

## BECOMING ALL THAT WE CAN BE

God has a vision for the church. God has a vision for you and for me. God sees potential in us far beyond what we think is possible.

Francine Rivers wrote a remarkable novel about the great potential God sees in us. Called *Redeeming Love*, it is a story based on the Biblical book of Hosea. It is set in the gold rush days of California, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a story about a woman who was sold into prostitution as a child, a woman who survives by keeping her hatred alive. And what she hated most were the men who used her, leaving her empty and dead inside. It is a story about a man who loved her deeply, in spite of all that she was, a man who refused to use her, a man who saw beyond what she was to the beautiful woman she could be. The man's name was Michael, the woman's name was Amanda.

Michael married Amanda, but it was a one sided relationship. Amanda didn't feel worthy of Michael's love, she felt ashamed and guilty, and so she ran away. Three years later Michael's friend, Paul, set out to find Amanda and beg her to return to Michael. He found her in San Francisco and the conversation led to this moment.

*Amanda chewed on her lip. "I was sold into prostitution when I was eight," she said slowly, staring down at nothing. "I never knew any other way of life until Michael married me." She looked at him again. "And I never understood him, not the way he hoped I would. I can't change who I was. I can't undo the things that happened."*

*Paul leaned forward. "You're the one who still doesn't understand, Amanda. There's something I didn't even comprehend until now because I was too stubborn and jealous and proud . . . Michael chose you. With all your past, with all your frailties, with everything. He knew from the beginning where you came from, and it didn't make any difference to him."*

Michael loved Amanda and saw great potential in her, even when she couldn't see it herself, and he committed his life to helping her achieve that potential. And so it is with Jesus who gave his life so that we might become all that God has created us to be!

Today we continue taking a look at the vision God has for his people, the church. Our guide is the book of Ephesians, a brief letter in the New Testament, written by the Apostle Paul to Christians living in Ephesus. This letter talks about the great dreams God has for us.

But you know, when we look at ourselves we realize that we fall short of those dreams. When we look at the church, it is so easy to focus on its faults and failures. But when God looks at us, God sees something wonderful and full of promise. When God looks at the church, God sees great potential.

The verses we read today from Ephesians talk about reaching our potential. They talk about comprehending the love of Christ, they talk about growing stronger, they talk about being filled with the fullness of God. In short, they talk about allowing God's love to penetrate the hardness of our hearts, and when we do, when we really allow God's love to embrace us, we are set free to become the beautiful, wholesome, caring people God intended us to be.

Back to the story about Amanda and Michael - through Paul's intervention, Amanda is struck by Michael's

unwavering love for her. She decides to find Michael and talk to him. After a two day journey, she meets Michael, who is a farmer, working in the field. We pick up the story at that point.

*All her carefully planned words fled. So many words to say a simple, heartfelt thing: "I love you, and I am sorry." She could not even speak. The tears that had been frozen inside her all her life came, and the last bastion melted away in a flood.*

*Weeping, Amanda sank to her knees. Hot tears fell on his boots. She wiped them away with her hair. She bent over, heartbroken, and put her hands on his feet. "Oh, Michael, Michael, I'm sorry."*

*She felt his hand on her head. "My love," he said. He took hold of her and drew her up again. She couldn't look into his face, wanting to hide her own. Michael took off his shirt and put it around her shoulders. When he tipped her chin up, she had no choice but to look into his eyes again. They were wet like hers but filled with light. "I hoped you would come home someday," he said and smiled.*

At that moment, Amanda was set free. Her love for Michael was released and she began to grow and become the person Michael had envisioned her to become.

And so it is with us. God has a deeply moving, passionate love for each of us - a love that is unconditional, forgiving, unchanging, never ending, self-sacrificing - the kind of love for which most people hunger their entire lives, but never find. When we open ourselves to this love and allow this love to embrace us, we become more than we ever dreamed possible. We become the people God created us to be.

Wouldn't it be great if that happened? Wouldn't it be great if this place became a place where people are so fully embraced by God that they are set free to become all that they can become? Wouldn't it be great if this place became a place where people soak up the love of God so much that they grow and grow and reach their fullest potential? Wouldn't it be great if you became all that you could be?

It can happen! It can happen, because God's love for us knows no limits and God can accomplish far more than we can ever ask or imagine!