

Toronto United Mennonite Church - February 12, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

And Now, Beloved, Choose Life

Goals are wonderful aren't they? Goals help us to achieve things that are important to us through thoughtful, intentional, careful planning. Without them, we meander, miss opportunities, even flounder. With them we are energized and propelled ahead.

Goals are getting a lot of attention. Do a Google search of goals and you'll find hundreds of books to help you succeed in meeting them. There's Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. And Jim Collins encourages people who want to go from *Good to Great* in their lives, businesses and organizations, to set for themselves a clear, compelling, finish line oriented Bee-Hag, which is short for "Big Hairy Audacious Goal". There's *Eat That Frog*, which encourages us to get the things we least like to do behind us first. There's one entitled, *The Magic Lamp* and the *10-x Rule*—to name a few. There are short-term goals, long-term goals, and specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound --"SMART" goals.

Meeting goals is science. Meeting goals is art. Manage time. Manage people. Manage intake. Manage output. Manage anxiety. Build habits. Exercise discipline. --Write it. Speak it. Visualize it. Practice mentally. Practice teamwork. Meet your goal by finding the "right" help. Get a coach or a psychologist. Or up the ante and enlist both. Seek out cheerleaders, mentors, investment bankers, economic forecasters. Find yourself a study partner or tutor. Choose a pastor, an expert in mission, denominational leaders or congregational consultants.

In his Memoir, *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson tells of his formation as a pastor. His pastoral identity was developing alongside a congregation. This congregation began and was formed through the energy and excitement of a new church plant. Peterson led this plant from a small group of 40 meeting in his basement in suburban Maryland, through gradual growth, to turning the soil on a plot of land and dedicating a carefully planned place of worship for Christ Our King Church. To Peterson's surprise,

A month or so after the dedication of the sanctuary attendance at worship began to drop off. Men and women who had been faithful in worship from the beginning disappeared for three or four Sundays at a stretch. Men and women who had plunged into the business of planning and organizing and inviting friends and neighbours were finding other enthusiasms. If someone did not show up for a month or so at worship, he went to see him or her. "I've been missing you, anything wrong? Oh no pastor nothing's wrong. They had pulled it off, were pleased to have put their mark on the neighbourhood and to have been a significant part of being in on it. People weren't quitting church; they had found other things to do. ...A kind of malaise developed and spread.

Eugene Peterson took annual pilgrimages through the "featureless aridity of the Dakota Badlands" en route to his family cottage in Montana. The badlands became a metaphor he used to refer to this difficult season in ministry.

Wondering what to do, Peterson went to his "New Church Development Supervisor", who had a ready answer—"Start another building program. ... People need something tangible, something they can get their hands on, a challenge, a goal. Trust me. It's the American Way." In the weeks that followed Peterson realized,

he was probably right, at least about the American part of it. But something didn't seem right about his diagnosis. I felt an inner reluctance to embrace his counsel. This didn't sound like the voice of God to me. I had just assumed that when we had completed the demanding work of organizing and building, everyone would be

energized to embrace our newly formed identity as the people of God, Christ's body, church---living together, grateful for what had been given to us and ready to invite and serve other out of who we had become. I expected that the church into which we had been formed as a worshipping community would shape us into men and women who were growing up in Christ, serving our children and spouses, neighbours and fellow workers in Jesus's name.

Instead he'd entered the "badlands", a space of learning, waiting, listening, watching and pondering his way into a depth of being the Pastor which he would not allow to be shaped by manipulating God's people into some busy-making goal to "get them there and working every week." Instead he did contemplative work. He did plodding work, inner work, family work. Borrowing a line from Nietzsche's *Death of God* Peterson wrote *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. He modelled prayer, waiting, listening as he waited for God to shape and deepen this suburban Maryland congregation.

Peterson had a wisdom that held the advice of his Church Development Supervisor suspect. He knew that best goals grow from solid identities—that who we are has to shape our reason for being—our purpose. He knew that our purpose has to shape our goals—*what we choose to do*, and that our identity and our purpose shape the behaviours that move us toward our goals.

Our goals can take us to the most joyful, vital, life giving places—if—when—they are shaped and guided by a solid sense of who we are at our core. All day, everyday, all the way choices. --A long obedience in the same direction.

Out of the badlands Peterson, admittedly success and goal oriented man who had strived academically realized, "there is far more to this Christian life than getting it right. There is living it right."

There are choices. --Choose life. Moses spoke these words, a man all too familiar and experienced with the badlands. He stands with God's people on the edge of a long-awaited promise. But so much more than this final goal was in his

mind when Moses presented Israel with “life and life and prosperity, death and adversity” (Deut. 30:15). This is a retrospective stop; an over the shoulder view of crises and deliverance, of God revealed through signs and wonders, of God sustaining and providing in the most surprising and unexpected ways. It was a time to remember their (Israel’s) gratitude at the unexpected mercies of God’s provision and of and how soon this gratitude had turned to boredom, complaint and restlessness for other gods. Yes, the edge of the wilderness was a long view. It was a looking back and forth –a time of “I remember when” and “remember who *you are*”, and “*I AM*” and of the essence of the law, which is this:

So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God ^{[and} his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.”
(Deuteronomy 10: 13-21)

This is the path to life. Choose life!

Dennis Bratcher of The Christian Resource Institute writes that Moses final word is

not about warnings or failure. And neither is the final word an open ended, disinterested, and dispassionate call to make a decision. This is a call to make a *particular* decision. ...Standing once again as they had

... between the failures of the past and the possibilities of new life in the future, provides a powerful context for the call, “Choose life”.

This “choose life” call is always meant for *right now*. For *this* place and *these* people. In today’s lectionary readings it is the people of Israel. It is Moses at the Jordan, looking ahead and leading his people into what was beyond and so longed for. It is Apollos and Paul leading a church in Corinth. Choose Life. —for Eugene Peterson it was in the suburbs of Maryland, in the cozy basement beginnings, in a new church building, and it was in the badlands as he was seeking to faithfully live into a Pastoral identity, watching and waiting for God to form God’s beloved people and to see them being transformed as they discovered more deeply their primary identity as brothers and sisters in Christ. In his memoir he writes:

Learning the truth of God, the gospel, the scriptures, involves understanding works, concepts, history. But living it means working through a world of deception, of doubt and suffering, a world of rejections and betrayal and idolatry. We don’t grow and mature in our Christian life by sitting in a classroom and library, listening to lectures and reading books. Or going to church and singing hymns and listening to sermons. We do it by taking the stuff of our ordinary lives, our parents and children, our spouses and friends, our workplaces and fellow workers, our dreams and fantasies, our attachments, our easily accessible gratifications, our depersonalizing of imitate relations, our commodification of living truths into idolatries, taking all this and placing it on the altar of refining fire—our God is a consuming fire—and finding it all stuff redeemed for a life of holiness. ... accessible to every Dick and Jane in every ordinary congregation.

...finding it all stuff redeemed for a life of holiness...accessible to every ordinary congregation ...accessible to Toronto United Mennonite Church, on Queen St. East in Toronto. Right now, in February of 2017. With these board members and this Pastor-Congregation Relations Committee, with this Reference Group and this newly resigned Pastor and with each and everyone of God’s beloved living into this time and place and these circumstances.

In the stuff of everyday as we navigate life's choices, we don't necessarily see immediate cause and effect consequences, blessings and of curses flowing from our choices. Life has shown us that it is much more complex. For God gives "his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike." (Matt. 5:45 NLT)

So, we are invited, to see as Moses did, taking a long view of choices past and those to come. We are being guided, as Israel was at this crossing, to live into a solid sense of our primary identity as a people formed by God and a people beloved of God.

What do we do when our primary goal is to seek earnestly to choose life?

- We take Moses counsel. "Love, obey and hold fast to the LORD your God."
- We seek to understand God's desire for us, God's people in every decision—the ones that come at significant junctures, the crossings and difficult situations and in the seemingly smaller things in the "field" (1 Cor. 3:9) of God's people (and God's good creation).
- We weigh and sift with good common sense and by seeking the "mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5) in everything.
- We seek to live from a place of surrender to the will of God.
- We look around seeking to notice, with eyes and hearts open to what God is up to in forming us, God's Holy people. Then, we do our best to get "on board".
- *And we listen.* We listen to scripture and to Spirit as she is heard through scripture ... and through prayer... and through each other.

Today, in *this* place with *this* news, as you look retrospectively over your shoulder and forward with wonder, embrace the now –with its grief and wonder, fear and anticipation, with its disappointment and gratitude. Embrace now. Then look forward, as God's beloved and blessed who seek to live as a blessing.

And now, beloved, choose life ...while holding to this promise... “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11). Amen.

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