"Hungering for an Epiphany"

Matthew 2:1-12

Julie R. Harley – First United Church – January 10, 2010

As a working mother, I will confess I do not come home every night and prepare home-cooked meals for my family. My children think food comes from a box in the freezer, not a farmer's field.

So last Sunday night when I got home and started fixing a meal that actually involved peeling potatoes and making several different dishes, my oldest daughter was surprised. "What motivated you to cook, Mom?"

I looked at her and gave a one-word answer: "Hunger."

Just plain hunger: it's the motivation for most of what happens in our world.

Do you happen to know the hunger rate in Afghanistan? About 20 million people out of a total population of 26 million live below the poverty level – the deepest poverty level of any South Asian country.

Do you know the hunger rate in Yemen? It is 36 percent – the highest in the Middle East or North Africa. Yemen has the lowest Gross Domestic Product per capita of any country in its region. Life expectancy is lowest; the literacy rate is lowest; and infant mortality is the highest.

In the last 20 years, Al-Qaeda has recruited thousands of young terrorists from Afghanistan and Yemen, as well as surrounding impoverished nations. Do you think it's easy to motivate people who are hungry to become suicide bombers, to board airplanes carrying explosives, or to blow up subway stations and embassies?

Yes, it is; hunger is a very powerful motivator. It inspires us to survive by any means necessary.

Even in our affluent nation, more than 35 million Americans (10 percent of our population) live with hunger every day. One-third are children. The US ranks first in child poverty among all industrialized nations. We see it for ourselves, in the lines that form on Kenilworth Avenue hours before the food pantry opens. We see it on these below-freezing nights when we bring out the pads for homeless people to sleep in Centennial Hall.

Hunger drives hundreds of people to our door each week. Not spiritual hunger; but sheer physical hunger.

Of course there is another kind of hunger that motivates people. Those who are in power hunger to maintain control of their power. It's been a little more than a year since Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich was arrested on federal corruption charges. It's been about 2,000 years since King Herod got a tip from the Magi that was "bleepin' golden." The astronomers came to him looking for the new Jewish Messiah and Herod realized they could lead him to the source of a potential threat to his power.

Hunger can bring out the worst in human nature. Other people's hunger can make all of us insecure.

But there's a third kind of hunger that draws upon our higher nature.

That's the hunger for wisdom, the hunger for holiness, the hunger to be part of something bigger than ourselves, the hunger to make a positive difference in the world.

This is the kind of hunger that led the magi to watch the heavens, to study the stars, and to see one that stood out from the rest. The wise men packed up their camels and followed that star, on a journey that took two years. They followed that star from Iran to Judea, in a journey of 800 or 900 miles, because for them the Star of Jesus was an epiphany. They were **hungry for an epiphany.**

An epiphany is a divine manifestation; a sudden appearance or showing. To have an epiphany is to experience a great revelation or an intuitive insight.

The magi came to Jerusalem bearing gifts for a king, and they intended to pay him homage. But their epiphany did not turn out as they expected.

Instead of a king, they found a child. They were embroiled in a web of royal politics. They had to return home by another road – in order to avoid King Herod and his evil plots. And yet the magi carried the news of the Christ child to the rest of the world.

Don't we share the same hunger the magi felt? Why do we keep showing up, week after week, at First United? Here we are again, sliding into the pews, plunking our money in the offering plate, passing the peace, praying for each other.

We keep coming back. What is our motivation? I suspect it is hunger.
We hunger for wisdom, we hunger for meaning, and we hunger to be part of something bigger than ourselves. We hunger to make a positive difference in the world.

Sometimes that hunger here is so strong I can actually feel it. I've been your lead pastor for just 15 months now, but I can tell you this is what we are hungry for:

1. People at First United want to be part of a church where children come first.
2. People at First United want to be part of a church where youth are valued and nurtured.
3. We want a church that respects intellectual inquiry; where you don't have to check your brain at the door.
4. We want a church that values diversity and relevance, while also preserving what is good, true and beautiful in our tradition.
5. We are a community of activists. We want to do something significant . . . locally, nationally and globally.
6. We are all independent thinkers, but we have come to many of the same conclusions. We are unique, but united.

We are a church filled with people who are hungry to do good things, who are already doing great things all the time. But we also know some things are missing.
With all due respect and deep love for this church, I've noticed these things:

1. We talk about things so much and so long that we think we've already accomplished them. But actually all we've done is talk.

2. We are so busy doing good work in the world that we don't take enough time to nurture and sustain our personal relationships. Our kids might know each other, but our parents don't. We're good at organizing mission projects and book clubs, but planning all church social and fellowship events? We've got no time for that.

3. God is not always part of our plans. The God who works in mysterious ways doesn't work according to our timeframe. We're too impatient and too skeptical to be spiritual.

4. First United already has a great reputation in the community and the metropolitan area, so it's easy for us to rest on our laurels. It's tempting to simply coast.

5. We have seen a lot of pastoral turnover in the last several years. Besides Marylen, I am already the senior member of the pastoral staff! This transition in leadership has made us feel insecure, and we have lost some long-term institutional memory.

6. We are confused about what it means to be part of two denominations – even though we've been doing church this way for 35 years.

7. We have taken our historic financial strength for granted and not invested much time or energy in teaching people how to give.

8. It has been many years since we've taken a hard look at how we do mission work. Too often we are writing checks for charity, like a church-sponsored grant foundation. To use an analogy, are we working in a MASH unit responding to casualties or are we working to stop the war?

When I arrived as your lead pastor, it was clear to me that First United Church needs a new vision. We're ready for an epiphany---a fresh perspective on our ministries---as we begin a new decade of life together. To do this, we need to look beyond our own walls, just as the Magi aimed their vision at the heavens.

So here is what we did. Last June, the Council appointed a six-person Vision Team: Rick Ashton, Jane Barker, Mark Jolicoeur, Dick Krissinger, Mark Loafman and Sara Stevenson. The team met with me to develop our own process for discerning where we are now and where we need to go.

Our team interviewed a dozen community leaders who were identified by our Council members and staff: leaders of our Village government and not-for-profit groups

like the Children's Clinic and Hephzibah House and PADS, school administrators, newspaper editors, and community activists.

We then talked with leaders of 15 outstanding Protestant congregations across the country who were identified by my colleagues in ministry.

We held 12 vision conversation meetings last fall, inviting every member of the congregation to share their hopes and dreams.

There were a few times when our Vision Team felt we didn't know what the heck we were doing. We weren't following a traditional corporate strategic planning process. We didn't hire a consultant. We were relying on listening to one another and to God. Our major tools were prayer and wisdom.

We got discouraged at times, because we noticed that many of our vision conversations involved looking at small stuff inside our own walls, rather than a big, God-sized vision for our future that looks outward at the community and the world.

But we've come to a point now where we want to preview this vision with you. Our 2020 Vision will be the focus of our annual meeting at 9:00 a.m. on Jan. 31.

Why do we need a new vision? Is this just a meaningless exercise? Just more notes on a flip chart? I don't think so. We're hungering for an epiphany at First United. Here are some sobering facts:

1. All mainline Protestant churches are shrinking dramatically. Since I was born in 1960, both the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church USA have lost <u>44 percent</u> of their members. That's right: we have lost almost half our members in the last 50 years. There are now just over one million members in the UCC and somewhere between 2 and 3 million members in the PCUSA. Our church membership is in a prolonged recession, but no one seems to be designing a stimulus program.
2. At the same time, the needs of the world are growing, as you can see from the Food Pantry statistics alone. We are serving <u>four times as many clients</u> today as we were three years ago. And though there are more than 40 congregations in Oak Park, we are one of the foremost churches in this community. Most other congregations don't have the guts, the resources or the vision to respond to what is happening here.

3. This congregation has the potential to be one of the leading churches in the country, in both of our denominations. As a congregation, we have greater strength than our denominational structures themselves. The UCC Chicago Metropolitan Association has one half-time clergy staff member. The Presbytery in Chicago has about the same number of clergy staff that we do at First United. Forty percent of Presbyterian Churches in America cannot afford a paid pastor.

4. Most importantly, I believe with every ounce of my strength that those of us who hunger for righteousness need to take our work as seriously as do those who are hungering to do violence. In describing the bomber who attempted to blow up a flight to Detroit on Christmas Day, an expert on militant Islam said, "The group's leadership in Yemen has improved. They have clear ideological and strategic plans."

Do WE have clear ideological and strategic plans for the mission of Jesus Christ in this place? Are our UCC and Presbyterian churches actively recruiting thousands of new converts to our cause, as Osama bin Laden has done for Al-Quaeda?

Do we want to continue to shrink slowly over the next 10 years? Or do we want to develop some clear strategic plans to grow the mission of Jesus Christ in this place?

Brothers and sisters, we're hungering for an epiphany! As Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you're going, you might not get there."

Our vision cannot be scattershot. We can't do everything all at once. The magi were not following different stars. They followed the same star.

Our vision cannot be out of focus. Too many people are hungry and hurting.

Our vision must be clear and unmistakable – known by all.

Here is the way God might envision our future at First United:

I see that one day First United Church will be so radically Christian that your acts of love, compassion and generosity will astonish everyone.

Your unashamed faith in me will burn like a shining beacon, attracting people of every age, race, creed, and spiritual condition to create a community of life-changing worship and reconciliation.

Though others have used my name to oppress, exclude and preserve their own privilege, you will bear witness to me by liberating the poor, welcoming strangers, and caring for your neighbors – even when it is unpalatable, even when it requires sacrificing your own comfort and convenience.

I see that one day you will expect everyone in your community – children, youth, adults and seniors – to be shaped, challenged and renewed by the power of my Spirit. Your life together will be rich with deep connections, nurturing relationships and grace-filled prayers that extend far beyond Sunday morning.

One day every member of First United will live with profound spiritual humility and commitment to this shared vision. No one will be a spectator. Everyone will be actively engaged in worship and ministry.

I see you moving beyond simply providing charity to people in need toward changing structures that sustain injustice. You will call congregations and charitable organizations to join together to address the root causes of poverty, hunger, homelessness, drug abuse, gangs, crime and discrimination.

One day all of you will be sent out as advocates for all people, in our nation and around the world. You will invest your resources with joy to bring long-term, lasting change for generations to come. You are here so that my realm will come and my will shall be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Pursuing this vision will not be convenient. It's not microwaveable. It's not pre-packaged. It's going to take a lot of time, investment, and prayer.

We'll have to make it from scratch, with the help of God and one another.

Jesus said, "If you love me, feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17)

Friends, the world is hungry for a God-sized vision. Let's roll up our sleeves, get in the kitchen, and see what we can fix. Amen.