

Sermon: CHOICE ASSIGNMENTS

July 10, 2011

I Cor 12:7-18

Raise your hands if you have ever heard a sermon on this passage..... I think today's reflection will be a bit different than what you have heard on this in the past.

The point of most of these sermons on the parts of the body is that we all have different jobs to do that need doing and which are necessary for the whole body to function. Since everything is critical, you should then happily accept and value of your own job (or role) finding content knowing that in God's eyes it is worthy—a necessary part of a larger organism or plan. Most such sermons leave it there and send you off to try and be happy with your present circumstances.....

However, let's be honest. Sometimes you feel as though you have been dealt a rotten hand. You look around you and wonder why God has not blest you more or involved you in more important work. Perhaps you are disabled or sick and wonder why this has happened to you while others seem untouched. You ask yourself what is going on? What is God trying to tell me? Why me when far too many "less deserving" smucks are sailing right along feeling important, essential, powerful, talented, accomplished, healthy.....

Do some people get the CHOICE ASSIGNMENTS? Is God making a statement about our worth and commitment in our work life, our family dynamics, in our health?

I must confess to you all that this whole rumination is related to leaving corporate life and struggling to start a small business. I now get far fewer phone calls, often work in my sweats from home, meet people in coffee shops, don't have my 10-12 subordinates reporting to me, and don't get paid when I am sick. I have to fix my own printer, buy my own supplies and do my own expense reports. And, too often I am missing the freedom and focus of self employment as I long for the costume of worldly success. Like a person in exile, I am sometimes preoccupied with my downfall waiting to be re-discovered and placed back in my rightful and more visible spot.

We are told not to worry when we are only the hands or the feet rather than the head or the heart of the body. But what if we feel more like a smattering of cells attached to the body's backside or an arm pit? Much less strategic than even the hand....

I became a Christian at my church in Tacoma, where I grew up, at the age of 12. In my teens I often heard people assure me that God has a wonderful plan for my life; that I was needed to bring about the Kingdom on earth; and that all I had to do was be ready and willing.

I thought about that a lot as I moved through my teen years and early adulthood. I wanted to feel a tap on my shoulder when my ASSIGNMENT came. With gusto I embraced the jobs I got no matter how small considering them a link to the next more important ASSIGNMENT. Although I knew there would be challenges along the way – I assumed that progression to the CHOICE ASSIGNMENTS – you know the ones that are noticed and applauded --- would be fairly linear as I marched through life.

I wanted meaning, excitement, authority, and power. I wanted to see that my assignment changed the course of events for the good—in some way or

the other. I wanted an assignment that had a beginning, middle and end; one that hung together and made sense; that you could reconstruct as a story to encourage those who would follow me. A book about my life would have been nice but a movie would have been even better. Move over Bob Pearce and Billy Graham. Let me join the inner circle of saints and celebrities.....

I had high expectations of how God should use me. As I left college and took jobs I remained open but often had trouble connecting what I was doing to the ASSIGNMENT I was waiting for. Rather than getting that clear top drawer assignment, it often felt as though I was getting busy work to keep me occupied. Okay.... I could handle that since it probably meant I was being held until the time was right for my big JOB.

Years passed. Occasionally my assignments would yield precious moments where I felt that I had made a difference in the world for God. Once I was doing job placement for low income people in Los Angeles. Two years later one of my clients came back and told me how her whole family was better off because of the job I found for her. Another time, I arranged for a memorial service at work for one of my colleagues who was murdered. People wanted desperately to do something but no one else had the church background to decide what to do and how to do it. People came to me after the service and thanked me for giving them an opportunity to remember this woman and pay proper respects.

But most of the time, I worked away trying to stay busy all the while wondering if God didn't trust me or if my past sins and indiscretions had black-balled me from the really important stuff.

Now, as I am moving far too rapidly through what is graciously called mid-life I sometimes get angry at the lack of, what I would consider, CHOICE ASSIGNMENTS that have come my way. I also have been looking around and wonder why certain other people (and you know who you are) have gotten what appear to be those CHOICE ASSIGNMENTS.

Lately my focus has been on Oprah and her farewell shows. Did you see any of them? They have been like the Academy Awards only much, much better. One after another of the most famous people in western culture have come before the cameras to thank Oprah for her work and her life. In praising her, they have observed how she made them, and the rest of us, better people. It was heart-warming and humbling to see the affection so many people had for her and the high level of esteem in which so many seemingly held for her.

I was really jealous. I wanted adulation and appreciation on that scale; that feeling confirmed by others that my life was really being meaningfully lived.

Her retirement fete is the best example, I think, of what we can expect in when we arrive before God's throne in heaven—*"Well done thy good and faithful servant"*. God may not have shown up on Oprah to thank her personally, but after people like Bono and Maria Shriver did, it was easy to assume God was in agreement.

Oprah received a lot in those final shows, and indeed she has gotten a lot in the last 25 years as one of the most influential people in the US—Oprah got what many of us crave – an obvious CHOICE ASSIGNMENT that matters to the world and is often and broadly noticed. She got it on national TV where millions of people tuned in to be part of the adoring crowd. Oprah's assignment carried with it the ultimate gold watch, in-depth testimonial

celebrating her skills, gifts, hard work, good decisions, and great good fortune, not to mention riches.

Why did Oprah get all that while each of you in this room are lucky to have your children occasionally tell you they love you; to have the people you do work for say thank you; to get a hug? Does God need and value Oprah more than you and me? How did she snag such a CHOICE ASSIGNMENT? Was she more faithful? More gifted? More reliable?

Now, look at this another way..... While you and I are well-fed, secure, with all our physical needs met ---there is a very poor person in southern Sudan who has just enough clean water to survive but not enough to bathe; she suffers from the cold at night in a mud hut with few blankets, she has to flee for her life because she is considered cannon fodder in a racial and political power struggle that will not benefit her no matter what the outcome; she sees her kids die one by one from disease and malnutrition; She endures constant aches and pains from physical problems left untreated, and she will die of AIDS before age 45.

Talk about not drawing a CHOICE ASSIGNMENT. Why is this woman born into a life of suffering and hardship while we get to live in relative ease and comfort?

When I compare my life to that of my Sudanese friend, I start feeling a bit like I hope Oprah must feel. Blest by my undeserved good fortune! When I compare to my TV friend, Oprah, I feel passed over and forgotten, and wonder why God has seemingly abandoned me.

Do you see what is happening with me here? I am searching for my fulfillment by comparing my life to others. As a guy that often sees the

“glass as half empty” I look upstream in terms of wealth, fame, beauty, and power and can always find people who appear to have more or have it better. If I were a “glass is half full” type of person I might prefer to look the other way and feel great because I am not in Sudan or a host of other countries too numerous to name where simply surviving is a noble task.

To be honest it is very hard NOT to compare. This is human nature. We are constantly interpreting our own situation by comparing to selected aspects of someone else’s situation. Notice I say selected aspects, not the whole. I may want Oprah’s fame, her lifestyle, and influence but I am not sure I want her childless life, her weight problem, or the hurts of racial discrimination that she has endured.

Comparing does help us get oriented from time to time as we navigate our own lives. It does help us be socially appropriate and do a better job being part of a group. It might even be a motivator occasionally to do or even to NOT do certain things.

However, comparing our lives with others or comparing our ASSIGNMENTS with those of others also means we are taking our eyes off God. It means we are accepting the human interpretation of how the world works rather than trying to understand God’s plan and purpose. Most important-- comparing tends to make us miss what is happening with and to us, because we are so distracted looking away. We are missing the present by being distracted with the past or the future.

As I look at my own life and consider my ASSIGNMENTS now there are 4 truths that help re-orient me to God's perspective....

1. God's ways are not our ways.....

Our small group has been studying Romans. The book of Romans has a lot to say about purpose and ASSIGNMENTS. Bits and pieces of Romans are often used way out of context to make certain points (like calling out some sins as far more heinous than others- not true by the way). There are a lot of highly quotable verses in Romans. For most of us, we remember those while failing to grasp the overall message of Romans. Here is a quick summary:

- God is in charge of all things.
- God is not accountable to us or under any obligation to make any sense to us.
- The world will be resolved eventually and all things will be worked out according to Gods plans for reconciling creation
- All sin is equally despicable to God; it is only we humans that try to differentiate; that try to set up a heirarchy of sin as a way to determine who is better or more holy. We are all sinners!
- All humankind (every one of us) is in desperate need of GRACE and indeed that is the only way we can connect with God
- That there is nothing we can do to be separated from God; He is always willing and desires to welcome us back

Every one of these points illustrate that God is interested in very different things than we are. Every one of these points contradicts our human instincts and how we see the world working. Perhaps God's CHOICE ASSIGNMENTS are not what we consider CHOICE. Perhaps God sees our striving for fame, fortune, and security as totally missing what he has put us

on earth to learn and experience. Perhaps he knows we have value in the kingdom even when we are poor, sick, struggling.

As I consider my life journey and the state of the world, I hope more and more that God is looking at things differently than we do. What we are doing as individuals and as a human race is not so great. It makes the most sense to me to imagine that there is a totally different game going on with radically different rules.

2. God does not need us to get things done here on earth

I hate to break it to you, but like a patient parent, God lets us help here in the world. He LETS US. He does not need our help.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is that of Esther. She becomes queen in a foreign land where the Jews are in exile. No one knows that she is Jewish. Later the Jews are being persecuted and her uncle Mordecai comes to her in secret and tells her she must go before the King and get him to issue an order of protection for the Jews. Esther wants to help but knows that without an invitation, she risks being killed when she enters the throne room. Mordecai tells her two important things found in Esther 4:14

- If you remain silent, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place (i.e. God will get it done).
- Who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this” (i.e. this might be your assignment).

Esther’s whole life came down to that moment and her willingness to accept the assignment that was thrust upon her even when it seemed like a sure loser. In football it would be called a “hail Mary”-- a long pass just before the clock runs out when you are behind in the score and looking for a miracle. It was enough for Esther to believe that the assignment came

from God. What appeared as a poor assignment ultimately became a very important and CHOICE ASSIGNMENT for her.

God does NOT need us to accomplish his will, but he is willing to let us play if we remain willing to deal with whatever comes our way. He allows us to help probably more for what it does for us than what we do for him.

3. We are stewards of our life and expected to exert effort and be productive.

The second reading today is from Matt 25: 14-30 – the parable of the Talents

I read a couple of commentaries on this passage and to be clear the word **TALENT** is an increment of money. It does not refer to ability. What would fit most tidily into this point is to be able to say – if God gave you great abilities (talents) then you have more responsibility to do something with those abilities than someone not near so gifted.

But this is about getting money and being ordered to grow that through risk and effort. It is almost the same in that those that do work hard and see the money increase are then rewarded for their good stewardship by getting more responsibility and more money to invest. The servant or slave who does nothing is cast out, considered less than worthless....lazy and indolent. The faithfulness, as shown by the first two servants results in more ASSIGNMENTS; more opportunities to work with God on his worldly affairs.

Be faithful in small things and larger things will come your way. Ignore the day-to-day and you risk being cast aside, no further ASSIGNMENTS at all.....

4. It's about process not flashy results

The parable of the talents at first seems all about results. Isn't the master concerned with how much his treasure grew? Yes... and no.... Notice that he wants to know what they did. Also notice that there is no one in the story that worked hard and failed.

I think process over results is part of what I call the economy of God. I think it is the key to this whole thing. I think God calls us to be present every minute of every day to participate in His great dance of creation and reconciliation. Since we are not really needed for God to accomplish his will, it makes sense that in all that we do, God wants us to learn and grow and nurture others. Perhaps that is the only CHOICE ASSIGNMENT – what you do with what comes your way..... How you respond every minute to what is occurring around you.

Imagine taking your eyes off the pursuit of glory here on earth and simply being available, present, and connected to God. Imagine embracing the journey, not simply looking for the destination. Sure it helps to understand that ultimately we will all have our “Oprah” appreciation party with God in eternity. But, in the meantime our challenge is to live with joy in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. That is true Christian courage and faith.

When I was 11, I went to my first funeral – my grandpa. He was born in 1894, had maybe an 8th grade education, drove a road grader and later retired and grew pears on a five acre plot in Yakima. He cared for my grandmother for 20 years as she lived quite disabled with congestive heart failure. He showed incredible joy whenever my brothers and I came to see him and took incredible amounts of time to include us as he fed chickens, did chores, fixed things in his shop and cut asparagus that grew wild in the orchard. He was kind and gentle, simple and gracious. He enjoyed all the

little stuff and seemed relaxed with his life. Other than my brothers and me, virtually no one is alive now to remember him. As we headed home to Tacoma from Yakima following the funeral, I overheard my dad as he turned to my mother and in a choked up very soft voice said to her-“If I could be just half the man my father was, I will be very proud.”

One might say my grandpa never got a CHOICE ASSIGNMENT. He was not what the world considers important. He authored no books or made any medical breakthroughs. He grew pears, laughed at silly jokes from little kids, and sat on an orchard box teaching me how to whittle. He accepted the assignments that came his way and kept a positive appreciation for his life through the ups and downs. He was faithful to his wife and family. I think my grandpa did a great job with his little assignments. No one could have done better.

I imagine when we all gather before God’s throne in heaven, with many of our world’s greatest people looking on, that God will acknowledge my grandpa; point to him and say “well done Martin, my good and faithful servant”.