



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

“An Old Game”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Romans 4:13-25

July 26, 2009

I remember an incident from my early twenties. I realize this is remarkable that I can recall something from so long ago, but I do. One night I took the car out when I should have remained at home.

It was a bitter January night, and it had been snowing for hours. TV and radio stations were issuing warnings to stay off the roads because the streets were getting worse by the minute. Of course, when I was that age I was much smarter than I am today. I was not going to allow a little snow to stop me from running to the store. I knew I could handle it.

Once I got a few blocks from home, I realized that the streets were not bad; they were treacherous. When I stepped on the brakes, it was like trying to stop a car on an ice skating rink. There were cars turned sideways, some in ditches and others in front yards. I made it halfway to the store before I finally came to my senses and acknowledged that it was far more dangerous than I had imagined, so I turned around and headed for home. It wasn't long before I slid into a curb and my tires started spinning. It looked as if I might not be able to get the car unstuck and I realized that some other nut out on the roads that night might come barreling into me. I got that panicky feeling you get when it appears that something awful is about to strike. And so I started praying, “God, if you will get me out of this storm safely, I promise not to drive into something like this ever again.”

Have you ever been in a situation where you attempted to strike a bargain with God?

“God, if you will help me land this new job, I'll increase my giving to the church.”

“Lord, if you will let me not be pregnant, I'll not get myself in this predicament again.”

“God, if my loved one can survive this emergency, I will be in church every Sunday.”

Have you ever attempted to play “Let's Make a Deal” with God? It is a very old game. It has been around since at least the time of Abraham, 4,000 years ago. In the book of Genesis, there is an account of Abraham attempting to finagle a bargain with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham did not have any better luck than we do.

I suspect that for as long as human beings have been in existence, people have tried to strike deals with God. Most of us seem to think that we can live however we please, and then when we land ourselves in trouble, we can whistle for God to snatch us out of our predicament. But God is not like the parent of a two year-old, hovering in the shadows, prepared to swoop in and prevent a disaster when the child engages in risky behavior.

And it's not only the decisions *we* make that land us in some of our predicaments. The actions of others can also have a devastating impact on our lives. If our spouse starts drinking

heavily or our teenager becomes pregnant or our boss starts making unreasonable demands or our elderly parent begins to lose her mind, we can find ourselves in a dreadful situation. At times when we're feeling desperate, it is natural for us to try to bargain with God. Unfortunately, it will not help.

What do we do, when we find ourselves in a bleak situation? If making a deal with God will not work, what will? For one, we need to remember what is genuinely important. When life does not unfold as we hope, it is easy to lose sight of what is truly significant and to be dragged down by minor problems. Life is much more satisfying when we keep things in perspective.

A few years ago there was a story about a bride and groom whose wedding did not go exactly as planned. After all 200 invitations had been mailed, it was discovered that they had the wrong date on them. New invitations had to be printed and sent. Not long after that mishap the bride's veil disappeared and was never found. Then, on the day of their wedding – which was planned to be outside – the bride and groom awoke to the heaviest rain of the year. At least the minister officiating the service could be counted on to get things right. Wrong.

He showed up half an hour late. And finally the filet mignon, which was to be the main course at the reception, had been refrigerated in the kitchen of a nearby retirement home. The elderly residents were not quite sure of the source of those steaks, but they had one of the best lunches they had ever had!

If you cannot take some things in stride, if you cannot laugh about them later, then life is going to be a constant struggle. Life is messy, and problems crop up frequently. Fortunately the couple, whose wedding seemed to be going haywire, knew that all those things were side issues. They knew that what was truly significant was the commitment they made to God and to one another. And so today, they remember their wedding day as the joyous occasion that brought them together accompanied by a number of twists and surprises.<sup>1</sup> They are blessed with the knowledge that life throws us countless curve balls so it is essential to be flexible and to focus on what is really important.

Second, we need to have faith that God is at work opening doors for us. Today's passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans speaks of the importance of faith. Paul uses Abraham as an example of a faithful follower of God. The Book of Genesis tells us that Abraham and Sarah hoped for a child. However, as the years went by and Sarah never became pregnant, their dream began to fade. Paul tells us that Abraham never completely lost hope because he believed in the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." (Romans 4:17).

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story of hope. Even though they were well past the child-bearing years, Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son. And that was the beginning of the nation of Israel.

Their story serves as an example for people of faith. When we feel that our situation is as good as dead, we must hold onto the belief that God can breathe new life into it. Now, when Paul urges us to trust God to give life to the dead and call into existence the things that do not exist, he is not saying that if you have a strong faith and you pray hard enough, God will grant your wish. Rather, what he is saying is this: God can still open doors, even when it seems that every passageway has been sealed.

When a marriage falls apart and life is filled with pain, we need to trust God to show us a new path. When a loved one dies and the future we had imagined is snuffed out, we need to have faith that life is not over and that there are still good things to come. When life is caving in

on us, and we cannot picture a future that holds anything worthwhile, we must cling to the belief that God can present us with new chances even when cannot the imagine the possibility.

Over the course of my ministry I have seen many people, who in the midst of the worst storm of their lives, were convinced that life was finished and there was no reason to carry on. And yet, with the help of friends and with the scrap of faith they could muster, they survived the turbulence and eventually discovered that the sun did indeed rise again. It may not have been the life on which they had counted, and they would have preferred not to have had to carry such a heavy loss, but they found that even if life has lost all purpose, God can open a door we never expected.

However, to discover that new path for healing, we need to be open to possibilities that we may not have considered. God experiences all people and events in all of their pain and all of their glory. God does not simply experience life as we wish it were, but as it actually is. God continuously envisions new possibilities and urges us to live into our best possible future given our situation. Thus, we need to be as open as possible to the dreams God has for our lives.

This is not easy to put into practice. Often we have a firm idea of what we want, and we think we should be able to snap our fingers and God will make it happen. However, sometimes our expectations are unrealistic. God does not rewind the tape and change the past. God does not force others to act the way we think they should act. God does not make pain and suffering magically vanish. God deals with the world as it is, and encourages us to live as fully as possible, given our situation.

Many become frustrated and have difficulty moving forward with their lives because they are looking for one specific remedy and they refuse to consider any other possibility. They block healing in their lives because they have already written out the prescription and they are waiting for God to fill it precisely as they have written it.

I know I've made people angry when I have suggested to them that the door they are hoping will open, may never open. Some have ignored me when I have suggested that they may need to take a new approach to dealing with their difficulty and to consider a different outcome than the one they're counting on.

Finally, to heal the hurt *within* us, we need to look *beyond* us. When we focus on our personal problems, our mind constantly swirls around what we are lacking. Like an infinite loop, our mind repeatedly focuses on our loss, our pain, our sadness and the unfairness of life. However, when we focus on what we can do for others, we not only break the loop, we garner the satisfaction of lightening the load of someone else. Personal healing derives from rediscovering a purpose. When we have a purpose, our lives are fulfilling and joyful. We heal ourselves, when we give hope to someone else.

You may have heard about Michael Goldsmith recently. This 4<sup>th</sup> of July was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lou Gehrig's immortal speech about leaving baseball due to his debilitating disease. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, Goldsmith threw the ceremonial first pitch in Yankee stadium. Goldsmith has A.L.S., the illness also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. He was invited to throw out the first pitch because he was responsible for getting Major League Baseball to hold special ceremonies in 15 different ball parks to raise money to fight A.L.S.

Goldsmith, who is only 58 years old, is a law professor at Brigham Young University. He was diagnosed with A.L.S. three years ago and his health has been in a steep dive ever since. His friend and former boss said, "(Michael) knows he is going to die a horrible death, but there has not been one word of complaint from him...(Instead) he is spending his time working on this

project to raise money for A.L.S. research knowing that the money will never help him.” He simply hopes it will help others in the future.

A few days before throwing out that pitch, Goldsmith wrote why he is doing what he’s doing. He said, “I have spent more than two decades exhorting law students to take a proactive ‘can-do’ approach to the law and to life in general. And I have tried to lead by example, showing them how creativity and commitment to a cause can produce positive results. The success of this effort demonstrates yet again how the power of one can make a difference...As for me, my health has declined considerably recently. I use a wheelchair part time, have skinny chicken arms and my voice has become impaired.” And then, he concluded with these words, “But I’m still in the game and I intend to go down swinging.”<sup>2</sup>

He could have become despondent and instead of throwing a baseball, he could have thrown a pity party. Who would have blamed him if he had become bitter and depressed, and railed against the unfairness of his plight? But instead, he discovered a door God opened for him that is allowing him to live as rich a life as possible given his predicament. He is a living example of how God can take your seemingly dead situation and still call forth new life for you.

#### NOTES

1. Anna Carter Florence, “A Good Laugh Is Hard to Find,” in *Lectionary Homiletics*.
2. The story of Michael Goldsmith was told by George Vecsey in an article for the New York Times entitled “Gehrig’s Voice Echoes in a Story of Courage,” printed July 5, 2009.