

*“A Clear Plan” (The last of three sermons on “Insider Info.”*

*Mark 9:38-50*

*September 30, 2012*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

“There are two plans: your plan and God’s plan. And your plan doesn’t count.” So said a professional in the entertainment industry—his name long lost to my memory—in an interview with Barbara Walters. That he self-identified as an agnostic made it all the more memorable. It is a healthy corrective to those of us who feel the need not only to guide but to control; and who desire not only to know God but to give God advice on how things ought to run.

Today is the last of three messages on “Insider Info,” particular teachings Jesus gave to those who evidenced a desire to be his disciples. The first, “A Clear Purpose,” told us that disciples deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus. The second, “A Clear Goal,” revealed that disciples are in servant-ministry: the last first and the first, last. Yet how do we get there? That is the question behind “A Clear Plan.”

Yes, there is only one plan and it is God’s. Yet we have human responsibility for our lives, the choices we make, and the way we seek God’s guidance in those choices. Does planning guide our spiritual life?

After all, planning is a part of our temporal lives in so many ways. We plan our retirement; our travel; our family holidays. We may have custodial responsibility to plan for the needs of others. People in business, politics and social services plan to achieve goals: short, medium and long range. All this planning, personal and professional, is designed to help us achieve not only goals, but the purpose of our life and organization.

So, is planning something we do for our spiritual life?

For some of us, the idea of planning one's spirituality is counter-intuitive. After all, "spirit" comes from a word which means "breath." We don't plan to breathe, we just do it. Keep it simple. Don't make it more complicated than it needs to be. I've got so much going in my life already, I don't need a complex faith.

Yet such a view does not prepare us for life's complexities. A few of the "spiritual" matters I've dealt with this week include hiring a new administrative assistant, helping guide an annual stewardship campaign, teaching two classes and preparing worship. Without planning, these acts of ministry would, simply, be of inferior quality; and I would be unable to respond to the things I cannot plan—like hospitalizations and personal crises—that invariably arise. If one agrees with the notion that our purpose is to be disciples and our goal is being in servant ministry, then a spiritual plan is essential to achieve these.

It is at this point that we enter the ongoing Gospel story. Jesus has twice told the disciples of his impending death and resurrection. In the reading two weeks ago Jesus asked them who they said he was and Peter declared "You are the Christ." Last week he told them that welcoming the weak is the way to live servant ministry. Today, in Mark, Jesus provides a plan.

This plan is more a roadmap than a blueprint. To be sure, Jesus gives a blueprint in other encounters. He sent out disciples two by two with authority to preach and heal. He told the rich young man that he needed to sell all that he had, for the young man's possessions were blocking his way to God. After healing the Geresene demoniac, Jesus told him not to follow him in the traveling ministry, but to go home and tell those at home how good God had been to him. Jesus was certainly capable of providing a directed plan!

Yet his direction today is a roadmap with three elements. First, watch out for flawed assumptions. The disciples assumed that those who did not follow as they did were not part of the kingdom building: “If you’re not with us, you’re against us,” as it were. But Jesus said the opposite: “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Our spiritual plan needs to include this permission-giving assumption, which includes giving the benefit of the doubt to those whom we’re not sure are with us or not.

This is the essence of resolving many conflicts: assuming the good intent of those who do not agree with us, rather than demonizing them. An example of the latter is the story of three Belfast, Ireland clergy in a heated theological debate: a Roman Catholic priest, a Protestant Church of Ireland cleric, and a rabbi. Suddenly an angel appears and says, “God sends you divine blessings. Make one wish for peace and it will be fulfilled.”

Said the Protestant cleric, “Let every Catholic disappear from our lovely island and peace will reign supreme.” Said the priest: “Let not a single Protestant be left on Irish soil and peace will come.” The rabbi was silent. Inquired the angel: “Rabbi, have you no wish of your own?” “No,” answered the rabbi, “just attend to the wishes of these two gentlemen and I shall be well pleased.” Our plan needs to give benefit of the doubt and be careful of flawed assumptions!

In the second part of Jesus’ roadmap he implies that the disciples’ flawed assumption can actually lead others away from him. That can lead to disastrous consequences, spiritually speaking. If we assume that those not with us are against us, we may intentionally or unintentionally put stumbling blocks before them. These are not things that simply offend us personally, but actually keep wholeness from ourselves or others. Randy Alcorn uses the example of beverage alcohol in defining a true stumbling block:

*The church people who are most offended by wine drinking would typically never be tempted to drink wine in the first place. Drinking alcohol may be a stumbling block, but not to those offended by it, but rather to those who may imitate this action without sufficiently strong conscience and self-control. They might not be able to handle it, so it would do them damage, become addictive and lead them into sin.*

Eternal Perspective Ministries website  
18 February 2010 post

Jesus speaks in a way that may make us uncomfortable. His passion for “the little ones”—people young in age and/or spiritual maturity—causes him to use strong language: it is better to cut off the appendage that causes others to stumble than to stay intact but go to hell. Whoa! That these statements are hyperbole, spoken to shock us and get our attention, only increases the seriousness with which we regard them. Our plan must allow for the impact of our behavior on the lives of others. We are an example whether we desire to be or not.

This truth is essential and the third part of our roadmap. To grow spiritually, to get from where we are to where we want to be, our plan must incorporate this final element: truth. We must be truthful with ourselves and others about our situation. Jesus describes it like this: *“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?”*

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus told us, *“You are the salt of the earth.”* I’ve given you a salt packet today as a reminder that you are “salt of the earth.” In antiquity, salt was very valuable, used as a preservative and not just as a seasoning. It was the ancient equivalent of refrigeration. Christians are to help preserve the best of life as well as to bring zest to life. But if, through the corruption of its internal chemistry, salt has ceased to become what it is, how can one make it salty again? Perhaps a chemist here knows. I don’t. What I do know is that when, through falsehoods, there is a corruption of our

spiritual chemistry, it is very difficult to get back to the way of truth-telling and to have others trust us to tell the truth. Our plan needs to include living in such a way that we can tell the truth about, and to, ourselves as well as others.

A brief word about planning at Mary Taylor Memorial Church. I mentioned last week that such planning has begun for your pastor in terms of identifying goals for the next year of my ministry; and that in six weeks—in time for our November Church Council meeting—I will have a plan for my ministry that has been seen and endorsed by Staff-Parish Relations. I expect that we will embark on a similar process for the church early in 2013. And I expect that both plans will include these important teachings of Jesus reflected in today's Gospel.

As we seek to be servant disciples of Jesus, let us develop a spiritual plan that gives others the benefit of the doubt as we would wish them to give us. Let us develop a plan that keeps us from causing others to be hurt. And let us develop a plan that allows us to tell the truth, that we who worship God may do so in spirit and in truth. Amen.