

The Plans He Has For Us

Ephesians 1:3-6

Dr. Fred Craddock tells about a pastor who, years ago, advertised on a given Sunday he was going to preach on this topic: “The Member of this Church I Would Most Like to See in Hell.” You can imagine the anticipation that sermon title stirred. They had a crowd! People who’d never been to church before came that Sunday.

Even more striking, in the sermon the pastor called the name of the member he would most like to see in hell--and it was a teacher of a Sunday school class in that church. Then the pastor went on to say that the reason he had chosen her to be the one he would most like to see in hell was because she was such a quality saint that, within two weeks, hell would be converted. (1)

I wonder if this pastor told that beloved saint ahead of time what to expect that Sunday morning. It could have been quite a shock to her otherwise that she had been chosen to go to hell. She might have walked out before he explained why.

People have been chosen through the ages for all kinds of reasons. There is a wonderful old Jewish tale about a tailor in the town of Chelm, Poland. Now you need to understand that the town of Chelm, Poland is the target of a great deal of traditional Jewish humor. Think of it as a kind of “redneck central” where none of the citizens are all that bright.

Anyway, in this story, the men of Chelm decide that they must do something to prove their town’s importance. How can they make the world sit up and take notice of them? One man suggests that they prove their importance to the outside world by choosing the wisest man in town and naming him “Chief Sage,” sort of a chief “wise man.” No other town in Poland had a chief sage. It sounded like a great idea. Everyone agreed, and so Moishe the tailor was chosen to be chief sage.

Now, they reasoned among themselves, how would anyone know that Moishe was the chief sage? How could they distinguish him from every other man on the street? The men of Chelm decided that as chief sage, Moishe must wear a pair of golden shoes. Then, everyone who saw his golden shoes would know that he was chief sage. But as Moishe tramped through the streets of Chelm in his gold shoes, he stepped right into a mud puddle. The mud covered up the gold shoes completely.

The men of Chelm came together to discuss this problem. They decided to craft a pair of leather shoes to cover Moishe’s golden shoes and protect them from mud. What a problem! Now the leather shoes covered up the golden shoes. How would anyone know that Moishe was the town’s chief sage if they couldn’t see his golden shoes?

Finally, the men of the town came to a solution: Moishe would wear the golden shoes on his hands. Now, if any outsider wanted to know who Chelm’s wisest man is, they could point to the fellow who wears gold shoes on his hands. (2)

My guess is that people pointed at Moishe and asked, “Who is that foolish man wearing shoes on his hands?”

It's nice to be chosen for a special honor, even if it is to be the chief sage of Chelm. It's nice to hear your name called to receive a special award at work or at school, in your reading club, or wherever it may be.

St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians tells about a group of people who are chosen by God for some very special blessings. He writes, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."

Paul is talking, of course, about the church of Jesus Christ. That's you and me. And he's saying that before God created the world, God chose you and me to be His people. "In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will . . ."

Last week we talked about what it means to be sons and daughters of God. As we begin this New Year, I want to continue that thought, for I am convinced that our greatest problem is not that we think too much of ourselves, but that we are unaware of just how great our potential is. Admittedly there are some of us who do seem to think too much of ourselves. We puff ourselves up and strut around as if we owned the world. But that is a smokescreen. That is the result of a marked sense of insecurity. We want people to believe we are more than we are. We take pride in our wealth and our position, or our looks and athleticism even though those are all only temporary assets that will one day be stripped away from us.

But what if we really are sons and daughters of God? What if this world is only a prelude to a greater world yet to be revealed, a world in which those who are closest to God will be blessed "in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ"? What if we are walking around with our heads down and hearts heavy when we are those who have an incredible inheritance awaiting us?

Last week we told about Sarah, a young woman in West Virginia who had been adopted at birth, who discovered when she became a young adult and traced her origins, that she was part of a Royal family in Sierra Leone. She was a princess. It was a life-changing experience for her. What would happen to you and me if we claimed the promises of God this New Year and began living as sons and daughters of God?

Wouldn't our lives have a new purpose? I worry about people today. Because we have moved farther from God, we have also moved farther away from the idea that our lives have any real meaning.

Biologist Stuart Kauffman in his book *At Home in the Universe* says the main culprit is not sin, but science. He writes, "Once a scant few centuries ago, we of the West believed ourselves the chosen of God, made in his image . . . Now, only 400 years later, we find ourselves on a tiny planet, on the edge of a humdrum galaxy among billions like it . . . We are but accidents, we're told. Purpose and value are ours alone to make. Without Satan and God the

universe now appears the neutral home of dark matter . . . and is utterly indifferent. We bustle but are no longer at home”

He continues, “We accept, of course, that the rise of science and the consequent technological explosion has driven us to our secular worldview. Yet a spiritual hunger remains.” (3)

Do you see what he is saying? Modern science has robbed us of our feeling of uniqueness. We no longer feel chosen for a special task in the universe and with that we have lost our sense of meaning and purpose.

Please do not misunderstand. Being chosen can be a double-edged sword. There have been times in history when people who considered themselves to be God’s chosen people have committed horrible atrocities to others that they considered lesser beings.

A most glaring example is the Pilgrims who settled our country. They prided themselves as a righteous people chosen by God to settle this new world and to create “a city on a hill,” serving as an example for others to emulate. However, this did not keep them from slaughtering their Native-American neighbors who stood in the way of their ambitions.

It would break my heart if anyone left this room today and went home with the thought that because we are chosen of God that we are somehow more worthy of God’s love than anyone else in this world. The truth is that our neighbors, whoever they may be, are chosen of God, too. The only difference is that they do not know it. And unless we tell them, they will go to their graves believing that their lives do not matter. Our lives have purpose. Our lives have meaning. We’re not simply a higher order of animal. We are children of God.

Evangelist Billy Graham says that in dialogues with young people, many of these young people have told him that there is something they long for more than mere things. They want to know how to find meaning and purpose. Graham suggests they can achieve these desires to find meaning only one way. That is when they find three things: a moral code to follow, a cause to serve, and a creed to believe in. (4)

Who could argue with that? A moral code to follow, a cause to serve, and a creed to believe in. Let’s consider each of these and see how they apply to our lives.

Let’s begin with a moral code to follow. Don’t tune me out here. That’s what many people do when a pastor begins to talk about a moral code. Think with me for a moment about why society must have a moral code, why we must have rules to follow, why some “thou shalt nots” still apply.

Dr. Robert Schuller tells about a time when certain psychological libertarians argued that little children and teenagers were being thwarted in the development of their personalities by rules that stifled their natural freedom to be creative. Human freedom should not be restricted, they argued, so long as “no one is hurt.”

But this case was lost, says Schuller, when a playground for young children was planned and built without fences. The absence of fences, it was imagined, would be emotionally healthier for the children. “They will not feel oppressed, shut in, or locked in a territory,” supporters argued.

But what actually happened when the children began using this playground surprised everyone. The children were very tentative in their play. They didn't run free and fast as the experts had predicted. They were remarkably cautious. Without the boundary of fences to set safe limits, the children imposed their own limits.

This was obvious when the fences were later installed. The children were actually liberated! They ran as fast as they could with open arms until they would fly to a safe stop, sometimes even crashing harmlessly into the chain-link fence.

Then educators were shown a video that further challenged their theories. It showed cars driving across high bridges over deep canyons. The startling thing is these bridges had no guardrails. You want to guess what drivers did? They drove very slowly in the very middle of the bridge! When the guardrails were reinstalled, the drivers felt safe driving closer to the edge.

How wrong the assumptions about unrestricted freedom are. People who understand that they are children of God understand the need to live by a moral code. (5)

Writer William J. Bausch reminds us of a scene in a fascinating movie of a few years back titled *Moonstruck*. *Moonstruck* is the story of a vigorous, even riotous Italian family and their need to love and be loved.

The mother of the family, played by Olympia Dukakis, correctly suspects that her husband, Cosmo, is having an affair. And then almost by accident she herself is drawn into what might be called a relationship. It's nothing more than sharing a meal with a man who happens to be very nice to her. He accompanies her home. They realize that nobody else is in the house and he asks if he can come up. At this tension-filled moment, she answers gently but firmly, "No, no, I know who I am." (6)

That's the answer sons and daughters of God give to anyone who would tempt them to violate their moral code, "No, I know who I am."

Children of God not only have a moral code they can follow, they have a cause they can serve.

Writer Stan Buckley tells about a recent interview that someone did with popular singer Amy Grant. Grant said that several years ago she was on her way to get on a tour bus when she went by to see her mother who had Alzheimer's. As she was leaving, Amy said, "I've got to go sing, Mom."

Her mother said, "You sing?"

Amy said, "Yes. I sing and I write songs." Her mom asked about the kinds of songs she sings and if she would sing for her.

Then, as Amy was walking out the door, her mom called after her. "Hey, would you do me a favor?"

Amy said, "Yes, what?"

And her mom said "when you walk out on that stage, sing something that matters." It seems that Amy Grant's mom, though not even in her right mind, was on to something. If you're going to sing, sing something that matters. (7)

Rich Mullins, a musician best known for his song, "Awesome God," once said something

that I believe is right on target. I quote, “I don’t believe that God chose you and blessed you so that you could heap those blessings upon yourself. I believe God chose you . . . because He wants you to make a difference in this world. And you know what? What I think is scary about God is He didn’t come up with any ‘plan B.’ That He left the church here, and the church is the only group of people and the church is the only institution in the world that can bring about a change. The government cannot do it . . . Educational systems cannot do it . . . The church was chosen by God to make a difference . . . And you know what people? . . . You’re gonna make a difference when you lay down your life, and in complete submission to God, choose to die with Him in service to other people.” (8) End of quote.

He’s right, of course. God has no plan B. He’s depending on us.

Children of God have a moral code they can follow and a cause they can serve--the cause of bringing the entire world into the family of God.

But there is one thing more we must have if our lives are to be filled with meaning and purpose: a creed we can believe in.

I don’t believe there is a better creed than this one: “I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ, his only Son . . .”

Do you know of a better creed to believe in? For two thousand years people have been pledging their lives and their sacred honor on the basis of that creed. They have built churches and hospitals and ministered to the least and the lowest all over this earth. If you can find a creed that has served humanity better, please let me know about it.

You have been chosen . . . Don’t let this secular world rob you of your feeling of uniqueness as a child of God. Hold on to what is real and eternal. Don’t give in to the feelings of emptiness that many people feel today. Give some thought to this simple formula for a meaningful and purpose-filled life and make it your own: a moral code to follow, a cause to serve, and a creed to believe in.

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1. *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).
 2. Josepha Sherman, *Rachel the Clever and Other Jewish Folktales* (Little Rock: August House Publishers, Inc., 1993), pp. 147-149.
 3. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 4.
 4. *Reader’s Digest*. Date unknown.
 5. Robert H. Schuller, *Don’t Throw Away Tomorrow* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2005), p. 84.
 6. *More Telling Stories, Compelling Stories* (Mystic, CT: Twenty third Publications, 1993).
 7. <http://www.mondayfodder.com/>.
 8. <http://www.laughandlift.com/>.