

**June 18, 2017
Acts 11:15-18
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“Create Possibility”

Good morning! I’m going to be trying something new in my sermon this morning -- at least, I hope it’s new. I’m going to be preaching about something I know very little about. It’s something I know some of you know a lot about. It isn’t the Bible -- although I will be including that in the sermon. I wouldn’t say that I’m an expert on the Bible, although I have spent plenty of time studying and reading about it, and I’ve done that for this sermon. What I’m going to be talking about is a game. One I’ve never played. Unlike softball, which we hear about in Genesis which starts, In the big inning . . . or tennis, where the Bible tells us that Joseph served in Pharaoh’s court, this game isn’t mentioned in the Bible. It’s the game of golf, and we’ll get there after we look at the book of Acts.

This is sermon number four of a five-sermon series on the book of Acts. We have talked about Jesus’ promise to his disciple to send them the power of the Holy Spirit, and how that Spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost, allowing each person gathered to hear about God’s deeds of power in their own language. Last week I shared the story of Peter and Cornelius, and how Peter, a faithful Jew and follower of Jesus had a conversion experience. Peter is now a faithful Jew who has had his vision of the church expanded to include the possibility of non-Jewish believers, and a follower of Jesus who is willing to accept Cornelius, a Roman, as a brother in Christ. Peter is including possibilities which the church had never considered before. Remember this logo? [Speak Possibility slide] It’s been a visual reference for the past three weeks, and it’s still displayed in the Gathering Area.

The book of Acts is a record of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the apostles and the first converts to Christianity. It is the Holy

Spirit that created the church and directed its mission and vision. And sometimes that mission created disagreement and tension. Remember last week I pointed out the word Change which is an inevitable part of creating possibility: whether or not we name it. There were certainly outside forces creating stress on the new church: persecution, imprisonment, and even the martyrdom of the first leaders. But Acts chapters 10 to 15 -- beginning with Peter's vision and encounter with Cornelius and ending with the Council of Jerusalem -- are focused on the internal struggles of the church and how it dealt with creating the possibility of change. These were huge and hotly contested decisions for the church; decisions which set the course for the rest of Christian history. And that's why I want to talk about golf today.

What we talk about determines what we focus on; what we focus on determines what we imagine; what we imagine determines what we do; what we do determines our future. Athletes know that there is a mental as well as a physical component to their training and performance. Studies have repeatedly proven that a positive approach leads to better performance. Mental rehearsal involves visualizing successful performance and rehearsing it in your mind. The athlete who introduced this to a large audience was golfer Jack Nicklaus in his book *Golf My Way*. Instead of focusing on avoiding mistakes by thinking "Don't slice it," or "don't hit it into the trees," Nicklaus said that 50% of hitting specific shots is the mental image he forms during the set-up. When he was asked how he got to be such a successful putter, Nicklaus said, "I've never missed a putt in my mind."¹

You may have heard the phrase "self-fulfilling prophecy." It means that what we expect is what we get -- because that is the reality we have created for ourselves. If we expect people to be negative, we become defensive, and people respond to us negatively. Our *projection* of what other people think actually creates the reality which we experience. When that projection is negative, "Nobody ever listens to me," "I don't think I can do this," "Nobody cares about me," this creates the downward spiral that Ben Zander talked about in the video many of you saw last week. It made me think of this Far Side

¹ *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, Sue Annis Hammond 1996 Thin Book Publishing, p. 23.

comic by cartoonist Gary Larsen [Slide: Roger screws up] I didn't put the name Roger in there, by the way. It could be any of us who are so focused on not messing up that we have already sabotaged our success . I speak from personal experience: nothing derails a sermon quicker than thinking, I sure hope I don't mess this up. This also fails to honor the inspiration and power of the Spirit. Visualizing success is not a substitute for preparation -- I'm sure Nicklaus hit plenty of practice putts -- but getting rid of stinking thinking which focuses on what might go wrong instead of what could go right, is a significant change in focus.

Creating possibility by imagining the best from ourselves, those around us, and our organization, is not just a good idea. It does happen to be a good idea which costs us nothing except the effort of self-awareness, and a willingness to monitor and change our own thinking and speaking., which will inevitably change our focus. But more than that, I think creating possibility is a theological imperative. Which is a fancy way of saying something God wants us to do. We are expected to create possibility for ourselves and others, because that is the attitude with which God sees us. This is amazing, because God knows us; who we are, the things we're ashamed of and all the stupid and hurtful and selfish and sinful things we have done. Sometimes we're not even sorry. Some people don't think God has anything to do with their lives, or even that God exists. God still loves those people -- and we are *all* those people. Who are we to think we can judge people where God does not?

I'm going to use another golf metaphor, from a book I discovered in the Creekside library. I'd read it before, but it kind of literally fell in my lap when I was filing books last week. It's called *The Mulligan* by Ken Blanchard and Wally Armstrong. A mulligan is, in friendly play, permission granted a golfer by other players to retake a flubbed shot, especially the first shot of the game. This second-chance shot is not allowed by the official rules of golf. And a mulligan, my friends, is one of the best ways I've found to understand the book of Acts and the mission to share Christianity with the Gentiles. The official rules of Jewish law had become paralyzing: either you didn't even try, or you became caught up in the trying to comply with the fine print, and were constantly trying to don't mess up don't mess up don't mess up. Or maybe you were a Pharisee who delighted in pointing how other

people were breaking the rules. We can't have that -- wrong, wrong, wrong. God changed that game. It doesn't mean there are no rules any longer, and we can do whatever we want -- that would be chaos. What God did is create the possibility that we could still be part of the game, even if we can't do it perfectly. God gave us the promise of success rather than the condemnation of failure.

That gift is grace, the gift which is offered to each one of us because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the only perfect person -- he never even missed a putt -- and here's the good news of Christ's grace: not that we can be perfect (we can't be), but that we are freed from the tyranny of other people's expectations, and free to live into the possibility of who God wants us to be -- who God created us to be from the very beginning. That is what God wants for each one of us, and because of Jesus Christ we can get as many mulligans as we need to help us get there. The good news we can share with others is that Jesus died for them, God loves them, and we're not going to invent rules where God offers grace. Amen? Jesus didn't just give us a second chance, Jesus offers the possibility of freedom from the downward spiral of negativity and failure where we imprison others and ourselves.

Peter -- God bless Peter, he's so honest about not getting it the first time -- is talking to fellow Jewish believers in Acts 11. These Jewish Christians are pretty skeptical about including Gentiles in the church. Peter tells them about his vision from God and going to meet Cornelius and preaching to his entire household. The apostles aren't buying it; after all, Peter is talking about changing their understanding of thousands of years of Jewish law and who's in and who's out. They are not about to give those Gentiles a mulligan at the beginning of the game. And Peter says, as I spoke to the household of Cornelius in Caesarea, the Holy Spirit fell upon them -- just like it had on us at Pentecost! And I remembered John the Baptist saying 'I will baptize with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' And I realized, if God gave those Gentiles the same gift God gave us, who was I to stand in the way of the Holy Spirit? It's an awesome Aha! moment; and the apostles are silenced. I take it by your silence that you agree.

I believe that the power of the Holy Spirit which is woven into the Acts of the Apostles is the power of possibility. It is the power to be open to the Spirit's possibility for us, but also the power to create possibility for other people to be free to live into God's will for their lives. Who are we to stand in the way of the Holy Spirit? We ought to be in the business of creating goals: of seeing visions and dreaming dreams that challenge us to succeed for the sake of God's kingdom. We ought to be anticipating and expecting the best from one another. We ought to be handing out mulligans right and left -- because we need to break those spirals of negativity which sap our energy and leave us discouraged and keep us fixated on how we have messed up, instead of freeing us to live into the possibilities God has for us.

I got an email this week that made my day. It was from someone at Creekside. This person hadn't been critical of me, but it was still a mulligan of sorts, and I was touched and encouraged. I shared a phrase with you at the beginning of this series, and it was great to have someone send it back to me. It was as if . . . I don't know, someone had actually *listened* to something I said. Maybe you'll remember this phrase: If it isn't fantastic . . . that's because God isn't finished. We serve an awesome God, who has great plans for us. We have been given the grace of Jesus Christ, who died so that we could free from our sin. We are promised the power of the Holy Spirit to create possibilities for God's mission and to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. If it isn't fantastic, that's because God isn't finished. Amen.