

New Hope Sermon God's Audacious Plan

Our theme today is God's audacious plan. As I look at all other religions, this is the title that fits The Lord God Almighty revealed in the Bible. Why that choice? The definition of audacious gives us a clue. Audacious means "bold courage, daring, fearless, not restrained by a sense of shame or propriety." What that means from a comparative religion perspective is that no other God acts like our God. In Islam Allah is the God of beautiful names, high above all mortals and neither immanent nor holding a personal relationship with his devotees. The Buddha was a human and made no claim to be a God – only to provide teaching as the enlightened one for how to transcend the sufferings of life. In Hinduism among the over 300 gods (lower case g), even the most powerful have not provided sacrificial redemption for their devotees. The Lord God Almighty has not only done that, but God has done one more thing that's our subject today. He has linked his purposes in the world to those who follow Him and made us Partners with God.

Have you thought about the implications of this? Doesn't it seem incredible that God would in a sense limit His work in the world to how His people respond in obedience and joy to His directives? If people need an overarching purpose in life, this would certainly be it - we get to work together with the God of the universe to fulfill His goals in history. **God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.**



But it's not what I would call an equal partnership! One picture to describe the dynamics at play comes from this story of a mother and her disabled son.

"When Sumner Spence expressed his desire to attend college, many people scoffed because he suffers from cerebral palsy. Sumner can't read books because his eyes won't focus. He can't hold onto things very well because his hands clench uncontrollably. Taking notes in a classroom would be out of the question. Anyone who knew Sumner would have thought it perfectly understandable if he had never set a goal beyond learning how to operate his wheelchair. But that wasn't good enough for Sumner. And it certainly wasn't good enough for his mother, Susan Spence.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable odds, Sumner Spence enrolled at the University of Delaware. His mother attended all his classes, faithfully taking his notes for him. Each evening she would enter the lecture notes into a special computer program whose digital voice read the notes back to Sumner as he studied. Over the course of 2½ years, Susan Spence scanned more than 5,000 pages of textbook material and edited the scanned text for accuracy so Sumner could effectively study. One particular class assignment called for Sumner's mother to go the extra mile. The students were asked to read Liam Callanan's first novel *The Cloud Atlas*. The famous author was going to be a special guest lecturer on the campus. Sumner's mom was not aware an electronic version of the novel existed, so she re-typed the entire book into their home computer.

When the class hosted an informal lunch to chat about Callanan's book, Sumner offered a number of insightful observations and questions. Later that evening, Callanan received a phone call from the professor of the class. Sumner's mom had just spoken with the professor, tearfully telling her how before that meal Sumner had never eaten in public with anyone other than a family member. He was always afraid he would repulse people who didn't understand. But, since he loved reading, he wanted to talk about books, and the lunch that day had given him the opportunity.

On the evening of May 24, 2007, Susan Spence took a seat in the back of the auditorium, and she watched as Sumner wheeled himself across the platform to receive his Associate of Arts degree. After addressing his fellow graduates at the commencement ceremony, more than 300 students and family members in attendance erupted in a standing ovation for this determined boy and his loyal

mother. Morning Edition, National Public Radio (5-24-07) and Martin Mbugua (with assistance from Sharon Dorr), "Tearful gratitude by graduate who triumphed over disability," www.udel.edu (5-26-07)

Can you see the parallels in this story with our partnership with God? It seems to me that we as humans, in comparison with our Almighty God, need God's continual provision of power and resources as much as Sumner needed his mother's help at every stage of his academic career. She is the one who attended all Sumner's classes, took notes for him and entered those notes into a format he could handle. She was the power behind his accomplishment. He needed to do the studying, surely, and complete the assignments, but it was because of all the resources his mother provided that he was able to do that and graduate.

Isn't that what God does in our partnership with Him? He has all the resources which he makes available for us; He provides all the empowerment, and then trusts us by His Spirit to do the work he has assigned to us. Partnership with God.

One Biblical example of that is the story of Joshua. From the text in chapter 1 you could entitle this chapter You and I. Look at the number of times God speaks (the I in the chapter) of all God will do, and then the things He commands Joshua (the you) to do. Partnership – You and I.

God has the plan –the audacious plan and it had 3 parts:

He makes the promise of giving the Israelites their promised land. V. 2 It has clear boundaries

He has the power for their victory – v. 3 I will give you every place where you set your foot...v. 5. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life.

And His presence will be with them always – v.5 – I will never leave you nor forsake you. V. 9 I will be with you wherever you go. (repeated twice)

But God needed the person – Joshua to make that plan a reality. He is relying on Joshua to fulfill his role:

Joshua's role:

v. 6 You will lead these people to inherit the land.

v. 6 be strong and very courageous, repeated in v.7 and v.9

v.8 Meditate on the book of the law day and night. (The word meditate means actually to mutter it aloud). Be careful to obey everything written in it

v.9 Do not be terrified (although Joshua was going into enemy territory with heavily fortified walled cities and giants in the land); do not be discouraged (because of the daunting task ahead of him and the people's disobedience that would cause defeat and vulnerability in the context of the vast numbers of enemies who could unite against the Israelites and wipe them out.)

But the partnership worked. In Joshua's first words to the people as leader, he makes it clear that the Lord is in charge giving them the land (v.10 & v.12). In fact, the entire book of Joshua describes the fulfilling of God's plan through Joshua - the man He chose as His partner.

From Joshua's story we learn an important lesson about who God partners with- It is the obedient. The one with faith and courage who mediates on the Word and resists fear and discouragement. The humble, the surrendered one. These traits are needed because the partnership is not among equals. God partners with us but God is the one with the plan, with the promises, with the power and the presence. We are not asking God to bless our plans; that puts us in charge. I see the role of humility and obedience particularly in Joshua's life in two incidents at the very beginning of leadership after God opened up the Jordan so the people could cross over to the Jericho area. Once in that enemy territory, God demanded that all the males be circumcised. That put the entire Israelite people in great jeopardy because all the males were incapacitated as they healed. Then the Commander of the armies of heaven came to Joshua and gave him the battle orders for taking the city of Jericho. They were to march around it for 7 days. Marching, not firing on it, not doing anything military – just

marching completely vulnerable to the arrows and attacks of the Jericho army watching from their ramparts. The Israelites were easy targets. Yet Joshua obeyed God's battle plan to the letter and the city walls fell on the 7th day when the priests blew their trumpets and the people shouted. God's unorthodox way to take down a city. But Joshua did it. A humble, obedient partner with God.

We see this same spirit in the Apostle Paul. Both times he mentions partnership with God are in his letters to the Corinthians. First I cor. 3 *"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow."*— Notice that it was a team effort with God, with each person doing a different part of the job needed for God to give the growth -

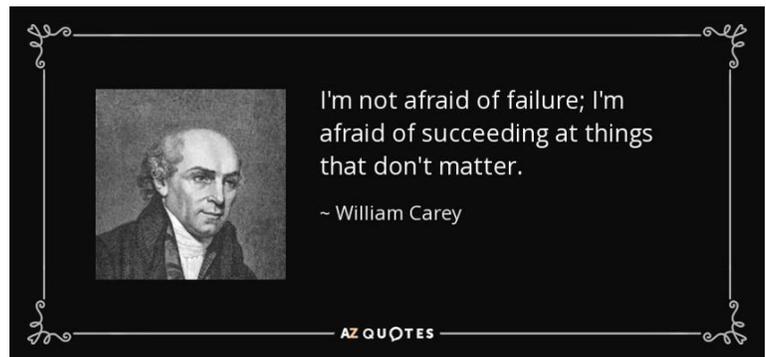
And in 2 Corinthians *So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. 6: 1 As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it.*

Here again we have the God and you idea from Joshua. God has made reconciliation possible. God gives to his people the role of ambassadors who appeal on behalf of Christ for people to be reconciled. But it's God's plan, God's power, God's purpose, God's presence, coupled with our obedience.

Let me give you two more contemporary examples of what this partnership has looked like in the past. I want to start with a quote by J. Edington "People who don't believe in missions have not read the New Testament." Two extraordinary/ordinary missionaries who partnered with God in mission were William Carey and Hudson Taylor. They lived and ministered a century apart.

William Carey has been called the Father of Modern Mission. He went to India from Europe as a missionary in 1793. I've chosen 3 quotes that express his understanding of partnership. First, "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God."

Second, "I am not afraid of failure, I'm afraid of succeeding on at things that don't matter." Now that's very interesting, isn't? We can easily get side-tracked on our own agenda, not God's. God alone has the power and resources to help us accomplish extraordinary things when we are aligned with His plan. And third, "Your future is as bright as the promises of God." Carey spent 41 years in India. When he died at 73 (in 1834), he had seen the Scriptures translated and printed into forty languages, he had been a college professor, and had founded a college at Serampore. He had seen India open its doors to missionaries; he had seen the edict passed prohibiting *sati* (burning widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands), and he had seen converts for Christ. He partnered with an amazing God to do great things.



Similarly, Hudson Taylor believed God and went to China as a missionary in 1853. He was 21 years old. Here's what he said, "The great commission is not an option to be considered, it's a command to be obeyed ... It will not do to say, that you have no special call to go to China with these facts before you and with the command of the Lord Jesus to go and preach the Gospel to every creature. You need rather to ascertain whether you have a special call to stay at home."

For those who responded to Taylor's plea for workers as missionaries in the Chinese interior, he said, "God is ready to assume full responsibility for the life that is wholly yielded to Him." This is very important because Taylor and his colleagues ministered at a time of great political unrest, which created substantial dangers for both Taylor and all the missionaries in his organization. He trusted God to assume full responsibility for each of them.

History validates that "Hudson Taylor became the most widely used missionary in China's history. During his 51 years of service there, his China Inland Mission established 20 mission stations, brought 849 missionaries to the field (968 by 1911), trained some 700 Chinese workers, raised four million dollars by faith (following Mueller's example), and developed a witnessing Chinese church of 125,000. It has been said at least 35,000 were his own converts and that he baptized some 50,000." (Ed Reese).

In addition, Taylor took on national dress in his work in China, although he was severely criticized for that by Western Missionaries. His most famous principle that comes out of his movement is called "Hudson Taylor spiritual secret." That secret, as a partner with God, was to rest in God and trust GOD to give his peace because it was God's power and God's work.

He said, "There are 3 stages in the work of God – Impossible, Difficult, Done." Being a partner with God does NOT mean there will not be trouble and opposition and even great suffering. Joshua had to defeat all the enemy peoples in the land of Canaan to take possession of it with God's help. But it does mean that there is victory. God's plan will succeed so we CAN attempt great things for God and expect great things from God.

Finally, Taylor said, "I used to ask God to help me. Then I asked if I might help Him. I ended up by asking Him to do His work through me." Amen. That's partnership.

Let us pray. Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 10/1/17