

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on
Work and Faith

**“Obsessing, Digressing, and
Progressing!”**

George Cladis

SERMON NOTES

*The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.
Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

Three Sermon Outlines on Work and Faith *Obsessing, Digressing, and Progressing!*

Introduction to the Sermon Series

The workplace is where most of our congregation spend about a third of their lives so the metaphor of sacred journey fits well in this constantly changing environment. How common it is for us to seethe and obsess over a colleague's betrayal, the boss publicly holding up for ridicule some sincere effort of ours to advance the company, or a major client dropping out of our portfolio over a misunderstanding that couldn't be corrected no matter how hard we tried. Also on the journey with God at work, there are times when we are called to a higher level of creativity – seeing beyond what is expected to the fantastically new. Still, there's more. The Bible is filled with testimony after testimony of those whose lives were complete ruins, the charred remains of people who started off like everyone else thinking life would be this great arena of achievement, one great thing after another, only to find eventual disaster, either self or other inflicted, and now reduced to ash.

Three scenarios. Three real life experiences people in your church know well. Related to the journey motif, it is about getting unstuck from resentment, accepting and even valuing the detours and breaking the chains of the past to progress boldly. The preacher today has a marvelous opportunity to touch a raw nerve of those bedraggled folks who shuffle into pews Sunday after Sunday searching for a way to make sense out of an unpredictable present and frightful future.

George Cladis is the Executive Pastor of Liberty Churches in central Massachusetts.

Sermon Two: “The Importance of Digressing!”

Text Suggestions. Isaiah 55:6-9

⁸“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.

⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Exodus 13:17-18

¹⁷When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.”¹⁸ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

Luke 5:1-11

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. ²He saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

⁵Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

⁶When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.”¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Theological Point: God’s ways and thoughts are not ours. If we think of God as Wholly Other, as that thought which is above any and every thought and even beyond what we could ever conceive, our own concept of God being a mere shadow of God’s true Self, then there would be no way to know God or anything about the Lord. However, God chose to reveal to us the Lord incarnate in Jesus Christ so that “which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (1 John. 1:1). In Jesus, we are introduced to a radically different way to see the world and engage it. Jesus “rearranged the furniture of our minds” and turned values upside down. He taught us about the Way less traveled (Mt. 7:14). We might think that the quickest way to a destination is a straight line, but when journeying with God, we digress from such efficiencies, because God uses detours and side roads to open our eyes to a new way of seeing, believing, and doing.

Hermeneutical Connection: God moves us to zig when the world around us zags. It may seem as though we are digressing from where we should be: getting the best job, buying the upscale house, and so forth. But what appears to others to be detours are, for us, the Road of Life that leads to a greater fulfillment and satisfaction than the crowded roads that lead nowhere. God causes us to think differently about ourselves and the world around us. “Digressive thinking” is a form of creativity and innovation that is greatly valued in the workplace today. In fact, taking a lot of detours at work can actually increase your ability to make new discoveries.

Peter’s life was changed because he agreed to break with his daily routine – indeed, the customs of his culture even – and digress, obeying Jesus’ command to do what seemed ridiculous and put out his nets still again. By doing so, he was blessed beyond what he ever expected! God often challenges our routines, habits, and what we consider to be “straight-line routes” to our daily destinations and leads us instead down less traveled paths that are life-changing.

Introduction

The Preacher might want to begin by reminding the congregation of the series: obsessing, digressing, and progressing. Last week, we saw what it is like to be stopped in our tracks by annoying preoccupations that keep us from the path to joy. Today, we look at what might seem like digressing, but instead is following the Way of Life! These are holy detours from God that serve us to open our eyes to something new and wondrous that we would have otherwise missed.

A. Think Different

The Preacher might want to open this second sermon with a story. Here is one from my own life:

Years ago, I packed up the family in the minivan and we trekked to Orlando, Florida, for our first ever visit to Disney World. Needless to say, there was a lot of excitement in the car! Now, I am one of those who plan out vacations. I'm really way too organized about these things, carefully mapping out the route and creating an *Excel* worksheet of all we are going to do and how much to budget for the trip.

In order to prepare for the Disney trip, I read *The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World*.¹ I found something interesting in these pages: a strategy of how to do Disney World theme parks so that, by noon of each day, all the major rides and attractions have been done, even when large crowds are anticipated. The book even came with cut out maps so you could follow the dotted lines and run through the rides in a counter-intuitive fashion.

I thought this was brilliant!

So, we tried it out! Each day, we entered one of the theme parks and immediately did it backwards than the crowd, resulting in getting in more rides and attractions than if we followed the path most people naturally take as they entered the park. The book showed us how to think differently about what is, actually, the best route, and it isn't the one you would naturally take.

In other words, the book taught us how to think differently.

Usually, digressing is a negative thing, taking you off the most direct road to your destination. In conversation, digressing is not getting to the point the quickest way, but going instead down a rabbit trail. However, in the Bible, there is a lot of digressing! These are holy detours without which we would miss so much of the rich adventure of God with Israel, in the life of Jesus, and through the work of the early church. In fact, sometimes the most important times of our lives are these sacred digressions, going the road less traveled but anointed by God, and thereby having experiences with God that are life changing.

B. The Bible and Detours

Here, the Preacher can review the Bible readings. From Isaiah, how God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and yet we have encountered God in Jesus Christ, and our minds and hearts are opened up to Something larger. Note how Jesus had the effect of causing people to think differently, to act counter-culturally and experience God in new ways by breaking with convention. Elaborate on the Scriptures and what it must have been like to be going about one's business, off to the market or to work, when encountering Jesus teaching a crowd. Would we have been too busy to break our routine to see this new act of God? If we were Moses, would our daily routine of shepherding keep us from looking aside, and exploring the burning bush? How many theophanies of God do we miss because we refuse to get out of the ruts of our normal thinking and being?

Illustration. Look at a list of digressions from Scripture. We often think of detours in life as frustrating occurrences and simply inefficient. Yet, in Scripture, these are critical occurrences. The exodus wandering was a forty-year detour off the main road that would have taken eleven days; the Apostle Paul was detoured by God from arresting Christians in Damascus and taken on a multi-year journey of a new education in the Lord before returning to ministry; and Philip was also detoured resulting in the evangelization of one man – an Ethiopian eunuch – from whom many more are believed to have come to faith in Christ. We think we're digressing off the main road, but God is showing us that efficiency in our lives is not the same as in the Kingdom of Heaven!

Here is a good illustration from one who went on a sacred detour of God when he lost his job: http://www.thehighcalling.org/blogs/manninginthemiddle/beginning-and-end#.Ux8h9_lDWck

C. See Different – Think Different

So, why are we taken on these detours of God? It is clear that, for biblical people, one reason was to expand their experience with God and introduce them to a larger view of the Kingdom of Heaven. Without such detours, we would be forever limited in our thinking. Expanding our view of the world around us is not only important to our spiritual

¹ The current edition is *The Unofficial Guide to Walt Disney World 2014* by Bob Sehlinger and Len Testa.

lives but also our work. Many workplaces today put a lot of value on thinking differently!

There are times when we are called to a higher level of creativity – seeing beyond what is expected to the fantastically new. God’s leading in Scripture was rarely a straight line but zigged to and fro, each zag an intentional diversion to pick up a wise gem or forgotten truth. This apparent digression from the principle destination resulted in a better Israel, more attuned to a God who wants to take us where the Lord would have us go and not where our poor saddled minds would trot, blinders on, unable to see the Larger World. Oh, isn’t it true? That we get rutted in life and won’t leave the sorry road without a divine spur in our side and a holler “AI-yee-AH!” breaking through our malaise, a call to leap up and out and into the Unknown. The workplace today is unforgiving to the 9 to 5’ers who plop down their cardboard coffee cups, flip on their computers and believe their jobs will be secure year to year if they only keep their heads low. Today, right or wrong, the company that thrives is the company whose employees see what others miss and work counter-intuitively, zagging where others zigged.

Today, if you don’t think different, you’ll fall behind.

Illustration. Here is one of mine you can use or think of your own: Apple is, by all accounts, an amazingly innovative company that encourages employees and others to Think Different. View their famous Think Different commercial here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SswMzUWOiJg>. Also, if you use slides in worship, consider the Think Different image from Apple. Use your internet browser to view it.

As you listen to the narrative by Richard Dreyfuss, don’t you think these words are an apt description of what we should be as Christians? If a tech company can teach the world to think different, than how much more should the Savior be able to coach our minds to see the world around us different, “think different” and “act different!” *If you do not show videos in sermons, consider commenting on the narrative of the video, reading some of the words. You can also find a description of the commercial here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Think_Different. The point: God wants to break open our minds to encounter the Lord in new and different ways, and expand our application of Kingdom values to the world around us.*

Here is an alternative illustration to the one from Apple: See http://www.thehighcalling.org/faithimagination-and-work-faith#.Ux3uv_ldWck.

Wrap it Up!

Preacher: here is your opportunity to really bring it home. How easy it is for us to accept convention and routine in the workplace and in our lives when God is calling us to something higher. It might mean getting that innovative “Ah hah!” that results in a great, new product. Or, it might be a break-through moment when your eyes see differently than those around you: with more compassion and hope; or, with an eye toward how things ought to be!

Here’s one way to illustrate this point: On February 1, 1960, four young men walked into the Woolworth store on South Elm Street in Greensboro, North Carolina. They started to see the world differently and, consequently, the world would never be the same.

These college students were Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, and David Richmond. They were freshmen at North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University. In those days, they were called Negroes. They sat down at the lunch counter and ordered sodas, coffee, and doughnuts. The employee behind the counter refused to take their orders and asked them to leave. Sixty years ago, black people were required to stay out of white restaurants, use only black designated water fountains and restrooms, sit in a separate balcony and in segregated bleachers, and of course go to their own segregated schools and colleges, and even churches.

The store manager appeared and said, “I’ll die before I serve you guys because this is the way things are in the South, and this is the way we’re going to do it. We’re not going to integrate this counter.”

One of the Greensboro four, Joe McNeil, remembers: “Those were risky moments for us. McCain and I were the first to sit (at the counter).” McCain recalls that an elderly white woman came and sat beside him, and engaged him in conversation. She indicated to him that she was very disappointed.

He said he looked at her quizzically and said, “Ma’am?”

And she said, “Yes, I’m very disappointed. What you’re doing now, you should have done years ago.” (Joe McNeil, ABC News Service, “Pride and Prejudice, Civil Rights Sit-In,” 1998)

You see, they changed the world. But first, their thinking had to change.

God takes us on detours, digressions of life, to show us Something different – a different way of seeing, of being and of valuing. And we are never the same afterward.

Preacher: bring it home! Now . . . is that new thinking going to just sit inside you? Or will it change your world?