

Committed to Hope

By Tony Campolo
2102 05/16/10

At Eastern University where I teach, I can count on this happening every May. Some student will come in and say, "Well, Doc, I'm not coming back next semester."

I try to be professional and say, "Pray tell? Why?"

You can count on what he's going to say. "I need time." And I'm thinking to myself, he hasn't done anything for the last three months. He's going to say it with great emphasis, "I need time Doc. I need time to..." You know what he's going to say. "I need time to...find myself." And they all look in the same place, Boulder, Colorado. Then it becomes quite intense. "Doc, what I'm trying to tell you is I need time to peel away each of these socially prescribed identities, these personas that society has pressured me into accepting for myself. I'm tired of being the me that my family expects me to be, that the church expects me to be, that you expect me to be, that my friends expect me to be. I've got to peel away each of these socially generated identities and come to grips with the core of my being, the essence of my selfhood." Kind of makes you puke, doesn't it?

I always say, "Charlie, suppose after you peel away each of these socially prescribed identities, after you peel away each of these socially generated cells, and take that long guru trip into the innermost recesses of your being, and when you get there, what if you discover hi-ho, nobody's home."

While trying to find yourself, maybe you have missed the point. Jesus said, "Whoever seeks to find himself, will lose himself. But whosoever is willing to lose himself for My sake and the sake of the kingdom, will find himself." That, in fact, the self is not waiting to be discovered through introspection. The self is waiting to be created through commitment. Commitments define us. Commitments give each of us our identity. And if you have no commitments, you are, says T.S. Elliott, the hollow man, the empty man, the straw man blown to and fro by the wind. Ours, says Kenneth Keniston, the sociologist, is the generation of the uncommitted. And yet it is through commitment that we become Christians. It's not enough just to believe in Jesus, not enough just to believe in the doctrines of the faith. You must commit yourself to Christ and say, "Here I am, take me, fill me, use me. I want to be the instrument of Your love in the world in which I live."

In the field of psychology, there's one school of thought; the behavior school that basically says that what we are is the result of our past conditioning; that we are nothing more than what the forces of our yesterdays have molded us into being. If I believe that, I would give up tomorrow morning. I have hundreds of young men and women who work with me, coming out of Eastern University, working in cities all across the United States and in third world countries, working with the poor and the oppressed, working with boys and girls who armies have marched over, who have been battered and beaten and abused. And, if I believed that they were molded by their past and that's what it's all about, I would give up.

But, I'm here to give you the good news: What you have been is not as important as what you choose to become. That's the good news of the gospel. What do you choose to become? That's the big issue. For we are more molded by the future than the past. That's what makes us superior to animals. Animals are Pavlovian. They're molded by the past. But humans are able to imagine and dream about the future.

And, if there's anything that the Holy Spirit will give you, if you'll surrender to Christ, it's an empowering that will make you into a dreamer and a visionary. A lot of people say I'm too old to be a dreamer or a visionary. You're not too old. Never too old.

Abraham was 94 years old when he got turned on with a vision. You've got to picture it. Use your imagination. He wakes up one morning, shakes his wife, and says, "Sarah!" Can't you just see it? "Sarah!" Poor old lady; she's 92.

"What is it Abe?"

"I just had a vision." Hey guys, there's a whole new approach you haven't tried yet. Poor old lady.

"What kind of vision? What kind of vision, Abe?"

"We're going to create a new humanity, a new epoch in human history. We are going to create the human race all over again!" Poor old lady.

"How's this new humanity start, Abe?"

"Glad you asked, Sarah." Well, if you don't think God's got a sense of humor, picture this: it's said in the scripture that Abraham left the Chaldeans with his wife Sarah, not knowing where he was going! Get the picture! This old guy on a walker, going down a dusty road with his 92-year-old pregnant wife next to him. Is this a picture?

And can't you hear them saying, "Where you going Abe?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do when you get there?"

"I don't know."

"Then why are you leaving Abe?"

"Because God has given me a vision. God has given me a VISION!"

And the Bible says, "...and when the old no longer have their dreams and the young no longer have their visions, the people perish." What this country needs more than anything else, more than ANYTHING else, is a rebirth of vision and a rebirth of dreams. We've got to believe in the future because we're old as a nation, as a people. We are old as individuals when our memories are more important to us than our dreams. That's what makes us old. That's what makes us old!

I was speaking at UCLA to sociology students and they were so cynical. At a particular point, I said, "You are 23; I am 75. I am younger than you are because people are as young as their dreams and as old as their cynicism, and I'm still dreaming!"

There are those who say it's too late for me, I'm inadequate, I have shortcomings, I'm a loser. Don't you ever call yourself a loser. You wouldn't be here if you were a loser. You were once a sperm. Do you remember? Not only were you once a sperm, but you were once one of five million sperm in a group. And you lined up at the starting line, and at the end of a long, long tunnel, there was one egg. And there was a race, and you won! Hey people, the odds were five million to one and you came through! Don't ever call yourself a loser. You make the Olympics look like nothing! Five million to one and you won! You're a winner! Stop to think about it, folks. If your mother had had a headache that night, you wouldn't be here today. You are here by divine appointment. God has a plan and a will for your life and the only question that is before you today, is: "Am I ready to say, 'Living Lord Jesus, come into my life. Take my life, and let it be an instrument to live out the dreams and the visions, not that I have for myself, but those that You had for me when You created me?'" Because God has dreams and visions for every one of you, the question is are you willing to say not my will, but Thy will be done?

Then there are those who say, "But I have so many shortcomings, so many inadequacies." Of course, you have inadequacies. A friend of mine out in Hawaii told me this story about a young man who was in a horrible

automobile accident and lost his left arm. He was so depressed, so his father, trying to cheer him up, said, "Can I do anything? Is there anything I can do for you?"

The boy said, "Yes. I would like to take judo lessons. I understand you can do judo with one arm."

The father got him a sensei, a teacher, to teach him judo. After learning the basics of the art of judo, the sensei concentrated on one move, just one move alone. That one move over and over and over again, day after day, week after week. After two and a half months, the sensei said, "We're entering a tournament."

The young kid said, "You've got to be kidding. I've only been taking judo for two and a half months. I only have one arm. My left arm is gone and I'm going to be in a tournament?"

They go to the tournament and the boy wins the first round, the second round, the third round. He can't believe it. He keeps on winning right up until the final. He wins the final. On the way home, he said to his sensei, "I don't understand. How's this possible? I've only been taking judo for two and a half months. I really only know one move. How could I have just beaten the champion of the state?"

Sensei said, "You won for two reasons. First, the one move you do know is the most effective move in all of judo. The second reason why you won is because the only defense against that move is to grab your opponents left arm."

You say you have a shortcoming? You say you have a weakness? This is what the Bible says: "In your weaknesses are My strengths. I will use you not in spite of your inadequacies, but through your inadequacies. There are great things I can do through you that I can't do through anybody else." God has great plans for you.

Of course, the ultimate excuse - I hear this all the time - is, "I'm too sinful."

When I was in grad school, I was the pastor of a small church and I asked this one man to teach a Sunday school class. He held his Bible up about this high and said, "I would love to teach that class of junior high boys. I would love to do it. But I'm so sinful, I'm so inadequate, so sinful."

And before I could catch myself, I said, "I know, and if we had anybody better, do you think I'd ask you?" I didn't last in the pastorate. Do you understand? I did not last.

God can use you. God has plans for you. Accept His will for your life. Say, "Jesus, I not only believe in You, but I believe You have plans for me and I invite You to motivate me, empower me, energize me so I can do the things that You've created me to do in this world."

There are some people who say, "Well, what if you're on your deathbed? There's no future for you then." Of course there is, especially when you're on your deathbed. The best lies ahead of you!

I love the story of Hudson Taylor, who went into the mission field. When he returned to England, the committee that had sent him out got their dates mixed up and did not know when he was arriving. He arrived in South Hampton the same time that Teddy Roosevelt arrived. There was a crowd that met Teddy Roosevelt and carried him away on their shoulders, cheering as the band was playing. Hudson Taylor got off the boat and there was no one there to meet him. He waited about two hours, sat down on his suitcase, and said, "Lord, I didn't expect a band or a crowd to carry me away on their shoulders, but there could have been somebody here to welcome me home." He recalls that experience, saying, "It's the only time I heard words from heaven. When I said 'there could have been somebody here to welcome me home,' as certain as anything, I heard a voice say, 'Hudson, you're not home yet. You're not home yet.'"

People, all the way through life, there's a future. All the way through life, there's hope. Even on the deathbed, there's hope. There's always hope and faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

I tried to get one of my students to research this to see whether it was true and I couldn't find out. But I've heard the story that when the great movie, "The Seventh Seal," by Ingmar Bergman was shown in 1958 in New York, Bobby Fischer, who had just won the world championship in chess, was there in the audience. The movie is built around the story of a medieval knight who's playing a game of chess with the prince of darkness. All the way through the film, the prince of darkness is making moves on the knight, trying to trap him. And in the last scene, the prince of darkness makes a move on the chessboard, looks at the knight, and says, "Checkmate." The game is over. And the curtain comes down. Bobby Fischer is reported to have turned to his friend and said, "Why is that knight giving up? Doesn't he see it? Doesn't he see the pieces on the board? The king has one more move. He can win. The king has one more move!"

Now if you can't preach that, you can't preach. Because I don't know what the excuse is. You say, "I'm too old." The King has one more move. You say, "I have shortcomings and inadequacies," and the good news is the King has one more move. You say, "I'm filled with sin." Sin won't even stop you because the good news of the gospel is that Jesus will take care of your sin. Because of the cross, He will take the punishment for your sins. You're saved by grace. Do you understand that word, grace? That means that it isn't something that you earn; it's a gift that God gives you because He loves you.

My son is a missionary worker in Cincinnati. When he was working in Philadelphia, he would take young people into the mountains for weekend retreats. He's a great pied piper. He can get young people to follow him with no hesitation. And they do follow him. He had 250 of them up at this retreat center in the Poconos Mountains, but my son isn't an expert on details. And he only had two counselors with these 250 tough inner city kids who were tearing the place apart and he, himself, had not even arrived yet. He was late going up the northeast extension of the Pennsylvania turnpike. He's got a van full of young men and the van is loaded with luggage. He's halfway up to the Poconos when there's a blowout. He got out of the van, he got all the boys out, he got the luggage unloaded, got the tire out, he's changing the tire, he has the thing jacked up, and the van fell off the jack and crushed to the ground. And my son let loose with a religious statement that had no theological content.

On the way home, this young man next to him said, "Hey man, this was a great weekend. I decided to become a Christian this weekend."

My son was really moved. He said, "What did it? Was it the speaker, the Bible studies, or the prayer groups?"

"Oh no, none of that." He said, "On the way up here, remember when the van fell off the jack and you said those things you shouldn't have said? I figured then that if he can be a Christian, anybody can be a Christian."

Sin does not disqualify you. No matter what you've done, no matter where you've been. I mean, stop to think about it. Have you ever gotten a woman pregnant and then turned around and saw to it that her husband was put to death? Well David did, but God took even those horrendous sins and said, "If you're willing to confess your sins, I will cleanse you and make you into a new creation. I've got work for you to do in the days that lie ahead."

Nothing disqualifies you, not age, not inadequacies, not sin, for greater is He that is in you than he who is in the world. I'm asking you this: Do you feel that you can't do much for the kingdom? That it's over for you? That you had your chance and you blew it? Don't be deceived. The King...the KING has one more move.

© Copyright Hour of Power 2010. This message was delivered by Tony Campolo from the pulpit of the Crystal Cathedral and aired on the Hour of Power, May 16, 2010.