

Sermon for the Feast of Beginnings - August 2016 – Craig C. Hill

***The Best Laid Plans***<sup>1</sup>

Romans 1:8-15

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Acts 28:11-16

Three months later we set sail on a ship that had wintered at the island, an Alexandrian ship with the Twin Brothers as its figurehead. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there for three days....And so we came to Rome. The believers from there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

If you paid close attention to the scripture readings, you probably already know where this sermon is going. Paul had a plan. Well, not exactly. That is claiming too much specificity, too much certainty. Paul had a hope, maybe even an expectation, that he would someday go to Rome and preach to the church in the great capital city. He admits in Romans that that hope had already been frustrated. Yet we know from Acts that the goal was indeed fulfilled, albeit in an entirely different way than Paul anticipated. He got to Rome—as a prisoner. “We see through a glass darkly,” indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> Some portions of this sermon were derived from Craig C. Hill's forthcoming book *Servant of All: Status, Ambition, and the Way of Jesus* (Eerdmans).

It is interesting that the NT author who actually does talk quite a bit about “plans” is Luke, especially in the book of Acts. In all likelihood, that is because Acts is written *retrospectively*, where the plan of God is perhaps easier to discern. Isn’t that the case in your life?

Almost every step along the way of my own ministerial vocation has come as a surprise. I had other plans. Lots of other plans, in fact. Not long ago, my wife, Robin, observed that every single appointment I have had over the past thirty years came as a result of an external call and not because I had engineered it. The things I have thought to engineer on my own behalf, often as not, have fallen flat. Perhaps that’s not true with you, but that is definitely my experience.

Why mention this? It’s because today you’re taking a big step forward into an uncertain future, and it matters a lot how you think about it.

There is a lecture that I have given to every student for over two decades who has knocked at my door, eagerly wanting to talk about pursuing a PhD in biblical studies.

I first ask them to consider their gifts. How well do their talents, personality and interests align with this proposed course of study and eventual choice of career.

I might ask them if they’ve verified these perceptions with their professors. If for no other reason, we can thank American Idol, the auditions segment in particular, for teaching us that relentless, unremitting, incessant self-confidence is not always a virtue.

I then ask them to count the cost. Education may be priceless, but it comes at a price. A fine education is expensive, and not just in financial terms. It takes a lot of time and effort to become good at almost anything worthwhile.

Doubtless, the would-be doctoral student anticipated these concerns and came equipped with at least partial answers.

But then I get to the unexpected bit:

Are you able to let go of the consequences, whether a specific job or the recognition of some authority figure, especially one whose approval is essential to the fulfilment of your plans?

You see, you might well know your gifts. You might thoughtfully and thoroughly organize your preparation. What you cannot do is control your opportunities.

My own career as a pastor, professor, and administrator is neither a triumph nor a tragedy. It is instead a mixture of achievement and disappointment, of wins and losses, of ambitions realized and thwarted. Some things have gone better than I had reason to expect, but others worse. At

no point over the past several decades would I have predicted the course of my own career accurately.

The choice of the word “career” is deliberate. Except on the most general level, the New Testament has nothing to say about careers, even careers in ministry. It does however talk a fair bit about living one’s life within the framework of a calling or, to use our preferred term today, a *vocation* (from the Latin word meaning “a call” or “a summons”).

The pastoral vocation is lived out over many years and so, on a mundane level, is experienced as a career much like any other, with its own trajectory, with an inauguration (a Feast of Beginnings in this case) and a conclusion, with highs and lows along the way. The problem comes when career is confused with vocation.

Pastors who become embittered often get that way due to a misplaced focus on career. That is not to say that ministers should give no thought to where they would be most fruitful, most useful, and even most happy. They would be poor stewards of their gifts if they did not.

In reality, however, they probably will be required to exercise their vocation in ways and in places they neither expected nor desired. Whether they then flourish has everything to do with their perspective. If the desire of their heart is to be useful, there is limitless need and so endless opportunity. If their sole ambition is to be the pastor of the largest church in the state or the executive director of the denominational missions agency, well, that narrows things quite a bit.

Again, it is natural to want to employ one’s talents to the fullest extent. It is a joy and a privilege to do so, and in a perfect world that would always be possible. This is an imperfect world, however, and only a tiny minority throughout history has had the chance to “be all that they can be.” Countless Russian serfs, European peasants and American slaves might have been able doctors, teachers, engineers, or church leaders had the door been open to them. And the situation was that much worse for women of every background and class. To some, these examples may seem extreme, but they are the norm in historical terms—and remain too much the norm today.

Most of us are blessed with an array of opportunities, yet each of us still inhabits a specific context that constrains our choices, often in ways in which we ourselves are unaware. Ironically, our choices themselves constrain us. Those who have children assume a vital responsibility that, while fulfilling in itself, limits their ability to fulfill other duties. Every choice in favor of one thing is a choice against countless other things. Every opportunity has costs as well as benefits.

Will Willimon once asked me to teach a session of my choosing in his class on Christian ministry. I decided to tackle a subject I was confident had not been covered, “How to Be a Successful Failure.” Most of the students were in their early twenties, and none had gotten as far as graduate school by failing. The world, or at least the church, was their oyster, or so it must have seemed.

I attempted to explain that everyone in ministry falls short at times due to their own mistakes, due to the mistakes of others, or due simply to circumstance. A major part of what will eventually define them is how they deal with those setbacks. They were a polite audience, but my words fell to earth with a thud. It was a sunny day, and here I was selling raincoats.

By contrast, mid-career pastors are often relieved and even excited to have the chance to discuss failure. They are experienced, which means they have been beaten up a bit. Their best laid scheme went awry; life rained on their well-planned parade. This is true for pastors with twenty and with twenty-thousand member churches. They have come to understand that being faithful does not always mean being successful, at least not as they had initially defined success.

Of course, I do not mean to say that failure is either good or inevitable. I have no wish to encourage defeatism and resignation. It should be our constant aim to do excellent work to the glory of God. There are few things sadder than watching a dispirited pastor phone it in week after week. No one has been ordained to the vocation of mediocrity. We honor our Creator by developing our talents and elevating our standards. There is divine beauty in excellence.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that some soil is more productive and some toil more rewarded. We work the field in which we are placed, adjusting our labors and expectations to its conditions. Success in one patch might look quite different from success in another.

During seminary, I worked as the youth minister at a small church in Springfield, Illinois. It was a wonderful place, not least because of the presence of Rev. Bill Zander, one of the finest pastors I have known. Still, the youth group I superintended was tiny. It was a struggle to get six teenagers out on a Sunday evening. After that, I worked at a much larger church up the road in Peoria. Their youth group had experienced some problems, but it soon started to grow and eventually became more than an order of magnitude larger than the one in Springfield. Here I was, the same person doing most of the same things, but with a nearly opposite result. I am grateful to have had both experiences. With only the first, I might have been too hard on myself; with only the second, too easy. In reality, the context was the decisive factor.

They say that cynics are disappointed idealists. I prefer to be an optimistic realist. A realist, because we serve a world that is in many ways broken and dysfunctional; an optimist, because God is with us and will use us despite and even through our disappointments and failures. In short, what counts is not the impressiveness of our career, which depends to a significant extent upon variables we cannot control, but upon the performance of our vocation, which is in our hands. At times, the two might be perfectly aligned but at other times diametrically opposed. The good of one's career and the good of one's vocation are not invariably the same.

Let's be clear. There is nothing fair about ministry. It is service, often for the sake of the unthankful and even the undeserving—just as God in Christ has served us, unappreciative and unworthy though we may be. There is no keeping score. We love, not to be loved, but because we have been loved. It is service; it is not p.r. "Don't let your right hand know what your left is doing. Do your good works in secret, and God who sees in secret will reward you."

What has been said about pastors is broadly true for all Christians. Every believer has a primary vocation as a child of God and as a disciple of Christ.

Work is a chief means by which all of us participate in creation. Soon after Robin and I were married, I spent a couple of days building a bookshelf in our new apartment. Like God surveying the cosmos, I at last stepped back, gazed upon my construction, and said, "It is good." Note, I was not comparing my bookshelf to another's, saying, "Yours is good, but mine is better." (That would not have been the likely outcome of such a comparison in any case!) Nor did I think that I had achieved justification by carpentry. Instead, I experienced the joy of being junior partner with the Creator of the universe, of fulfilling my vocation as a child of God in this small way.

You might recall the line spoken by the Scottish runner Eric Liddell in the film *Chariots of Fire*, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure." To do a worthwhile thing well is part of every Christian's calling, whether pastor or porter, minister or miner.

In his book *The Disciplines of the Christian Life*, written for fellow prisoners during the Japanese occupation of China, this same Eric Liddell wrote that purity "does not mean crushing the instincts but having the instincts as servant and not master of the spirit."<sup>2</sup> The same could be said of careers: they ought to be our servants and not our masters, vehicles of meaning but not meaningful ends in themselves. For laity just as for clergy, the error is to mistake career for vocation. The former can be lost; the second cannot be taken.

To put the matter another way, a Christian is one who has chosen to live within the vocation of the New Covenant (1 Cor 11:25). It is a tradition in British Methodism to hold an annual covenant renewal service to remind believers of this fact. The centerpiece is John Wesley's Covenant Prayer. It is one of the most challenging pieces of liturgy ever penned, which reads in part:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal...  
thou art mine, and I am thine.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric H. Liddell, *The Disciplines of the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 72.

So be it.

To be honest, I wince inwardly every time I pray that prayer, afraid that God might take me up on my offer to suffer, to be laid aside, to be brought low, to be emptied, to have nothing. Nevertheless, this is my vocation as a Christian, to put myself at God's disposal, to live a life that is defined by something, Someone, greater than my career, my possessions, my status. What makes this commitment tolerable is that essential clause "thou art mine, and I am thine." That's what counts. That's what lasts.

Paul certainly knew that better than any of us. Acts says that Paul met a delegation of Roman Christians on his way to the city, and "thanked God and took courage." As he'd wished in his letter to the church of Rome, Paul was indeed given the chance to visit the saints in Rome, "share with them some spiritual gift...and to be encouraged by their faith." *It was just as he'd hoped and not at all as he had expected.*

If you know the New Testament, you might already have thought of James 4:13-15, which says:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." [or we might say, doing ministry and making disciples.] Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If God wishes, we will live and do this or that."

One thing God surely does wish is that you fulfill your vocation. At the most basic level, we should want, "to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength." One of the major challenges along the way is keeping sharp the distinction between vocation and career. The first is a constant and the second a variable, the first an appropriate end and the second a suitable means.

I feel certain that the program of study you have now undertaken will equip and enrich you. It should even open some doors for you. But I have also been around long enough to know that God's ways are not our ways. They are mysterious and yet wonderful to behold.

It is our obligation to prepare ourselves. It is God's to determine to what end.

Amen.