

**“Kingdom Class Goals” by Joanne Soliday**  
**Mark 1:9-15 and Ephesians 4:1-6**  
**Elon Community United Church of Christ, 5 March 2006**

If you’ll listen carefully while I read from our second scripture reading this morning, and I’m reading from the New International Version of the Bible, from Ephesians 4:1-6. “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle, be patient with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and there is one spirit, and just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, who is over all, through all and in all.”

I chose that scripture this morning to encourage you. If I want to lift one word out of it this morning, the word is hope because we need it so much. That’s what vision is all about. It’s not about deciding what we should build, or not about deciding how many people should come. It’s about deciding what our purpose is and what our vision is, and my vision has been broadened greatly over the last eight or ten years as I’ve traveled across the country and consulted in church-related groups as part of my ministry, seeing different denominations and different ways of worshipping. And, different ways of doing things don’t make a single difference in the word hope. Everybody wants it.

I find myself in Catholic colleges. I find myself there. I find myself with nuns who still wear habits, who all want hope and who all want the same things that you and I want. I promised myself I would tell you a funny story this morning, and I called Sister Francesca at Holy Family University Friday, to ask her if I could tell it in a church this morning.

She is part of a congregation of sisters who really want hope, and when I was on her campus helping with strategic planning, she heard me say to someone that I teach a Bible study that has drawn a lot of women to the church, and she said, “Will you come to the convent and teach a Bible study for us?” A convent, guys, a convent, O.K.? And so, I went to the convent, and I’ve never met a more faithful group of women, I think, ever in my life; women with Ph.D.’s who started to believe in Jesus Christ a long, long time ago and have kept the hope through all this time. The funny story is that they need sisters. Their numbers are beginning to get lower and lower. So, on my way out the door, Sister Francesca hugged me and whispered in my ear, “Now, you call us, dear, if your husband ever passes away.”

Now, that’s going after hope, O.K.? It’s courageous leadership, and that’s exactly what I’d like to talk to you about this morning. People are searching. Another little college I visited doesn’t say they want to do Best Practice. They are so Christ-centered they want Kingdom Class Goals, and that’s why I chose that topic for this morning.

Kingdom Class Goals are different from World Class Goals, and they’re different from Best Practice. They’re different from finding out how many more people can join the church. Kingdom Class Goals--and we need them. Before I began preparing for this sermon and my meeting with your Vision team, I went back to the research of George Barna, and if you’re interested in research you really ought to look up George Barna because he’s done the most substantial research on church that we’ve had over the last twenty or thirty years. He keeps track of all that we desire in the church and what people are seeking, and his latest Barna Report tells us that there are twenty million people in this country worshipping in small groups in homes. That says something to us. That says we failed somewhere. We haven’t been as relevant as we need to be over these last ten to twenty years, and people need hope so much that they’re seeking it in different places.

There’s also research that comes out of Barna that says that this next generation coming, the next leaders of our church value relationships more than we have. We worry about them joining cults and we worry about them running off and rebelling. That isn’t this generation. We do that. These folks want to be close to people. They want to trust. They want things that are relevant. They want the church to say something about

how we live today, and what we do in our church that relates to how we live today. So, with those things in mind and then with all those other things in mind, we are more disillusioned than ever as a community, and as a community of the world. And, the community of the world has brought us so much closer together. All over the world we are disillusioned. We are not sure sometimes even what's right from wrong. We don't look to see those ten great commandments. We kind of fudge a little and rationalize what's right and wrong.

We're all looking for something. Everybody's looking for something. Most of us are looking for purpose. It's no mistake that Rick Warren's book, The Purpose Driven Life, which I know some of you have read, has been on the top seller list for all this time. Just the title says we're looking for something. There's shame in all of us. We've done things wrong. We've made mistakes, horrible ones, some of us, all of us, probably. We've said things that we wish we could slip back into our mouths. We've done things that we wish we could slip back away and forget forever. We pay no attention to Jesus at all when he says he forgives all those things. We carry those things with us longer than he does. We have been offered the great plan to let those things go and find our purpose, and we carry them, and we carry them, and we carry them.

We've had failed relationships and we let those failed relationships set the guidelines for every other relationship we have. We're guarded. We're cautious. We're not open like we used to be. We're not willing to reach out a hand and be courageous and say hello to someone who's different than we are, someone who looks not quite like us. We're uncertain about our communities, our country and the world.

So, what's going on? And, why are peace and security so far from our hearts? Well, I've got to say that it isn't because we didn't have a plan. God left us with a wonderful plan. He said we could wipe all of those awful insecure, insecure feelings out and we could be a local church, and we could be the hope of the world. The plan was clear. The trouble with God's plan is that it depends on us. That's an awful lot of stock for Him to put in us when we're an awful lot of broken people, and when there are a lot of broken people out there who need His church.

God's hope is the church, and it is the hope of the world, and if we don't believe that this church and the church on every other corner in America is the hope of the world, then there is no need to do anything. We can sit comfortably in our pews every single Sunday morning and we don't have to change anything, if you don't believe that, but I don't believe that you don't believe that. I believe in my heart because you're here that you believe that the church is the hope of the world. The plan is simple. God did not make it complicated for us. It included four things. He said it's the people. It's you. It's depending on you. It's the power. I give that to you through the death of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit who stays with you as the counselor to help you, and to give you all of that energy and courage; and I gave you a philosophy. I told you that you needed to be my witnesses. That doesn't mean you've got to go out and evangelize. You've got to reach out a hand to anybody, whether they're the same as you or different than you are. His plan was pretty clear. There's no way for us to misinterpret it. There were just a few little words—to the ends of the earth. To the ends of the earth--not the end of the corner, not the end of Burlington, to the ends of the earth.

"Whatever they look like, however they believe, whatever they do, they are my people," God said. And, the plan is for you to find them and bring them to the local church. And so, for me, there is no question about whether we grow as a church. The answer has been given to us. The question is whether we're courageous enough to do it because it's troublesome. But, if you believe what I said, you've got to do it. C. S. Lewis said, "Live each day as if it were your last; plan as though our world might last another one hundred years." So, listen to the contradiction in that. Live every day as if it were your last one. If you don't do something purposeful and something that makes a difference, but know that you might have to do it for a long time.

So, it's not a burst of energy. It's not a sprint. It's a marathon. Marathon's are hard. You lose your breath on them. You fall by the side of the road sometimes. You need a drink of water or a drink of Gatoraide. They are hard on you, and if you stumble and you don't get back up, you don't win the marathon. So, God never tells us we won't stumble if we try to build the local church. In fact, he got us ready for it. He gave us

everything we needed. He told us in all of the letters Paul's written and all the Acts of the Apostles what we should do if we stumble. He gave us example after example about what we should do if we stumble, but you know what? The option was not to stop. There was no option not to grab this person's hand.

C. S. Lewis also said, "Work hard until the very end. Don't stop. There is a purpose until the very end." Don't stand around staring at the sky. Work hard to spread the word and build up the local church so that others will be able to share in God's great blessings. Even the great religious leaders that we know and that we quote from and that we study in our academic studies say the same thing. Be courageous. Kingdom Class Goals. Kingdom Class Goals mean that we believe what He said, and that we have a purpose, and that it is not philosophical. That means that this brick church on this corner of these two roads has a purpose. Its purpose is linked somehow to that college across the street. I know it, and yet, it is Kingdom Cass. So, you've got to be determined as its partners. Its purpose is linked to all of the people in Burlington and in Alamance County who don't have a church. It's not about people who have another church and getting them to come over to this church. It's about the ones that don't have a church. It's the ones who are lost and the ones who need hope, or the students who feel desolate and need a place where they feel there's a firm foundation.

It needs for you to dream big. You've started down the path. Now, you'll have to have the courage to change because you won't be able to stay like you are and have Kingdom Class Goals. There will be different people who walk in the door. You will want them to come if you have Kingdom Class Goals, but they'll be different. You'll have to move away from the people in the pews that you know you would like to go hug and you'll have to shake the hand of a stranger, every one of you. You'll have to show God's love with a handshake. You don't have to preach it. You don't have to evangelize, those words that we're all afraid of. But, you do have to show God's love with the shake of a hand, and you'll have to grasp the hand of a stranger.

That will be different for us. Some will come and they'll question the way you do worship, and you'll have to listen to the things they say about your worship service, and how you do it, the music you use, the way you begin your service, the things you do with the children. They will question it. They won't make it comfortable for you. They will question. And, because God said they should come to us when they have questions, you will have to answer those questions.

The generations of thirty-something to come will want to see new models of how they can be faithful, and they'll want them to be all tied up in relationships, in groups they can count on to hold them accountable. It will be their church the minute they walk in and say they'd like to join you. Now, if that sounds easy, well, guess what? It's not. It's one of the hardest. It will be their church the minute they walk in, even if you've been here thirty-five or forty years. It's God's church and it belongs as much to them when they come and sit as a stranger in the pews as it does to you. One minute of their membership is enough for God. But, your goals will be Kingdom Class Goals. I know they will, and as you gather in homes over these next months, and I'm excited that you're going to do that, each one of you has a responsibility. You've got to be an investigator. You've got to figure out where you're comfortable and where you're not. You've got to ask the questions you need to ask. You can't be still and then later be angry.

You've got to say what it is. You need to say, think about what you want this church to be, and you've got to grab at Kingdom Class Goals knowing that it will change you a little bit. Now, I'd be the last one to tell you to let go of things that are precious to you for your worship of our sovereign God. I would be the last one to do that, but I would be the first one to tell you that somewhere you may need to provide something that our sovereign God believes might be relevant to another's worship. And, that's what that will be about. When you go into your house meetings, don't sell yourself short. Don't cut your vision too close. Don't let your vision be about name tags or elevators or atriums or whatever your building plans are. Your vision has to be higher than that, and then those things will be easy to decide.