

Strategic Planning

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Text: Mark 9:30-37

One of my least favorite remembrances of things past from my old life as an officer of the United Church of Christ is the time and effort that we spent on what we called “strategic planning.” It’s a concept that the church got from the corporate world, where managers and directors review the company’s “mission statement”—and mission statements are something the corporate world got from the church—and then they set long-term goals and more immediate objectives. Or is it the other way around? I always get them mixed up. I don’t know how well strategic planning works in the business world, but I have a pretty good idea how well it worked in the church, which was not well at all.

When we did strategic planning, we would go off somewhere on what we called a “retreat,” which was really a misnomer, since we weren’t really retreating, we were actually charging ahead. Retreats were really just long meetings held somewhere else. But there, often at a church camp or conference center, we would plan. We would try to anticipate the future by looking at current trends and projecting future needs. It was always a little threatening for some people, because change was involved, and change might mean dropping some programs in favor of others that the group might consider to be more relevant. So strategic planning frequently was an uncomfortable exercise. Considering our efforts with the benefit of hindsight, I realize that our only real certainty was that in a few years we would have to go through the whole process again. Stuff happens; plans seldom work out as we expect them to. A wise person has said that if you want to give God a good laugh, make a plan for your life.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, we see a leader and his followers anticipating the future. The disciples, the followers, were planning. They seem to have been in frequent conversation with each other about where this movement they'd signed on to was heading. And being the quintessential human beings they were, they were arguing with each other over who would be in the best position to benefit or to wield influence once this kingdom Jesus was talking about came into being.

Mark tells us that three times Jesus gathered his followers together and said to them, "Here's the plan. I'm going to be arrested and beaten, and then I'm going to die on a cross." Actually it wasn't a plan. It was a reasonable expectation of what would happen to someone who told the truth so courageously and so forthrightly that the people in power wanted to silence him once and for all. Of course, Jesus also told them that he would be raised from the dead, but that little detail must have been overshadowed by that shocking prediction of his own demise.

Three times he told them what was going to happen to him. The first time Peter reacted with shock and disbelief and denial; the second and the third times the disciples chose to ignore him, basically treating him as if he had really lost it. It's kind of like how we deal with Jesus' more difficult statements, like the one about loving our enemies. "On the whole we agree with you, Jesus, but you've got to get off this unconditional love stuff. It's totally unrealistic, and it definitely won't play in Peoria." So, picking and choosing among Jesus' statements, the disciples ignored Jesus' prediction of his own humiliation and death, and went on to talk about what was to them the more important stuff: status and power and strategy. After all, who wants to be part of a plan that is guaranteed to fail by every human measure, even if it's guaranteed to succeed according to the measure of God's immeasurable love and unfathomable forgiveness?

We human beings have trouble operating without some kind of plan. During my time as Middle East Executive for our church, we had a missionary in Turkey who was a master planner. We used to pay missionary salaries on the basis of the size of the missionary

family. There were extra allowances for children. But when our mission money got tight, we had to tell our missionaries that there would be no additional allocations for more than three children. This man and his wife planned it out perfectly. They had their three children right on schedule—I was amazed at their discipline and their creativity—and they remained in the Middle East long enough to qualify for college tuition grants when those children were of age. It all worked like clockwork. Except that a few years after their return to the United States, when their oldest was still in high school, and when this friend was still in his mid-forties, he died of a massive heart attack while he was lifting weights. Knowing and loving the family, I'm sure that they did have precious and intentional time together, but when I heard the news of his death, I kept thinking, "All those plans, all those plans."

Voltaire once said that if God created human beings in God's own image, then we human beings over the years have returned the compliment. Since we are planners, we assume that God is a planner, too. And sometimes it seems that way, doesn't it? Husbands and wives will say to one another, and mean it, that "we were meant for each other." I've heard couples during pre-marital counseling sessions say that they thought that their meeting and falling in love with one another was part of God's plan. Or there's the man who started out wanting to be a professional athlete, and didn't quite make it, but who told me that teaching sports to children and young adults was what God really had in mind for him, and he's so glad that he didn't make it in that major league tryout. It was God's plan, he thought. Sometimes it seems that things do almost miraculously fall into place. A chance conversation leads to a good job; a broken romance leads to meeting the person with whom you go on to live a full and loving life.

But sometimes you wonder. Maybe for a time it seems that God has planned it all out so that things are coming together nicely for you, but then the bottom drops out. Life is no longer a happy series of fortunate coincidences, but a nightmare of corollaries to Murphy's Law: you know, the law that says that if anything can go wrong it will. Sometimes those things that go wrong are relatively minor irritations, like the proverbial toast that always lands buttered side down. But sometimes they are crushing human

tragedies, the kind of awful occurrences that cause us, like Job, to question whether God is indeed in charge, and if he is, what kind of God is this who would permit such dreadful things to happen to us or to people we love. I've had people tell me, with some embarrassment, that they're angry with God. I've suggested to them that anger with God is not something to be ashamed of. It's a testimony that we actually feel something about God even if what we feel is anger and disappointment. But then we need to go on and look at what our expectations are and how we see God's role in our lives.

I personally have trouble with the idea that God, for good or for ill, has a custom-made plan for me. If God had such a plan, then where would my own humanity come into the picture? What about my ability to make choices, choices that, along with external events that are beyond my control, will help to shape my future? If everything is already predetermined as a part of God's plan, then what is my role in this whole drama? If my script is already written, does this mean that I have no choice except to play out my part like a marionette in a puppet show? In other faith traditions we call that fatalism, or *kismet*. *Kismet* is an Arabic word that means "what is cut out for us," or "our lot in life."

So I have some difficulty with the idea that God has a nicely detailed plan for me. But I have no difficulty at all with the idea that God has a purpose for me, and even more than that, a desire for me—and not just for me, but for each and every one of God's beloved creations. The difference between a plan that determines in advance how my life will unfold, and a purpose that challenges me to discover God's hope for me and to live it out is the difference between determinism and freedom. To go back to Jesus' terminology, God doesn't go around putting crosses of disappointment and failure on our backs; God encourages us to pick up the cross of unconditional love and service to others. The cross is our choice, not our burden.

One of the guilty pleasures I cultivated during my time working in the Middle East was a love of Persian and Turkish carpets. I loved the whole process of buying a carpet: sitting in a shop as the owner gradually spread out his array of beautiful carpets, one after the other, as we drank tea or coffee together and admired all that beauty laid out in front of

us. Yes, we would haggle a bit, but we both loved what we were haggling over. You probably know that there is no such thing as a perfect Persian carpet. There's always at least one flaw, which is a reminder that only God is perfect.

One of the things I learned about the process of creating a Persian carpet is that when the weaver makes a mistake, she doesn't rip it out and start all over again, as knitters often do; rather she alters the over all design of the carpet to accommodate the mistake. The purpose of the carpet is its sheer beauty—each carpet's unique combination of colors, texture and design—but the plan of the carpet is constantly subject to change when stuff happens. The result is an imperfect, but exquisitely human, creation.

When Jesus caught his disciples planning, plotting really, what they would do when his kingdom was realized, he called a little child to his side. "Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name, welcomes me, and more important, welcomes the one who sent me." Jesus was telling his disciples not to be childish in their ambitious planning and scheming, but to be childlike in their acceptance of the wonders that life offers us. I'm always amazed at the resilience of children. It's a sign of their openness to the surprises of life, both the pleasant ones and the unpleasant ones. Children aren't great planners, except perhaps around Christmas. But they know how to live in the moment; they know how to play. There is something heavenly about being childlike.

God has a purpose for you, and God has a desire for you. God wants you to have life, and to have it abundantly. Sometimes living that life means abandoning those plans you've so carefully laid out for yourself; sometimes it means weaving a new creation around your experiences, including your failures and your disappointments. Live your life without expectations and you will receive blessings beyond any reasonable expectations. Trust me on that. It's God's design. Amen.