

God's Dream Team

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, November 16, 2008 Matthew 5:1-16, 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

He's so good, he has been called "The Chosen One." He was signed to a \$90 million shoe contract by Nike before he ever suited up for a professional regular season game. He was rookie of the year his first season in the NBA, was the All Star MVP in 2006 and was the league scoring leader last year. I'm talking about LeBron James of the Cleveland Cavaliers, who is generally recognized as the greatest individual basketball player currently active . . . and maybe ever. The greatest team ever was the 1992 Barcelona Olympics squad from the USA. Just listen to some of the names on the roster: David Robinson, Larry Bird, Clyde Drexler, Charles Barkley, John Stockton, Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan. In fact, 10 of the 12 players on that roster are still considered among the 50 best basketball players of all time. And they swept through the competition, winning the gold medal. Their average margin of victory was almost 44 points! No wonder they were called "The Dream Team."

Every player on "The Dream Team" was an established athlete of proven ability. They were selected because of that ability. No one was surprised when they succeeded. Few were even surprised by how easily they triumphed over the best the rest of the world could offer. How different was the early church. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians we hear them described as follows: "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." And listen again to some of the characteristics of the "team" Jesus called "blessed": the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart. Let's be honest – it doesn't sound like the recipe for a "Dream Team." And yet this "team" succeeded far beyond anyone's wildest dreams – anyone other than God, that is.

How could this happen? Well, I think there are at least three answers. One answer is that God sees possibilities in people that others don't see – including the people themselves. God knows us better than we know ourselves. How often in scripture and in church history God has called people who were convinced they didn't have what it would take to be successful. Take Moses, for example. Moses encountered God in the wilderness of Midian, in the form of a burning bush. But as soon as God gave Moses his assignment, Moses began to make excuses. "They won't listen to me," Moses said. "Yes they will," said God. "But I've never been eloquent, I've never been a good speaker," Moses argued. "Doesn't

matter,” said God. “Your brother Aaron can be your spokesman.” The prophet Jeremiah heard God’s call and resisted by saying, “Lord, I’m not old enough. I need more experience. I need wisdom. Who is going to take me, a kid, seriously when I say I speak for God?” But the Lord said, “Don’t say ‘I am only a boy.’ Go where I send you. Say what I tell you to say. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

And look at the sorry lot that Jesus chose for his disciples. He started with fishermen! I’m sure they were strong, hardworking types. But I am also pretty sure that they weren’t educated, it is unlikely that they had any experience with public speaking, and their knowledge of scripture was skimpy at best. Moreover, we know several of the disciples had hot tempers. James and John even got the nickname, “Sons of Thunder” for their readiness to call down God’s wrath on those they didn’t like. And then there is Peter, who said to Jesus, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man.” In other words, “Jesus, I’m not good enough to be a disciple.” Peter was right, by the way. He was always talking when he should have been listening, over and over again he seemed not to grasp what Jesus was all about, and when push came to shove, he proved to be a coward, denying three times that he even knew Jesus. Not exactly the stuff from which great leaders are ordinarily made.

Clearly, God sees possibilities in people that others don’t see. But what else explains how God was able to use such an unimpressive team to accomplish such great things? The second answer, I think, is that God draws forth and develops abilities in those God calls.

In fact, that is pretty much standard operating procedure for God. God doesn’t go out looking for people who are already proven and polished. God looks for the rough cut and unproven. And then the work of preparation begins. Jesus spent a lot of time with the disciples, getting them ready to carry on his work – years, probably. When he called them, he said, “I will make you fishers of men.” He didn’t say, “Abracadabra, presto change-o, you are fishers of men.” He said, “I will make you fishers of men.” It took time. It required experience. There were tests, not all of which the disciples passed, at least on their first try.

In my twenty plus years of ministry, I’ve spent more than a dozen years on district committees charged with the task of interviewing people who believed they were called into the set-apart ministry. Some came to the interview with enthusiasm and joy; others came with fear and trembling. But the ones I was always most concerned about were the few that came just looking for a “rubber stamp” of authorization – those who thought

they were ready to go, right away, no training necessary. When God calls us, it isn't always a call to immediate service or instantly to position of leadership. More often, when God calls, what God calls us to is a season of preparation, of learning, of gathering wisdom and skills for the task to which we have been called. God knows that natural ability is never enough; it has to be nurtured and developed. And those of modest natural ability who are willing to put in the time and effort often outperform those with a high natural aptitude who aren't willing to spend the time and effort they need to develop that aptitude.

So God sees possibilities that others do not see, and God draws forth and develops abilities in those God calls. Those are two reasons God was able to take people of whom "not many were wise, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" and fashion a church that changed the world. But there is a third reason. That third reason is that God really believes in the "team" concept.

Of course, that isn't exactly the language used in the Bible, but the point is much the same. God does not call us to be independent, free agent disciples. God calls us to be brothers and sisters, members of the Body of Christ, the church. Life in Christ has never been about becoming an individual spiritual champion. It has always been about working with others to move forward God's plans for the redemption of all creation. Corinth was one of the most competitive cities in the whole Roman Empire. It was one of the few places in the Empire where there was real opportunity to advance socially and economically. For that reason, it drew large numbers of very ambitious people. So we should not be surprised that an ambitious, highly competitive spirit was evident among the members of the church that Paul founded in Corinth.

Read against this background, Paul's letters to the church in Corinth are full of obvious examples of people behaving in competitive ways. People are out to prove they are the best – that they understand the gospel better than others, that they have more of the Holy Spirit than others, that they have better spiritual gifts than others. Of course, as is still the case in competitive situations, it was a short step from competition to boasting, taunting, "trash talking" and the like. The result? The congregation fractured into several factions.

Paul's letters aim at mending the fractures and recreating a sense of being "one body," the Body of Christ. In the 12th chapter of First Corinthians, Paul uses the image of the body to argue that all of the Christians in Corinth need to stop thinking of themselves first, and

instead put the body first and the work of Christ first. Indeed, no member can be complete or successful unless he or she is willing to serve God as part of the body – as part of God’s team, we might say. Harvey McKay, a best-selling author and popular motivational speaker, says Phil Jackson, the highly successful NBA coach, frequently reads poems to his players for inspiration. On teamwork he read recently a Rudyard Kipling poem from 1895, “The Law of the Jungle.”

Now this is the law of the jungle
As old and as true as the sky.
And the wolf that shall keep it may prosper
But the wolf that shall break it must die.
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk
The law runneth forward and back
But the strength of the pack is the wolf,
And the strength of the wolf is the pack.

Teamwork: it is what God intends and desires for us – not that we go it alone, not that we compete with each other to prove who is the wisest, the best, the most able. No, what God desires is that we come together and work together and use the gifts each of us has been given for the common good.

God sees possibilities in people that others don’t see. God draws forth and develops abilities in those God calls. God believes in the “team” concept. That is why God could start with a group that could be described with the words, “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” and create something that overwhelmed the world. And that is why God can take this congregation full of ordinary folks and do amazing things, far beyond all we imagine.

What we have to do is, first, respond when God calls, trusting that God can see in us something we may not see; second, be willing to learn, to train and develop our skills and ourselves; and third, work together, help each other, focus on God’s will and not on our own glory.

As we prepare to share a Thanksgiving Dinner as a congregation, one of the things I am personally most grateful for is the love and support of this congregation. And one of the things I am most hopeful about is what we can do together, for the glory of God. We are, for the most part, just ordinary people. But God has always done extraordinary things with ordinary people. Let our prayer be that God will do so again.

Amen.