

I. Introduction

A. Happy 2015 and welcome to everyone – especially those joining us at CR, HP and the 01.

B. I hope you have had a good last two weeks. We spent some time with my extended family and then Sheri and I had a couple days alone up in Wisconsin. It was full of nothing, which was perfect. It was a time to relax and breathe, and also a time to reflect. This time of year is perfect for that.

C. My two big takeaways were that I (we) have so much to be thankful for; and that I need to get my head out of the weeds. I've posted a few entries in my blog about some of this, so for the three of you who read that, you're in the loop. But there is more to say. I want to ask you to look out with me, and I'm feeling just bold enough, stubborn enough and confident enough to give this message the title: How to Win in 2015.

D. I do not usually go with titles like that – too much hype and too simplistic. And besides, the web is full of this stuff: eight principles of this; five paths to that; a new you in three steps. In fairness there is often something there. All the New Year resolution stuff tells you to pick a goal, break it down, get some accountability and get after it. And some have additional insights, pointing out that we overestimate what we can do in one year but underestimate what we can do in ten. There is some value here, but I'm skeptical. It's not the way I have approached things. But I actually think we could use a little of this thinking right now.

E. My time of doing nothing these last few weeks helped me see that I'd spent the previous eight months doing little other than surviving.

1. I had a stroke on Easter weekend. Right as we were entering into serious discussions with Crossroads. And right at the time I was supposed to be writing a book for the upcoming fall series.

2. When I came back I was so far behind that I spent all of my time focusing on urgent matters – deadlines and problems. I didn't much like it, and to be honest, I lost my way. Things became more of a grind than they had been in some time. There was no thought about winning; my goal was to survive.

3. Some of you know that feeling better than you'd like to admit. You gave up winning a long time ago. You are in survival mode. You live each week trying to hold on until the weekend, or your next vacation, or whatever.

F. What the last couple weeks provided me with was some quiet with God, which helped me see the bigger picture. The truth is, it's very easy to settle for survival and hard to stay focused on winning.

G. We become like a friend of mine who was playing cards without understanding the basics of the game. This happened quite a while ago. It was shortly after graduating from Trinity – but before we moved out West – Sheri and I spent a few days at a cabin in Michigan with good friends. On the first night we talked them into playing cards and were about twenty minutes into a game when my friend asked, “What’s trump again?” He had not been playing very well. We had to keep reminding him that it was his turn and explain why he couldn’t play certain cards. Suffice it to say, the game was off to a slow start when he asked, “What’s trump again?” And both Sheri and I – with a bit of exasperation – immediately replied, “Diamonds.” To which he replied, “That’s not what I’m asking. I want to know, what does ‘trump’ mean?” His question explained why he had been playing so poorly. It’s pretty hard to win if you do not understand the basics of the game.

H. As we kick off 2015, I want to back up and explain the basics so we can understand how to win. To that end, I want to make three points:

II. First, we need to be clear about our assignment.

A. If you are a Christ-follower – if you have stepped over the line, placed your trust in Christ – then you have been called and commissioned by God to help establish his kingdom, to be an agent of grace and love, an advocate for Christ.

1. The Kingdom of God is where the will of the King is done – where things operate according to the teaching and values of Jesus. One day He will return in power and bring his rule and reign in fullness. And we pray for that day – the second Advent. But it’s not here yet.

2. And we do not know when it’s coming. But what we can know – what we are expected to know and embrace right now, is our assignment: to bring the kingdom of God to our dark corner of the world. We do this – we push back the night – by living today in light what will happen, in light of ultimate truth. And among other things, this means that we Proclaim the Good News and Engage in Good Works. That we share the best news out there and we live and love and serve as people who have been granted eternal life.

- B. Let me back up even a half step before that:
1. God created a good world. But it was broken by sin and evil. At the point this happened, God promised to send someone to fix it. And as we read throughout the Old Testament, he kept refining and further clarifying the promise.
 2. Eventually – “in the fullness of time,” to quote Paul in Galatians 4, God sent Jesus. He came to live among us in order to get us back on track – to explain what was expected, to model the good life and to die in our place. His death is the hinge point of all of history, and that is why in a bit we will return to this table to be reminded again of Christ’s transformational death.
- C. Among the things Jesus did was start a revolution – which is what we’ll be seeing when we return to Luke. Jesus starts a revolution and then leaves us with the assignment of spreading it.
1. To that end we talk about Christ and his death – because his death can be our gain. Someone has to pay for your sins. The options are you or Christ. Pick Christ. Picking Christ is the best and most important decision you will ever make.
 - a) Christianity is not a call to be good so God will love you. That is a rough summary of almost every other religious option out there. A Christian is someone who realizes that they cannot be good enough to keep their New Year’s Resolutions long enough to overcome the bad they have done.
 2. Our assignment is to talk about the offer, and to live like people who have been given eternal life – which changes everything. We are expected to serve others out of a full heart and a desire to reflect the kind of humble, sacrificial life of our master.
- D. The collection of people who have signed up is called “the church.” In the English language we use the word church in four different ways:
1. **First, as a Building**, “Did you see the new church being built over on Main Street?”
 2. **Second, as an event**: “Are you going to church on Sunday?” Meaning, “Are you going to a worship service?”

3. **Third, as an Institution.** We use the word church when talking about an organization with staff and programs and resources pursuing Christian goals. “I made a donation to the church.” That means I gave money to a 501c3 nonprofit organization to fund its buildings, programs, staff, etc.

4. **Finally, we use the word to describe a Community:** The word church can mean a community of women, men, and children who belong to Christ and live under his reign—as in, “Bill is part of my church.” He’s part of the local assembly of Christians.

5. Which is it? Most of us know the church is not a building and it’s not an event, but we get confused when we are forced to pick between definitions 3 and 4. When you say “church” do you mean the organization, leaders, budgets, and programs? Or do you mean your community of Christian sisters and brothers? And part of the reason for the confusion is that the church is both three and four.

6. We are supposed to be a community on mission. Per God’s directives we meet every week to be recharged for our assignment. We gather for prayer, worship (which includes singing but is more than that), encouragement, instruction and the sacraments: baptism and communion.

7. The church is God’s idea. There was nothing quite like it before he came along.¹ And there is nothing quite like it when it’s working.²

8. Please understand, the church is not an end in itself. It doesn’t have ultimate value. It exists as a means to God’s end. To put this another way: we do not have a mission, God’s mission – of spreading his kingdom, reconciling everything back to himself – God’s mission has a church. And when we are doing what we are called to do there is nothing like it.

E. I went to college hoping – planning – to be a medical doctor. I was a relatively new Christ-follower, still very much figuring things out. Shortly after arriving at school I got quite involved in a campus ministry and not long after that a few people started telling me that I should go into fulltime Christian work. I responded with an emphatic no to that idea, in large part because my view of the church was so low. I had only ever seen the church as a tired, irrelevant and anemic institution.

1. Best I could tell, the church met in order to raise money so that they had a place to meet to raise money. That was it. There was nothing beyond that other than repeating a bunch of rules that I couldn't keep. That is because the church I grew up in – like most other churches today – had lost its way. It was all moralism. It was all about being good. The message was exhausting.

F. When I finally got around someone who got the message right and who explained that one of the main reason for the rules was so it would be clear that we could not earn God's favor – so we'd get to an end of ourselves and our delusions of being good – and cry out for help. And when we did we'd discover a God who was loving and gracious. When I finally got around people who understood the message and were sharing it and who were motivated out of the Good News to love and serve others, and fight injustice and care for the broken and poor and push back the night, I decided, "I could give my life to that."

G. Men and women, we have an opportunity to be part of what God is doing. We have a chance to do things that matter; we have a chance to change eternity, to play on the best and most important team out there. Our assignment – and please hear this, because many local congregations get this wrong – our assignment is to spread a message of hope and to serve others, especially the poor.³ We want to see more people come to faith and we want to help those who are hurting. And so, our plan is to keep starting new services on new sites and to help you find ways where you can use the way God has wired you to serve others – inside or outside the walls of the church.

H. So, the first thing we need to understand is our assignment: Proclaim the Good News and Engage in Good Works.⁴

III. The second thing we need to understand is our setting – we need to understand what's going on in the game because that shapes what we do.

A. If you are up by a lot and it's late in the fourth quarter, you run the ball and stall. If you are down by a couple touchdowns you run a hurry-up offense and throw the ball.

B. I am stressing this because our situation has changed. We do not live in "Jerusalem" any more. We live in Babylon. Some Christ followers act as though America is home base and we have power and can expect to get our way. That's not the case.⁵

C. I think we've lost some ground, which is not good news. I believe that in a variety of ways things will get harder. We will likely lose some religious freedoms, and get sued and have to give up our tax exempt status – we are going to take some hits.

D. But this is not as bad as some imply. In fact, it's got some upsides. In some ways, though our lives may become more difficult, things will become clearer. We need to think Exile not Exodus.

1. There are two big paradigms introduced in the Old Testament that carry over into the new, Exodus and Exile. They set up very different thinking about who we are and how we should live.

a) Exodus thinking – which happened when the Jews were slaves in Egypt – set up this way: 1) There is a bad guy: Egypt; 2) God's people suffer unjustly; 3) Israel will be delivered – God will set them free; and 4) The motif is slavery to freedom

b) Exile thinking – which comes several hundred years later (after David and Solomon have died and the kingdom has split and the Northern tribes have been overrun). I'm referring to the time when the Jews spent 70 years living as exiles in Babylon. (This is a period covered in the books of Esther and Nehemiah). Now, Babylon is the bad guy, but Israel is suffering because of her guilt and unfaithfulness. She has rebelled against God and He is disciplining her for their rebellion. God sent them away from home. All of the signs that suggested that they were special – such as the temple – have been removed, and the question is, "What will you do now?" The purpose of the exile is to redeem and purify Israel.⁶

2. Globally, the church understands herself to be in exile. In America, many Christians think and act like we are in Exodus – that there is an enemy (those who think [and govern] differently than we do) – and that any suffering we endure is unjust and that God will restore us.

3. It's important to see things clearly, because those who see themselves in Exile live differently than those who see themselves in Exodus. In Exodus the oppressors are to be resisted. We are justified in demanding our way. In Exile we are to love our enemies and serve our oppressors! In Exodus the goal is to get out of town and huddle amongst ourselves; in exile that is not an option, and it's not the assignment. We do not flee Babylon, we embrace the prophet Jeremiah's advice to love and serve the city where we find ourselves.

a) Jeremiah, one of the major prophets of the Old Testament, lived outside Jerusalem and prophesied around the time of its fall. In Jeremiah 27 he wrote to the people and gave them advice they never expected to hear from Jeremiah or God. Vs 4: This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

4. There is no call to overthrow it or withdraw from it. Rather, if you find yourself in exile we need to find ways to love and serve the people there.

5. Globally, the church sees herself in exile, but American Christians have frequently thought of themselves as in exodus: we are the chosen people, the Promised Land is rightfully ours; we are entitled; we can rightly claim the promises.⁷

6. And to some extent, that’s true. Theologically, there is aspect of both paradigms in place for us. We are promised that something much better - a Promised Land – awaits us. But we are living in exile now.

7. And things are likely to get a lot harder before they get better. But that’s OK. It’s nothing to live in fear of.⁸

a) For starters, a bit of heat helps purify things (us). When I was working as a college pastor out West – in the least churchied state in the country – Christians took some flak. My experience is that it fostered greater community.

8. We just can’t give up hope.

IV. Third, God wins (and so do we!)

A. It’s certain. Read the Book of Revelation – read about the celebration that takes place there. God wins. We win. Jesus wins. We have the ultimate trump card. Jesus is the ultimate Trump card.

- B. I was thinking about all of this while watching Unbroken this past week. I'd read the book; knew the story and knew that Zamperini died just recently at the age of 97. But it sure looks like he is going to die a half dozen times and I had to say, "no, we have a vision of the future and so we know he makes it past this point."
- C. Men and women, 2015 will likely have some tough spots for you and for us collectively. It may look dark, but God wins in the end.
- D. And we need to take another look at points one and two – our assignment and our setting in light of – point three: God wins. God wins. Jesus returns, this time not as a child in weakness but as a king in power.
- V. Let me bring this to a close.
- A. Max DePree famously argued that part of the job of a leader is to "define reality" – I've tried to do a bit of that this morning. But I'm not principally a leader as much as I'm a pastor. And as a pastor my job is to help you live today in light of the reality of God – to live in light of his glory, his power, his call and forever.
- B. You make choices every day that affect eternity. Let me say that again, You make choices every day that affect eternity. Let me encourage you to live in light of the higher calling of God in Christ Jesus.
- C. Let me set a challenge in front of you. Live as if these three points are true:
1. We have an assignment.
 2. We are living in a foreign land. We are exiles at the moment, but...
 3. God wins.
- D. What would it look like to do this?
1. Well, I think you'd think more strategically about your time – they are not inexhaustible. This was one of my big take-aways from last year. I think you'd look for ways to bless people and serve them.
 2. I think you'd look for ways to proclaim the Good News. And while I'm here let me point you to three easy ways:
 - a) Invite them to the Alpha kick off dinner. It's set up for this, and it starts in a couple weeks.

(1) As you have hopefully heard, Alpha is a 1

b) Invite people to church. We've got room. As a general rule we do not do so well on this front.

(1) Compared to other growing churches, we retain a higher percentage of people who show up than normal, but we get a lot fewer people here the first time.

(2) Invite people. Expect them to say no. They usually do for a while, but later on they may say yes. Or they may call you and ask for help.

3. Serve

a) I continue to work with a group of elders and deacons on our plans for the future, and one of our goals is to bump up our volunteer hours outside the church from 10,000 – which is what it was last year – to over 30,000 in 2017.

b) But it means so much more than that. Serve others as a way of life. Place the needs of others ahead of your own.

c) If you've not gone on the bus tour, now's the time.

VI. I could go on. But it's time to land the plane. Men and women, 2015 is a blank canvass.

A. You have an opportunity to do something with it.

B. And I believe you will be eternally grateful if you decide that in 2015 you are going to do things in light of these three truths:

1. We have an assignment

2. It's a new day – we are living in exile, we have to rethink things a bit

3. God will win.

VII. Communion

VIII. Wrap Up

A. Sermon notes on line

B.

¹ There wasn't a word for it so Jesus co-opted the Greek term *ekklesia*, which had previously been used to describe political movements.

² There is enough Christian memory out there in this country that lots of people who are not Christ followers share their money with the poor. That is not the case in other parts of the world.

³ Please note: some think all that matters is the proclamation. Others think that all that matters is serving. A plane needs two wings to fly.

⁴ And by the way, I believe we need to share this message over and over for ourselves as well. Because we can't believe it either. As soon as we look away from the Gospel – the gracious free gift of forgiveness from God and eternal life – as soon as we look away we become religious again. We think it's about us.

⁵ There is a lot of debate about whether that was every the case. My take is that those who claim that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and those who deny the deep Judeo-Christian values that shaped those who founded this country are both wrong.

⁶ It's almost as if the nation undergoes a national Matthew 18 process.

⁷ It's not far off to suggest that the American Dream is just a secularization of Exodus thinking

⁸ It can be done, Daniel did it. I suspect we'll be spending more time in Daniel and Jeremiah in the years ahead – the first (Daniel) was written to people who were in exile and knew it. The second (Jeremiah) was written to people who didn't know it yet.