

“Knock, Knock,” May 31, 2009

Bible passage: I Corinthians 16:9 (The Message)

“For the present, I’m staying right here in Ephesus. A huge door of opportunity for good work has opened up here.”

Sermon nugget:

We sometimes hear the phrase “when opportunity knocks.” How do we recognize an opportunity when it appears, and how might our actions create more opportunities?

Message part 1

In mid April of this year, there was a sports rumor that had to do a Duke University basketball player named Greg Paulus. Apparently, he had played four years at Duke, and is set to graduate this spring. Paulus, who was described as a complementary player eventually lost his starting role on the team during his senior year, but however, no one ever heard him complain about it.

When he lost the starting position, some speculated that he had chosen the wrong sport. You see, he was the number one ranked quarterback prospect in the country when he graduated from high school in 2005. He had led his team to a perfect season record and the state championship, and received some 70 football scholarship offers.

However in college, Paulus elected to bypass football in favor of playing basketball at Duke, saying that basketball was his passion. Now after not playing football for four years, several opportunities in that sport seem to be presenting themselves to him. For instance, he recently worked out with the Green Bay Packers, and could work out for even more teams. Or he could stay with basketball and pursue a career in coaching, or he could play basketball overseas.

However, he seems to believe that a door has been opened for him to once again play the sport at which he was so successful. Apparently, there’s a loophole in the NCAA rules that might allow him to play football once again—this time at Michigan as a grad student and quarterback. In addition, it’s curious that he even hinted about such a possibility in an interview almost six years ago. When asked if he might ever again play football, he answered, “If the right opportunity presents itself...you never know.” He seems to be of the mindset that if opportunity knocks, he is willing to open the door.

Speaking of knocking on the door, I suppose we know the knock, knock joke about this...right? I’ll start: “Knock, knock...” You say, “Who’s there?” I say, “Opportunity,” and you ask “Opportunity who?” Don’t be silly; opportunity only knocks once.” Is that true? Just how do you suppose Paulus in thinking this might be the “right opportunity?” How do any of us decide if knocking on this door is the best thing, or if we should try another?

Certainly, Paul in today’s Bible passage seemed to have a sense of when the opportunity was ripe. There’s more to the story than our simple verse is telling us about the writer Paul’s travel plans, and he is revealing why he’s not leaving Ephesus to come directly to Corinth. He writes that he’s going to stay in Ephesus, saying: **“A huge door of opportunity for good work has opened up here.”**

At the time Paul was there, he was definitely facing some challenges. One of the most grandiose buildings in Ephesus was the temple built to the goddess Diana. In addition, Paul was trying to get through to people who were leading what they thought of as “the good life,” with lots of wealth and all the luxuries they could ever have imagined. For someone like Paul, who wanted to convince them that Christianity offered a better way to live based on more lasting values, he certainly had an uphill battle. It’s interesting, however, to realize that he refers to it as “a huge door of opportunity” when many of us might conclude that it was place filled with roadblocks to his ministry. But that isn’t how he looked at it: “a huge opportunity” is what he called it.

That reminds me of the two salespersons who were sent to a remote country to sell shoes. After just a few days, “One emailed company headquarters, saying “Get me out of here... no one here wears shoes.” The second also corresponded with the company saying, “Send more inventory. No one here wears shoes!”

Our Bible passage could be described as a very similar situation. Paul in Ephesus was like being a shoe salesman in a country where no one wore shoes, and yet the opportunity was so great in his mind that he requested more inventory, or in his case, more time. He wanted to knock on the door of opportunity.

The word “opportunity” is defined as **“a favorable juncture of circumstances,”** and **“a good chance for advancement or progress.”** How are we supposed to recognize those favorable junctures of circumstances?

It seems clear to me that in the case of Paul’s deciding to stay in Ephesus, it wasn’t just simply an assessment of the setting in which he found himself. It wasn’t necessarily totally external, but I think it had a lot to do with his openness to God’s spirit directing him. He had a sense, a hunch, or he felt a nudge that God wanted him to stay there for a while longer, and he was willing to listen and respond to that nudge, all the while knowing it wasn’t going to be easy.

Video

Message part 2

I’m afraid that sometimes many of us fail to recognize the door of opportunity because it may look too difficult, or it may seem too risky. As Thomas Edison once noted, **“Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.”** Yes, it may be that it seems like too much work. Or it might be more along the lines of what Seneca once observed: **“It is not because things are difficult that we**

do not dare; it is because we do not dare that they are difficult.” Is it because we’re afraid to risk, afraid to step out, that we hold back and miss the opportunities that open before us?

My guess is that it’s probably some of both, and even more, and we wind up in what we might call a crisis situation. However, you may know that the Chinese use two symbols to write the word “crisis.” One stands for danger; the other for opportunity. (symbols on screen) In any so-called crisis, we need to recognize there is possibly some inherent danger, but at the same time, there is abundant possibility.

Thinking about that causes me to consider the economic downturn in which we currently find ourselves. I know there are mega difficulties going on in our homes and all around us because of what’s happening. Nonetheless, I’m convinced there are great opportunities, as well. Recently, I’ve heard the phrase “Never waste a good recession,” and I’ve heard it more than once! Why is that being said? Because there is an opportunity imbedded within every crisis.

Stepping toward the opportunity just might require us to take a risk, but that’s tough when most of us prefer to play it safe. Nonetheless, film director Robert Altman probably had it right when he said, “To play it safe is not to play.” And to live our entire lives never daring to knock on the door of opportunity is never to have lived.

Song: Start Over Again
Video:

Message part 3

A few years ago, there was an article in the IBJ with the headline, “Risk-taking enriches lives.” It was about several Indianapolis people who had tried something they’d never dreamed they’d do, or who had taken some calculated business risks in hopes of achieving the desired outcome. Consultant Jeanne Farah said, “Some people have a natural drive to be adventurous. Others want the outcome, but they may have to override in themselves a tendency to pull back, but they will do that because they value the outcome.”

Those talked about in the article had done things like climbing Mount Everest, or hiking the Appalachian Trail, and they had done it by taking a leap of faith. Greg Paulus may wind up playing football again after taking four years off, and he will do it by taking a leap of faith. Paul decided to stay in Ephesus, and he did so all the while trusting that that was where God wanted him to be —by a leap of faith.

But to take that first step requires some attentiveness. I believe there are opportunities lying right in front of us right this minute, but we don’t see them. That’s because we tend to think too narrowly and block out opportunities, thinking they’re unrealistic; We say, “it’s not practical; it’s not possible.”

Remember, however, that with God, all things are possible. What we need to do is ask God, and then take that leap of faith, trusting that God will open our

eyes and fill us with the awareness and the courage we need to embrace the opportunities that come our way. We need to garner the courage to say “yes” instead of saying “no.”

In addition, we have to prepare ourselves for the opportunities that are presenting themselves to us. That means we have to do our part, and not just expect things to drop in our laps. We have to be willing to knock on door after door after door, never giving up, even if the door is shut in our face.

It may mean that we may need more training or education, so we have to be willing to walk through that door to equip ourselves to be ready for what comes. I’m aware that some think it’s all a matter of luck, but I’m not sure that’s right. Oprah and several others put it like this: “Luck is when preparation meets opportunity.” Only when we’re willing to do the work it takes to be prepared will we be able to welcome the opportunities that are laid before us.

I’m not sure there’s ever been a time when this is more true that right now in 2009. Lots of folks are out of work, and it seems like a time or crisis, but we can trust that there is also ample opportunity. In fact, I found it interesting to read what the town of Wilmington, Ohio, is doing in these tough economic times. This town of 12,000 recently lost some 7,000 jobs when DHL shut down its airpark in their community.

However, the reporter who captured this story remarked how the town is buzzing and alive. Trucks, having no alternative route around, drive through the Main Street, and they see buildings and streets that are cheery and well-maintained. Those are just some of the pieces of evidence that this community is determined to become a model of change, partly by breathing new life into the downtown.

The article mentioned, sort of as an afterthought, that the town was settled by Quakers, and one person said the town was rebounding because of the people. He said, “The resilience of the people is what I believe is very unique about this town.” Without it being said directly, I read between the lines, and what I believe is going on is that the resiliency of the people is tied to their faith, their trust that if they do their part, if they prepare, the opportunities will come. When they do, I have no doubt that the people of Wilmington, Ohio, will be ready. Will we?

CLOSING:

Maybe CNN’s Anderson Cooper said it best when he said, “I just found it interesting to talk to adults I admired, and to discover that the path they took was never all that clearly defined. It was comforting to me when I figured out that you don’t have to know what you want to do with your life; you just have to take a few steps in one direction, and other opportunities will open up.”

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

