

House Church  
September 15, 2018  
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## Life's Second Choices

**“They attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” Acts 16:7**

Several years ago, my brother Danny went back to Livingston, our hometown in New Jersey, to attend his high school reunion. Before the event he leafed through his yearbook and tried to recall the plans, vocations and dreams of some of his friends and classmates. Then, at the reunion, he met a lot of them and came away realizing that very few of his classmates realized their first hopes. The class couple never married. He himself was now just as successful as the ones that had been voted “Most Likely to Succeed”. Several of his friends had divorced. The boy next door, who was Class President, an All-State Football player, Student Governor-for-a-Day, with a full scholarship to Yale, was now driving a semi-truck in New Hampshire. Over 20 classmates had died, some in war, some of cancer, some in car accidents. Not many had followed the vocational path they so confidently predicted 25 years before. Something happened, circumstances intervened and they had turned away from their first choices.

Very few of us have the opportunity to live out our lives on the basis of our first choice. Most of us have experienced major disruptions of life, interruptions, disappointments, significant illness, or tragic losses. We've had to make do with the leftovers of a broken plan, with our second or third choices, or even with an option that we never would have chosen.

Those who read the biographies of great men and women come to see this virtually as a matter of course.

James Whistler, the artist famous for his paintings of his own mother, Miss Alexander and Carlyle, started out to be a soldier; but he was expelled from West Point when he couldn't pass chemistry. He used to say, "If silicon had been a gas, I would have been a major-general." He then halfheartedly tried engineering and failed at that. Only then did he try painting.

Or consider the great author Pearl Buck. She submitted her novel The Good Earth for publication and received this rejection notice: "Regret the American public is not interested in anything in China."

And then the poet Yeats was shown this review following the publication of his first collection of poems: "Mr. Yeats will never be a popular author. I should really despair of mankind if he could be. He is absolutely empty and void, a complete nullity. I would not read a page of it again for the world."

How about Abraham Lincoln's road to the White House?

- 1816: His family was forced out of their home. He had to work to support them.
- 1818: His mother died.
- 1831: Failed in business.
- 1832: Ran for state legislature - lost. He also lost his job - wanted to go to law school but couldn't get in.
- 1833: Borrowed some money from a friend to begin a business and by the end of the year he was bankrupt. He spent the next 17 years paying off this debt.
- 1834: Ran for state legislature again - won.

- 1835: Was engaged to be married, sweetheart died and his heart was broken.
- 1836: Had a total nervous breakdown and was in bed for six months.
- 1838: Sought to become speaker of the state legislature - defeated.
- 1840: Sought to become elector - defeated.
- 1843: Ran for Congress - lost.
- 1846: Ran for Congress again - this time he won - went to Washington and did a good job.
- 1848: Ran for re-election to Congress - lost.
- 1849 Sought the job of land officer in his home state -rejected.
- 1854: Ran for Senate of the United States - lost.
- 1856: Sought the Vice-Presidential nomination at his party's national convention - got less than 100 votes.
- 1858: Ran for U.S. Senate again - again he lost.
- 1860: Elected President of the United States

How about us here today? Most of us understand the pain, the sense of waste we feel when we realize that what we are doing is seriously flawed, that the way to accomplishing our first choice is blocked or needs revision, whether the endeavor is the pursuit of a career, or facing the future alone after the death of a spouse or a friend, a failing or a failed marriage, a difficult relationship with a child, or the brokenness of a life confronting a terminal illness or an addiction to drugs or alcohol. Also, at times like this, there is a fear of the future, lurking there is the chance of a second failure, more shameful than the first. But pain and the fear of pain are the necessary preconditions for courage. Life sometimes calls us to make do with the leftovers of a broken plan.

Our Bible lesson records an impressive example of one who was called to pursue a second choice. The lesson is taken from a section of the book of Acts (16:7-10), which describes the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. The story is so simple and succinct, it might be difficult for us to suspect that in these few verses, we have recorded one of the most significant events in the history of Western Civilization. Here for the first time Christianity passes over from Asia to Europe. Paul carries the gospel of Christ out of Asia, which in a few centuries would be overrun by Islam, through the Aegean city of Troas, to Macedonia and so into Europe, where Christianity was going to have its chance.

But Paul had not planned to go to Europe. Europe was his second choice; and really, at first, not even a consideration. What Paul really wanted to do was go to Bithynia, one of the richest, most productive regions of Asia Minor (the birthplace of the Nicæan Creed). To establish churches there would have been a triumph. But for some reason the way was blocked, Paul's plan was broken. The text tells us that "the Spirit of Jesus prevented him from going," which is another way of saying that something happened that convinced Paul that God was blocking his path. Perhaps Paul lamented this change in plans, this disappointed expectation, the loss of his first choice. Troas was a terrible place, in that day, called what could be loosely translated, "the armpit of Asia Minor," but in Troas a way opened for Paul to go to Europe and there to develop the most significant, the most important ministry of his career. Over his own heart and intentions, he won a victory with the leftovers of a broken plan.

Wanting Bithynia and getting Troas, wanting what's beautiful and getting what stinks--an "armpit," that's a familiar experience for us. But wanting Bithynia, getting Troas and making of it the greatest accomplishment of our life, an opportunity to grow, to expand our human understandings and love, our service to humanity, this is the challenge and the call of our Christian faith.

**So then, what did Paul know, what was in his character that helped him turn a disappointed expectation, a second choice into a victory? Two things.**

1. First, Paul had a certain understanding about his religion, a conviction about the purpose of God, and he lived his life on the basis of it. Paul had discovered God's dominant desire, God's eternal purpose. He found it demonstrated in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **God's dominant desire is to bring life out of death.** Now some today will say that like taxes, death is inevitable, but for those of us who love God, not death, but life is inevitable. For Paul this was not simply an interesting theological proposition. It became for him an operating principle of life, so that whenever he landed in a Troas, in a difficult situation, which he did many times, he so effectually loved God that, aligned with God's eternal purpose, and empowered by God's Spirit, he himself made "all things work together for good." Can there be for us a finer achievement of the human spirit than this: aligned with the purpose of God, before every disappointment, in every situation of life, in every failed relationship, before every societal injustice, to work to bring life out of death.

One of my favorite authors is the American short story writer Andre Dubus. His characters are the kinds of people who accept pain as a fair price for pleasure and who view right and wrong as a matter of degree. Sometimes he suggests that our self-inflicted punishments are often worse than what a just court or a just God would decree.

Luke Ripley is one such self-punishing character. Luke the owner of a stable of thirty horses in northeastern Massachusetts. He's been divorced, his children moved away with their mother and he never sees them. Luke is Catholic and his religious convictions prevent him from ever considering another marriage. At one point he recounts his loneliness, the horrors of celibacy, how on bad nights he walks into his children's rooms, going from room to room, to look, to touch and to smell. The potted plants now neglected have died. He hates cooking only for himself. He speaks about how he's learning to cope. He speaks philosophically. "It's not hard to live through a day," he says, "if you can live through a moment. What creates despair is the imagination which pretends there is a future and insists on predicting millions of moments, thousands of days and so drains you that you cannot live the moment at hand."

Something rings true about Luke Ripley's perspective. We understand the despairing imagination which predicts an endless, unfulfilled future and thereby numbs us against any experience of the present. But over against a despairing imagination, as Christians we are called to discover a redemptive imagination, a creative imagination, an imagination which allied with the purpose of God, believes in a human freedom, believes in a human capacity to bring good out of evil, to create order out of chaos, to bring love out of loneliness and life out of death. Such a redemptive imagination predicts a future replete with possibilities for love and beauty, and so energizes us to live each present moment to the fullest.

The Apostle Paul wanted Bithynia, got Troas, and made a victory of it because he had a certain understanding about his religion, a conviction about the eternal purpose of God, and he lived his life on the basis of it.

2. Then secondly, there was a practical consequence of Paul's religion, a consequence of his faith in God: namely, his love for people. Within a day after arriving at Troas, Paul saw a man from Macedonia saying, "Come over and help us." His openness to the man's need, his love for people, motivated him to carry the message of Christianity to Europe, to make a victory of a second choice. **Nothing makes us so strong as a cry for help. Nothing can so fill our lives with meaning as responding in love to one in need.**

There is almost a universal belief that experiencing things like comfort, ease, gratification, diversion and a state of having achieved one's goals, one's first choices, constitutes happiness. A truer conception of happiness, however, involves not the dream of desires fulfilled, but striving toward meaningful goals, goals that relate us to a larger context of purposes; not a contented idleness, a pleasant thumb-twiddling, but the full use of our powers and talents. Both versions of happiness involve love. The storybook version puts the

emphasis on being loved. The truer version of happiness puts the emphasis on our capacity to give love.

Albert Einstein, the great man of science was also a great man of love. He knew the complications of a broken plan. He failed his first college entrance exam. He was divorced from his first wife. His second wife died 20 years before him. Hitler deprived him of his Berlin professorship and he was forced to leave Germany for England and America. Having early in his career gained fame for his theories of general and specific relativity, he worked for much of the remainder of his life on ideas he was never able to validate (yet, others, after his death, are still validating some of these ideas).

Near the end of his life he reflected on the practice of love and the purpose of human existence, saying this: "Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. There is one thing we do know, that we are here for the sake of others, with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day, I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of people, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received."

After Einstein's wife died, his sister Maja agreed to assist him with his household affairs. Fourteen years later, she suffered a stroke and lapsed into a coma. From then on, each afternoon, Einstein spent two hours with her, reading aloud from the classics. Maja gave no sign that even one word was heard. Still he continued, for, as he said, "I know how much love can be communicated through consistent, attentive acts."

Similarly, the Apostle Paul knew that when faced with a broken plan, a loving attitude toward people could open up a new way toward a meaningful life. A man from Macedonia asked him for help. He went and that act of love, that single moment, changed the history of the world.

What then did Paul know, what was in his character that helped him turn a disappointed expectation, a second choice into a victory? These two qualities: (1) first, an attitude about his religion, a conviction that allied with the purpose of God, before every disappointment, in every situation of life, he could work to bring life out of death; and (2) second, a love for people which opened for him a new way toward a meaningful life.

He took a hard thing and made of it a triumph.