

OPPORTUNITY IN DISGUISE

a sermon by

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Galveston, Texas

October 15, 2006

Text: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27

There are times that some Presbyterian congregations have faced unique opportunities. At other times, congregations may face unique challenges.

In recent years I have been privileged to visit with a number of Presbyterian congregations. Some of these churches wanted help as they worked to create new programs, or to write and implement a Child Protection Policy. At other churches, I (How shall I say this tactfully?) was present at the invitation of the Presbytery and its Committee on Ministry. My presence was an attempt to mediate an ongoing dispute within the life of those congregations.

Some churches were filled with hope and happiness. Others were being emptied by fear and by factious division. As I spoke to those congregations, I listened as they spoke of their hopes and of their fears. I heard their expressions of love and of their anger.

All of those churches had something in common – they were each, in their own way, confronting unique opportunities.

For some congregations, those opportunities were well disguised.

The Bible is filled with stories of the people of God as they are confronted with opportunities in disguise.

I.

The work had been to gain freedom from captivity in Egypt. Leaving Egypt, the people were confronted with a difficult situation. In front of them was a body of water. Behind them was the Egyptian army. The Hebrew people believed it to be a precarious moment in their existence. But, in reality, this was an opportunity in disguise.

The people complained to Moses saying, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

Moses, in his response, seems to demonstrate a lapse in judgment.

“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still.”

If I am reading this text correctly, Moses told the people to stand up and watch what God will do next. It is important that we deal only with the written word of the text; that we refuse to psychoanalyze the emotions of any particular character in the Bible. But one cannot help but to wonder what Moses was feeling. Did his voice betray his desire to hide his fear of the moment, his contempt for the people, or, perhaps, his frustration with, maybe even contempt for, the Lord God?

Regardless of the emotions experienced by or revealed in the voice of Moses, there remained an ongoing action by our God. The Lord said, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go on dry ground through the sea. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

You know how the story unfolds. It happened just as God had predicted. Today, we know how the story ends, so it is easy for us to assume that the stress endured by the Hebrew people was something less than what it must have been.

Their stress was real. As we all know, it can be frightening when you don’t know what tomorrow holds. As the people of God, we are to find our real comfort in knowing who holds tomorrow.

II.

It must be said that the Hebrew people did not walk alone and that they walked with God. This statement can be heard as a metaphor: “They walked with God.” This must also be heard as a statement of fact: “They walked together.”

When opportunities are disguised, the people of God must never walk alone. As the Church, we must walk together.

During the Protestant Reformation, there were two very different views regarding the Sacrament of Communion. Martin Luther and his followers held to the traditional Roman Catholic view of the Sacrament of Communion. Specifically, they believed and taught that the Sacramental elements of bread and wine changed substance into being the actual Body and Blood of Christ. John Calvin and his followers taught that the elements did not change substance. Instead, they believed and taught that the life-changing nature of the Sacrament was effected by the real and actual presence of the Holy Spirit.

These two competing ideas collided when North and South met in Heidelberg Germany, in about 1560. It has been said that in Heidelberg a dispute erupted between two priests during the worship services. These priests each represented a competing viewpoint on the Sacrament of communion. As the story goes, the much younger priest held up the bread and said, "This is my body broken for you." Believing him to have spoken words so insincere that they were heretical, the much older priest became enraged, leapt from his seat and tackled the younger priest. The two wrestled for the possession of the bread.

As you might imagine, this dispute had become disruptive to the worship and life of the church. This dispute spilled out of the church and into the community. Two individuals were appointed to write a catechism (a series of questions and answers) that was agreeable to both sides of the dispute. Zacharius Ursinus, a Professor of Theology, and Kaspar Olevianus, a Pastor to the Community, were chosen to write this document.

Surrounded by conflict, these two men began by seeking their common source of unity. And, so the Heidelberg Catechism begins with this as its first question and answer:

Q. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins.... Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

The situation in Heidelberg had digressed beyond anyone's worst nightmare. But, that terrible moment was an opportunity in disguise.

That deep division provided a terrible, precarious moment in the existence of the church. From those irreconcilable differences came the Heidelberg Catechism, a series of 192 questions and answers that, even after more than 400 years, continues to be a source of unity.

III.

Here, in Galveston, Texas, opportunity is all around us, even if some of it is in disguise.

In many ways, Galveston is a hard place to be. You all know our town's history. In August 1900, Galveston is competing against Houston to become the premier business hub for the Texas gulf coast. Then, in September 1900, an unnamed hurricane destroyed what had been a thriving island community. A few months later, in January 1901, Spindletop exploded just south of Beaumont and showered Houston, not Galveston, with the great riches of oil.

In his book, *Isaac's Storm*, Erik Larson notes that after this series of unfortunate events, Galveston was reduced to being nothing more than Houston's beach community. Since 1900, our community has seen great times. Our community has also known hard times. Some of you have expressed your concern that our town seems to be at a moment of decline; that our population and our public school enrollment are sliding a bit.

Something of this must be said of our congregation. In 1997, our congregation reported about 425 active members. Today, after about 10 years of steady decline, that number is less than 260.

Is this a cause for great concern? Or, is this an opportunity in disguise?

Some years ago there was a difficult season in the history of Mexico. The government, faced with the need to pay-off an international loan, devalued its currency, the peso. Overnight, inflation ripped through the country.

One consequence of that difficult day was the situation faced by industries that provided nonessential consumer goods; goods like Coca Cola.

The Coca Cola Company was faced with a sharp drop in consumer demand for its product at the same moment that it faced its highest operating and production costs. The Coca Cola Company saw that moment for what it really was, a moment of disguised opportunity. Coca Cola lowered its prices to remain affordable to the average consumer. For a number of years, this was done at an ongoing operating loss to the company. But, what the Coca Cola Company gained was market share. Those consumers who were purchasing soft drinks became more and more likely to be purchasing Coca Cola products. As Mexico's economy rebounded, so too did consumer demand for soft drinks. The Coca Cola Company held on to the percentage of people who were buying Coke products. Not long ago I read that Coca Cola continues to hold a strong market share in Mexico and around the world.

Today, our congregation faces a similar opportunity.

If the population of this island community is in decline, it is not realistic to expect us to see an exponential growth in our membership, at least not in the next several months.

However, if we merely maintain our size or even grow just a bit, our church will capture the business equivalent of market share. This is to say that we can grow the percentage of islanders who are involved in the life of our church.

Galveston will rebound. Even with only a few months on the island, and having read only a couple of books related to its history, it seems to me that the ebb and flow of Galveston – its population and its fortunes – are as predictable as the rising and falling of the tide.

My challenge to you in this stewardship season is that we neither fear nor cease to progress towards the opportunity that is before us, even if that opportunity be disguised and hardly visible to us. My challenge is particularly important during this stewardship season.

Yes, yes, I said it, “stewardship.” This is the part of the sermon where I quit preaching and commence “a-meddling” in your lives.

In recent years, it has happened that some of our most faithful benefactors have left. Some have moved away. Others have passed away. Their annual contributions are no longer included in the church's budget. Those responsibilities now rest upon our shoulders.

Permit me a moment of candor. I like you guys and I love you as only your pastor can love the people of this church. But, my confidence is not rooted in you. No, my confidence is rooted in the Lord God who brought you, me, all of us together to this place. Within the life of this church there remains a tremendous variety of gifts.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

Today there will be meal served in the Fellowship Hall. There will be talk of the church's need for your time, for your talent, and, yes, for money.

Some are looking to me for a promise as to what will come next in the life of this church. You are welcome to look; but your search will not be satisfied.

We don't have a promise as to what tomorrow holds. Instead, we are to have confidence in the one who holds tomorrow.

END NOTES