

## *Not of Your Own Doing*

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” — Ephesians 2:8-9.

Rumor to the contrary, I do try to plan things in advance. This time three years ago I was planning a sabbatical— 3 months in total— 11 weeks on the road. That was a major undertaking.

So, *do* I plan? A colleague once said he had never known someone who goes to the pulpit for a Sunday service of worship as prepared as I am. Indeed, if you have ever acted as liturgist at a service you will have seen one of these. (The pastor holds up a “liturgist copy” of the bulletin.)

It’s what I call the “liturgist copy.” It has introductions to the readings, introductions to the hymns, some prayers, things said from the pulpit by the liturgist or by the pastor, stuff not printed in the bulletin. I don’t, generally, ad-lib. Nor do I expect a liturgist to ad-lib.

Now, it may be that I am well prepared. However, when my colleague made that comment about being well prepared, I said back, “Yes. I am prepared. But that’s how I can ad-lib readily. You can’t ad-lib effectively unless you are well prepared.”

Show Business people know— and this is my Show Business background showing— Show Business people know there is no such thing as an ad-lib. You may have seen a TV show whose premise is comedians are given a situation. They then respond by ad libbing.

No, not really— these performers have a prodigious comedic, situational memory. They simply pull out a bit, a routine from their memory bank, something they have probably used before, and apply it to the situation.

Does it seem like it’s done off the cuff. Yes. Is it? Not really. How do they make it seem like it’s off the cuff? They come to the situation well prepared. It’s that simple.

That having been said, perhaps the most famous lines Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, wrote were (and I shall use the original here and try to not mangle the pronunciation), “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men / Gang aft agley.” Translated that would read, “The best laid schemes of mice and men / Go often askew.”

One reason a mouse is involved in the quote is the very title of the poem from whence these words come is: *To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough*. Indeed, John Steinbeck named the novella *Of Mice and Men* after that line in the poem.

The poem is actually about how making plans can readily be reduced by the sheer folly of an unforeseen turn of events. When the whole poem is read through you realize it says a poor mouse has survived in a frozen field through the whole of winter only to have a plough rip apart its burrow in the Spring. “The best laid plans...”

Here’s a related reflection: when I worked on Wall Street I once asked my boss if he was given free rein to create a job for me what would that look like. He said, “That’s easy. I’d put a clip board in your hands and send you out around this floor...” — mind you, this was back in the 1980s and the firm for which I worked was located in 5 World Trade Center, one of the shorter buildings in that complex.

It may have been one of the shorter buildings but the floor to which my supervisor referred was the size of one

square city block. And on that floor there were hundreds and hundreds of workers who sat at hundreds and hundreds of desks.

“I’d put a clip board in your hands,” said my boss, “and send you out around this floor. I’d ask you to write down all the problems you see and my expectation is you’d tell me how to fix them.”

Well, anyone who has been in my office knows it looks like chaos. It is organized chaos but most people take it to be chaotic. And here was someone, my boss no less, who thought I was good at identifying problems and fixing them, something which takes a great deal of planning and organization, the chaos in my office notwithstanding. (Slight pause.)

So, what are plans? What is organization? What do plans and organization mean, really? After all, isn’t disaster most of the time lurking just around the corner? Ask that mouse. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Slight pause.)

When we look at Ephesians, when we take this writing as a whole, it is clear the writer insists God is active in the life of the world. That might lead us to say, ‘Yes, God may be active in the world but is God effective?’

After all, we want results. We want to know where things stand. But is that the reality of life? (Slight pause.)

I think, despite all the polarized divisiveness we hear about today, we humans have more in common than we realize in a strange kind of way. Those on opposite poles, generally, imagine or even see themselves as ideological enemies.

Yet both poles place faith in determinism. Both see the world in apocalyptic terms. This dire thing will happen unless we do x, y, z. This dire thing will happen because....

That kind of attitude only diminishes human complexity, diminishes the complex reality of life. Everyone from creationists to atheists— opposite poles if there ever were opposite poles— everyone from creationists to atheists seem to fondly embrace what each sees as an inevitable outcome. So, perhaps our failing— pardon the expression, our original sin, is reductionism— trying to make things more simple than they really are.

At least in part, I think polarization is a symptom of reductionism, simplification. Put differently, I think much of the polarization we see in the world today is a symptom of people trying to simplify the world, simplify reality, even simplify Scripture.

One side, for instance, says take Scripture literally. The other claims if it’s in Scripture it does not matter at all. Either way, it’s a simplification. And that is not the reality of Scripture or the reality of life.

Try this one on for size: complexity is a reality of both Scripture and of life. Complexity and mystery describe the reality of life.

The very fabric of Biblical literature is complexity and mystery. Complexity and mystery, you see, describe things beyond our knowing. Complexity and mystery describe God.

And that is the very thing with which Scripture calls us to grapple: God— God who is both complex and mysterious. And we do not like to grapple with complexity or mystery. We like things kept simple.

Therefore, one option for us— an option often used in our polarized world— is to insist the world is *not* complex, to say reality is *not* complex. But insisting that will not change the world. The world will remain complex *and* mysterious. (Slight pause.)

And so... and so... the writer of Ephesians tells us things are *not* of our own doing. And that things are not of our doing— well perhaps that *is* complex— at least we perceive it as complex since, if God’s gifts to us are not of our own doing, we have no control. To repeat what I said moments ago: We do not like to grapple with complexity or mystery. We like things kept simple. (Slight pause.)

This passage states we are (quote:) “God’s work of art,”— *God’s work of art*— an amazing phrase. We are “God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to do the good things, which God prepared for us to do beforehand, from the beginning, to be our way of life.” (Slight pause.)

So, here’s something I suggest we all think about. A basic premise of Christianity says God is a mystery. And I think this passage reflects God is a mystery, complex beyond our understanding and that life, itself, is both mysterious and complex.

So, based on the text we heard today, perhaps the challenge for us is to realize God is in control. But also the challenge for us is to realize God loves us. That’s in the text too. God loves not just each of us but all of us. And that’s in the text.

And that idea alone— that God loves all of us— tells us not only that God is in charge. That very idea insists life is mysterious and complex. After all, that we should love everyone, even our enemies, is a tall hill to climb, especially in our polarized society.

And indeed, we all need to realize Scripture says God loves everyone. And we all need to realize Scripture says God is in control. And we all need to realize, yes it is possible not many of us are particularly comfortable with God being in control.

I know I’m not comfortable with that. After all, I like to plan. I like to be in control. But I’m not. Amen.

03/11/2018

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

**ENDPIECE:** It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “I’ve said this here before: theologian Walter Brueggemann the picture of God painted in Scripture is drawn with intentional artistic illusiveness. I think another word for that is mystery.”

**BENEDICTION:** There is but one message in Scripture: God loves us. Let us endeavor to let God’s love shine forth in our lives. For with God’s love and goodness, there is power to redeem, power to revive, power to renew, power to resurrect. So, may the love of God the Creator which is real, the Peace of the Christ which surpasses all understanding and companionship of the Holy Spirit which is ever present, keep our hearts and minds in God’s knowledge and care this day and forever more. Amen.