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“A Vision Beyond Ourselves”

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James 2:14-17

When we lived in Colorado Springs I would take our children every October to Mr. Nick Venetucci's pumpkin patch. He died a few years ago at the age of 93, but he was a legend in Southern Colorado for his huge pumpkin farm in the town of Security. He owned 175 acres—every inch of them planted in pumpkins. He was the pumpkin supplier for grocery stores in the whole Colorado Springs area for many years. However, Nick Venetucci was not famous for growing pumpkins; he was famous for giving away pumpkins to thousands and thousands of children over the years – including Mark and Katie.

This great pumpkin giveaway began in the early 1940's when Mr. Venetucci was delivering pumpkins to a local grocery store from his flatbed truck. As he unloaded the pumpkins, groups of children were standing there looking longingly at the pumpkins and Nick Venetucci impulsively gave free ones to the children passing by.

The following year when a preschool teacher asked if her children could come and see the endless acres of pumpkins on his farm, he replied, “Sure, and while they are down there, let them each pick a pumpkin to take home with them.” And thus an annual ritual was born that continued until his death. Every year dozens of school buses from all over southern Colorado would make the trip to Nick Venetucci's farm where he by now had devoted 50 acres of his 175 acres to free pumpkins for school children. He would especially enjoy seeing children go to the far corner of the field where the pumpkins were so large that they had to be rolled back to the bus.

Mr. Venetucci, became known far and wide as the “pumpkin man.” A street and an elementary school were both named after him. He received a special award from the state of Colorado. And after his death a bronze sculpture of Venetucci was installed on the north side of the Pioneer Museum in Colorado Springs, portraying him handing a pumpkin to a child.

I loved the pumpkin man because he lived out the teaching which is the essence of Christianity. You find yourself by giving of yourself, you gain life by giving life to others. It is a story of faith and love

shown in acts of kindness and generosity; 50 acres out of his 175 acres of pumpkins were devoted to giving pumpkins away to make kids smile. That is more than a tithe of just 10% – it is 28%

Nick Venetucci knew that we are put on earth to see beyond our own little corner of the world, to bless and help others. He knew that his life was not all about him, and he became quite famous because of that realization.

It helps me so much to remember that when I focus upon others and the bigger picture, I find happiness myself. It is not all about me all the time—what I want, what I need, what I think, what I believe. And it is not all about you all the time, either, what you want, what you need, what you think, what you believe. You and I are here for more than just our own satisfaction, comfort, pleasure and convenience. We are here for more than just ourselves. God has greater purposes in mind for us than simply focusing upon our own little worlds.

We understand that truth in this church, which is why we are constantly giving you opportunities to serve and give. A group from our church just returned from a Mission Trip to Red Bird, Kentucky, a mission in the Appalachian Mountains which empowers low income people by providing educational, health, and community outreach ministries. I am so proud that this was our 6th Mission Trip this year!

And of course, see beyond ourselves is precisely what we are about in our Bold New Beginning Campaign. We are inviting this congregation to get outside of ourselves and see beyond our own comfort and convenience. We are trying to reinvent ourselves as we prepare to leave a rich spiritual legacy for those who come after us. It is a very big picture sort of endeavor, a chance for us to do something truly great for God, and not many churches are ever given such a chance.

Of course there will be challenges, there will be setbacks, but I am convinced that it is the right thing to do. And we cannot succeed at all if we do not even try. Did you know that the Colorado Rockies are in the World Series? Many superstars of that game were just average players. Babe Ruth, for instance, was a pretty average baseball player according to many students of the game. Ruth struck

out 1,330 times! But we remember him because he hit 714 home runs. Reggie Jackson struck out 2547 times, and yet he is in the Hall of Fame. There is a lesson there for us. If we are going to do this bold and ambitious thing, we have to take risks. We have to step up to the plate and try or we will never get anywhere.

And when we do step up to the plate, we're going to strike out and if we are lucky we might hit a home run. But we have to try. God is looking for people of faith who will allow God use them to accomplish great things. And people who are willing to do that will be remembered long after they are gone.

Many of us learned this lesson in our own families – that we were placed on this earth to be givers and not just takers. We may fail, but if we don't try we lose. We were given the gift of faith and generosity, and of course study after study shows that people who do have a big picture philosophy are much happier people. Some of us were fortunate enough to learn about risking, giving and serving because our families lived that example for us.

Being a taker or a giver, a consumer or a servant is a critical choice for adults and particularly for children and youth in such an affluent culture. There is a book called Silver Spoon Kids that talks about the dangers of children growing up with too much stuff and no chance to give something back. Newsweek ran an article years ago about the need to say “no” to our children and the dangers of raising kids who are spoiled, over indulged and never learn to serve and share with others. The article says: “Kids who have been given too much soon grow up to be adults who have difficulty coping with life's disappointments. They have a distorted sense of entitlement that gets in the way of success both in the workplace and in relationships. Psychologists say parents who overindulge their kids may actually be setting them up to be more vulnerable to future anxiety and depression.”

This brings us to the Scripture lesson for today. The letter of James was written toward the end of the first century, and it is really more of a sermon than a letter, containing 60 imperatives in just 108 verses. It is a reminder on how Christians ought to live, sort of a constellation of the ethical teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. The author is

examining problems which arose in congregations with regard to faithful Christian living. He is confronting and diagnosing the self indulgence and misbehavior in the churches in his care.

The author of James writes about deeds of omission as well as deeds of commission, the things these Christians were not doing, and the things they should be doing. James tells these Christians to avoid envy and pride, to be cautious in embracing the values of the world, and to learn how to control their tongues, because the tongue is a wanton thing with ruinous power, it can turn harmony into chaos, send the whole world up in smoke.

James says that we must be intentional about our good works, caring for widows and orphans, treating the poor with love and respect, and making sure our faith is manifested in works, not just words. Later in this passage in Chapter 2, James says, "Do you profess to believe in the one and only God, but then sit back as if you have done something wonderful? That's just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do? Do you think you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?"

Ours is a church with a passionate commitment to do exactly what James says--put our faith into action, to realize that we are not just here to think about ourselves, but to think far beyond ourselves. We are here to share what God has given us, so that others may be blessed. We were not placed upon this earth for the sole pursuit of happiness, comfort and contentment.

You will begin to notice in the months ahead that we are moving toward becoming a high commitment church. A church where people are deeply committed and passionate about their faith. We are going to become a high commitment church that believes in the spiritual practice of generosity and in taking our membership vows seriously. We want everyone associated with our church to not only be receivers and takers but servants and sharers.

It will be important for each of us to keep moving toward deeper faith commitment as our journey unfolds. We all need to hold fast to our faith and to one another. That is what this Bold New Beginning is all about, and we cannot do it without your support.

When Abraham Lincoln was president he would often go to church close to the White House at New York Avenue Presbyterian church. He would go into the side door and sit in the minister's study to hear the sermon so he would not distract the other worshipers.

He was leaving one evening after the service with one of his assistants and the man asked President Lincoln what he thought about the sermon. Lincoln said, "The content was excellent and Dr. Gurley spoke with great eloquence. It was evident that he had put a great deal of work into that sermon."

Lincoln's assistant said, "So you thought it was a good sermon?" The president said, "No. I thought the content was excellent and the speaker was eloquent but it was not a good sermon – for this reason: Dr. Gurley forgot one very important thing. He forgot to ask us to do something great."

With this Bold New Beginning, God is asking each of us to step out in faith and do something great. Won't you join us? This could very well be the best chance we will ever have to do something truly great for God. Thanks Be To God.