this sermon, probably never will. If you Google him you will find precious little. It took quite a while for me to find his name in the WW2 internment records. After the sermon today, you will understand why Aki would not have cared whether we found any record. He is, to my mind, the difference between fame in this world and fame with God.

Since Aki was close to our pastor, occasionally, at our youth group get-togethers or functions, Aki would join us. I could talk for an hour about him, but suffice it to say his stories were amazing. Some were scary, many were sad, all were interesting, and I did get to learn a bit about him. Aki was Japanese and being Japanese, he and his family spent time in an internment camp in California during World War 2, where a close friend of his committed suicide out of despair. While it was obviously distressing to be in an internment camp and to see the effect on your mother, sister, and brother, it did not appear to create in him a toxic resentment. He enlisted in the army and fought in Europe. After the war, he pursued an education, entered the ministry, and eventually felt his calling was to minister to youth at the bottom of society's ladder. He saw a great deal of violence and death both during the war and after the war.

I don't know exactly when he felt the call to minister to the street. He was a pastor at a Presbyterian church in Chicago in his younger days. I know that he did feel called to minister to the forgotten and lost in Chicago at that time. I believe that one incident Aki told me about did more to solidify how he was to perform his ministry than anything else. I want to tell you about it because it also shows how his vision for his life affected how he related to other people.

While Aki was pastor to this congregation, he also ministered to people on the street near the church. One person he worked with was a prostitute who, one Sunday, came to church and sat down in the back to listen. One member of the church went back to talk to her and told her to leave because the church "didn't want people like her here." The young woman left immediately. When Aki found out, he was livid. He abandoned his sermon that day in favor of a much simpler message—only a few sentences. I won't tell you exactly what he said, but suffice it to say he told them (somewhat colorfully) that they were wrong and that his ministry was to people like her as theirs should have been. The congregation was shocked at his attitude; and, as I said, the

somewhat colorful nature of how he told them and gave him a very negative response. But Aki simply didn't care—it sheeted off of him like Teflon. He realized that if his ministry was to be to the people of the street, he had to be on the street and he left that church.

Understand why Aki did what he did. He was convinced what his vision was supposed to be. The only question for him was, what was the best way to go about it? The possibility of not doing what God wanted him to do and pleasing people did not occur to him.

Being Japanese, he was able to move between the gangs without any hint of racial bias. The white gangs would trust him because he wasn't black or Latino, the black gangs would trust him because—well, you get the idea. He worked in the toughest neighborhoods in Chicago. An expert martial artist who only once had to defend himself in the decades he ministered. Presbyterian leadership, who visited the tough neighborhoods in which Aki ministered, were advised by police to have Aki accompany them—they would be safer with him than with cops.

The thing that I remember most about Aki is how upbeat he was about what he did. It's not that he was untouched by the misery and hopelessness he ministered to, but he was unscarred by it. It was as if his vision gave him a kind of insulation that enabled him to work in what we would think of as an unworkable environment without actually insulating him from people themselves. I don't know how to exactly explain it.

Aki had a certainty about what he was doing. There simply was no doubt about what it was that God wanted him to do and he never, to my knowledge, ever wavered. To this day, there isn't a week that goes by where I don't think about him. Aki was very kind to an awkward, self-conscious youth far removed from the inner city.

Aki contracted stomach cancer in 1974 when I was in college. I visited him in the hospital a few times and watched his health deteriorate. We would talk, not much about his cancer, but just about stuff. He was in pain and very ill, but he never lost his composure. I never saw any regrets or wistfulness, just the same certainty about God's love and what he did with his life. After he died in November 1974, he was buried in a cemetery near our town and the youth group at church constructed a huge, red, wooden cross at his grave site. He was loved by all of us.

Sometimes, when I visit my parents who still live in the area, I visit Aki's gravesite. I talk to him a little, but mostly I pray and meditate for a while and then leave. A few years ago, I was asking myself if I had done what God wanted. Had I made enough out of my life? I wasn't as far along in my career as I had hoped by that time. What was I really supposed to be? Should I be starting my own business? Should I be looking at other positions? To be honest, some of these questions were depressing.

So, about two years ago, I was visiting Aki's gravesite and while I prayed, I asked God to give me His vision for my life. I'm not a very metaphysical person, but I asked to have the Spirit whisper something into my heart. Let me have some certainty about what my life was now supposed to be.

I have to tell you it took me a while to truly ask the question. I am a firm believer in the adage that you should never ask a question to which you do not want the answer. And there were answers I feared. I feared being told that I should give away all I have and become poor. I feared being given something to do that would be beyond me. I feared being told to go into the mission field, leaving my old life behind. Most of all, I suppose, I feared not being important enough to be given an answer. But I had gotten to the point where my desire to know was greater than my

fears and so I prayed and I mediated at Aki's gravesite. I quieted my heart as best I could, asked, and listened for some time; and when the answer came, like a whisper to my spirit, I didn't expect it.

"Be a Father to Neil."

That was it. I hadn't particularly been thinking about it at the time and at first I wasn't sure I understood—I love my son deeply; I'm very involved in his life and we have a terrific relationship. In a few moments, though, I got it. My life wasn't about me. With those five words, God gave me the freedom to be happy with my life and not worry about importance or advancement. Not to worry as much about what others thought. I have one, main priority. Help my son to grow into the man he is supposed to be. I can do this, I realized. Not just can, but want to.

Now, those of you who know me will not be surprised to find out that I spent the next week over-analyzing this. I think I'm a closet Pharisee, able to construct elaborate rules and procedures to flesh out the plan and fill in the gaps; but I passed through that phase, and now I appreciate the simple elegance of it.

I am now freer to enjoy life than I have been in a long time. I no longer worry about advancement at work or getting far enough ahead before the race is over. Oh, I work hard all right, and if I get promoted, terrific, it's gravy; but I no longer fret about it.

Sometimes I think life is like driving down a foggy country road. It's hard to see clearly and it's easy to wander off the road and find yourself driving along the shoulder or even leaving the roadway. Having a vision of what God wants is like having rumble strips. They don't keep you from wandering off the road, but they make noise letting you know where you're at giving you a chance to make a correction.

I think that the two biggest obstacles to hearing your vision is fear of asking the question and being unable to listen.

If I have advice to give it's this. Do not be afraid to ask, really ask, God to give you a vision of what you should do with your life—what your purpose should be. If you really want to know, the Spirit will tell you. God is faithful and He will not give you something to do that you cannot do, and the rewards of knowing are immense.

Listening is hard for us. Sometimes, it's not because we don't want to hear, but because we don't allow ourselves to hear. Our lives are filled with tasks, work, responsibilities, desires, and all kinds of noise. Truth is, though, we've never been very good listeners, have we? The Bible is filled with examples of people with cotton in their ears when it came to hearing what God wanted them to hear (remember Jonah?). Paul, the disciple formerly known as Saul, had to have his attention grabbed in a dramatic way on the road to Emmaus before he listened. And look what came of that! Sometimes I think that distractions today leveraged by technology are just new reasons not to hear. Why we don't hear what God tells us is another whole sermon. All I can suggest is that you find somewhere quiet, practice meditation—whatever it takes to quiet your hearts—pay attention, and listen.

For me, it was a quiet graveyard without distractions and a desperate desire to know. Otherwise, I am no better a listener than anyone else.

Your vision will likely be something different—perhaps very different. Maybe you're like Aki—neither father nor husband but with a larger perspective of family. Whatever it is, I know this. You were made for this vision. It's why God called you. You are not about you. You are about something that you must discover.

Well, I'd like to be able to tell you that, now, I'm a perfect Dad and that I make all the right work-life balance decisions, but that would be a lie. I make plenty of mistakes—you just have to ask my wife and son. But I am a better Dad and I make better work-life balance decisions, and now I hear the rumble strips.

And for being an example of God's love and vision, thank you Aki.