

GOOD TO GREAT 3

“CONFRONT THE FACTS, NEVER LOSE FAITH”

“Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem had been torn down, and the gates have been burned.” When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of Heaven...Please grant me success now as I go to ask the King for a great favor. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.” Nehemiah. 1:3-4 & 11

In his book, Good To Great, Jim Collins has discovered 7 principles that have helped 11 companies make a transition from being a good company, to becoming a great company. My purpose in doing this series has been to see if we might learn the truth behind these principles, find that truth in the Holy Scripture, and use that truth to help us think differently about the church God wants us to be, and become. Two weeks ago we discussed the principle of Leadership, and discovered that the leaders in these companies exhibited a blend of personal humility and professional will. Last week we discussed that making this transition from Good to Great involves making “Who” decisions before making “What” decisions; getting the right people on the bus, the wrong ones off, and the right people in the right seats on the bus; then determining how to reach your destination. We spoke of Disciple-making as our God appointed destination, and our Purpose statement as the particular vehicle we will use to help get us to that destination.

Today we are going to discuss the third principle; “Confront the Facts, and Never lose faith”. This principle comes from a story that I’d like to summarize for you now.

Navy Admiral Jim Stockdale was at the time, the highest-ranking US military officer to be held prisoner, for over 8 years at the infamous “Hanoi Hilton”; Prisoner of War camp, during the height of the Vietnam War. He was tortured more than 20 times during his 8 years, living without any prisoners rights, no set release date, and no certainty as to whether he would even survive to see his family again.

At one point he beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor, deliberately disfiguring himself so that he could not be put on videotape as an example of a “well-treated prisoner.” He instituted an elaborate internal communications system to reduce the sense of isolation that their captors tried to create, inventing a tap-tap signal that his fellow soldiers figured out, and their captors never did.

While being interviewed by the author of our book, Jim Collins; Stockdale was asked; how he was able to deal with this torture when he did not know how the story was going to end. “I never lost faith in the end of the story,” he said. “I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn this experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.” “Who didn’t make it out?” Mr. Collins asked. “Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The Optimists.” Collins states he was completely confused. “The optimists were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then Christmas again, and they died of a broken heart.”

After another long pause Stockdale turns directly in front of Collins and said, “This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” Collins relays Stockdale’s closing admonition to his beleaguered troops: “We’re not getting out by Christmas; deal with it!”

This event, this story, this man, became the name for a principle that, after the telling of the story, was recognized in all 11 of the companies under study. They called it the Stockdale Principle and this is it: Retain absolute faith that you can and will prevail in

the end, regardless of the difficulties, AND *at the same time* confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

He confronted the brutal fact that he might never get out, but never gave up hope/faith that he would. That is the paradox!

In the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah and a majority of the Hebrew people were living as prisoners of the evil captor King Artaxerxes. When a group of the remnant, left behind in Israel, comes to visit, they relay to Nehemiah the condition of their beloved city, temple and the wall surrounding their home. Nehemiah is brought face to face with the brutal reality that the wall has been destroyed, the city is in ruins, and the temple has been laid to waste. Compounding this reality report is the fact that he is not only a captive living in Babylon, (modern Iraq) he is employed in the King's Court as the King's cupbearer. He has to see the King at least 3 times a day, he couldn't exactly sneak out at night and head for home. What he does next is interesting, even inspiring. He begins to weep, he begins to pray, and he begins to fast. He confesses his own sin, and the sins of his country, and then devises a plan, to go to the evil, captor King, and not only ask for his release, but ask for help in returning to Jerusalem, and even goes so far as to ask the King to help finance the rebuilding Jerusalem process! You want to discuss never losing faith! Those teary eyed, empty stomach prays certainly gave him boldness...or something did.

Do you see the Stockdale principle at work here? Nehemiah faced the brutal facts of his reality, and, and, and, he never lost the hope and faith that in the end, God's Will would prevail. There is great hope for us in the church learning this principle; we are in the "hope" business, for heaven's sake. We are in the "Faith" business. It ought to be easy for us to never lose hope, to never relinquish our faith, but I suppose part of our 'factual reality', is that we sometimes do! We sometimes fall victim to our circumstances, and find our hope and faith being replaced by fear and speculation. We sometimes

'pooh pooh' faith and hope as being so 'spiritual' or even superstitious, when that is exactly what we should be clinging to, and marching under.

We sometimes lose hope, and try to replace faith with our own ingenuity, or human ability, or intellectual aptitude. We of all people; those born in the Garden of Eden and those born in the Manger of Bethlehem ought to be able to never lose hope, and always hang on to our faith. That being said, the second part of the paradox is likely to be a bit tougher for us.

What are the brutal FUMC facts that we must eyeball to eyeball, confront; while never losing hope? This anonymous quote helps me; "I would rather be a failure in a cause that will ultimately succeed, than to be a success in a cause that will ultimately fail." Our cause will succeed.

Well, I've tried to prayerfully come up with a list, of facts that face our Church, and I suspect you will want to do the same; in fact, I encourage you to do the same. These facts, if they are true, and if we can face them, and properly deal with them, will help us along this process of becoming a great church. If we choose to ignore them, or spend all our time debating their validity, we'll circumvent their power to help make us great. My list is not all-inclusive, may not even be right, but it's a start. I'd be happy to discuss your list together. Here is mine.

1- **WE ARE A GOOD CHURCH**

We are a good church. I don't have time to list all our positive attributes, but I'll mention a few. We have a strong Evangelical heritage, though I think it has become more a badge of pride than a defining calling card. We have a hard-working and committed staff. We have able and committed leaders at all levels of the church, and we have many caring, compassionate, big-hearted people who make up First Church.

But, as we learned in week one, being Good can sometimes be the enemy of being Great. I think that sometimes our 'goodness' has been coupled with that

indefinable word, 'enough', and we have a tendency to feel satisfied, that we are 'good enough'.

That fact will not compel us, may not even allow us, to want to seek greatness. The first reality we may have to address if we choose to accept the challenge to become great; is the fact that we are already good.

2- WE HAVE SIGNS OF HEALTH AND SOME DIS-EASE

Again time forbids the mention of all, let me highlight. We have healthy ministries in many areas that reach multiply generations with multifaceted programs designed to help us all 'become' our Mission statement. We have a strong mission history and contemporary application of the same. We have good givers, some who know what it means to give sacrificially. We have hard workers, some who do more than they probably should. We have many options for different people, and we do much, with excellence as our watchword.

We also have a number of folks who have yet to discover the great joy, of giving, serving, participating, leading, sharing, knowing, helping, reaching, sacrificing; for a cause that is beyond them, called Making Disciples. We have to confront the reality that some of us are doing our part, or more, and some of us are still just consumers. The body of Christ is all of us, and this is one of our brutal realities.

3- WE HAVE UNLIMITED POTENTIAL AND UNTAPPED RESOURCE

This may be the most arguable fact stated thus far. Do we really have unlimited potential? I know full well that we don't have unlimited volunteers waiting in the wings for an assignment, or a task. That's not what I'm talking about. We have too many who do nothing. I'm not ignorant of the fact that it takes some people some time of acclimation before they become involved. I'm talking about the many who have been part of this operation for a long time, who still act like consumers, and think the church

exists to make or keep them happy. Our purpose is to make disciples, becoming part of that operation is the only thing that will make or keep us happy!

I do however believe we have untapped resources, and I'm not just talking about giving more of our individual net worth, though some of us could definitely do better. It is a brutal fact that God stands ready and able and I believe willing to meet and exceed all our best efforts to advance the Kingdom under the banner of FUMC. These resources remain untapped, primarily because of our fear to venture beyond what we know we can afford, or raise ourselves! At some point, we need a project, that will require a miracle, and break the back of depending on ourselves. And I'm not just talking about building a building on N. Washington, or in Bolivia.

4- **WE HAVE A CERTAIN FUTURE IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD**

Again, our great hope is that for those of us who know Jesus Christ personally, as Savior and Lord, our future is set, our home is now being built, our ultimate destination has been determined. And though we sometimes forget to live in the light of that factual reality, we have a certain future. Believing in Jesus Christ, and obeying God's commands will bring us to heaven. Period.

But, we unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, we have to live in an uncertain world. The paradox of being surrounded (in and outside the church) by unbelieving people and ungodly values, and unchristian lifestyles, while trying to maintain our distinctive faith has been problematic for this church, and many others. We have adopted a stance of separation from the world, instead of creative engagement with the world. We have majored on Jesus' word to be 'not of the world,' and for the most part ignored what Jesus meant by being 'in the world.' The world's uncertainty, scares us generally, and ought to inspire us! It is this world into which Jesus compelled

us to go and find and make disciples. We can't just sit and hope that someday someone will come in, we have to GO and make disciples. It's a fact.

A number of years ago a television show was created called The 6 Million Dollar man. It's the story of an astronaut crashing an experimental vehicle and almost being killed. (watch the clip) The Doctors and NASA researchers decide not just to rehabilitate him back to health, but to remake him, better than he was, so they invest 6 million dollars to make a super human being, with all kinds of extra special gadgets and innovations. The point: They faced the brutal facts of their reality, and made a conscious choice to rebuild, better than they were before. That same choice faces each organization willing to consider its own brutal facts. We might just put the pieces back together and settle for being what we have always been, or we might infuse the process with the best and greatest innovations, wisdom and technology to create a super-human model of potential success.

The church willing to face her own brutal facts faces that same choice: will we reshuffle the glaring facts, tweak this one and ignore that one; will we settle for being good enough, or will we recreate our own future to make it GREAT! We know our future is not ultimately up to us, but we also know, many parts of it are! It is within our own hands, and our hearts, to create the kind of church we believe God has called us to be! It is within our reach to become great, not just good enough. It is within the realm of possibility that we might become a Great Disciple making enterprise, not just because we want it, but because we are willing to honestly confront the brutal facts, AND never lose the faith and hope that we can become the best church God desires us to be!

Nehemiah got it, Jim Collins figured it out, Admiral Stockdale lived it, and now it is before us. Confront the facts, Keep the Faith. Amen.

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The Stockdale Principle:

Retain absolute faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, AND *at the same time* confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

“I would rather be a _____ in a cause that will ultimately _____, than to be a _____ in a cause that will ultimately _____.”

FIRST UMC FACTS:

1- WE ARE A _____ CHURCH

2- WE HAVE SIGNS OF _____ AND SOME _____

3- WE HAVE UNLIMITED _____ AND UNTAPPED _____

4- WE HAVE A CERTAIN _____ IN AN UNCERTAIN _____