

Sermon for Sunday, April 28, 2013 (EasterV) Exit Strategy

Exit strategies. We hear those words, and we think of executives planning to leave with fat golden parachutes. Or perhaps we think of spies, trying to leave a foreign country without being detected. Or even burglars escaping the darkened home where they've just snatched the jewelry and silver.

But there are lots of other ways that exit strategies are a part of life. Let's explore them with a story or two about exit strategies.

Perhaps we can call this a tale of two exits.

The first one? It's the saga of Marco. He was a senior manager at a company that made high-tech widgets. After he had worked there several years, he got an idea for a new widget. It didn't compete with his company's widget -- that would have been a clear violation of his agreement with his employer - but it was in the same general area of widget. Marco wanted to start a company to make and sell this nifty new widget. So Marco started working on the new product. He worked on it day and night, which meant he did some of the work during the time he was supposed to be doing his work at his job.

Now it was a small company, so it will be no surprise to you that after a while, a couple of the employees caught on to what Marco was doing and said, "Marco, are you running another business on the side?" One was his secretary, and he said "If you say anything about this to the big boss, I'll get you fired." She was a single mother and really needed the job, so she kept her mouth shut, but the whole situation made her a nervous wreck, and her work began to suffer in ways that were obvious to everyone around her.

The other employee who noticed was a manager on Marco's level. Let's call him Polo. Polo was a really bright guy, and when Polo confronted him, Marco said, "Yup, it's true. I'm working on this new widget and I think there's a great market for it. Want to be my partner in this new venture?"

Polo had signed the same sort of contract with his employer that Marco had, and realized that this product was not a violation of the non-compete clause, but he had an odd feeling about it all. Marco was, after all, not being honest with his employer, and was in effect stealing, by using his work time and his work computer and copier and such as he tried to jumpstart the new venture. But there was money to be made, and maybe he could do his piece of the work in his spare time. Maybe that would make it alright. So they proceeded with the work on this new company, and one day the big boss called them both in and said, "Marco, Polo, something's up with you guys. You're not putting your best efforts into your work, and you're not making your numbers. And Marco, what's wrong with your secretary? She's as skittish as a wet cat."

After hemming and hawing a bit, Marco said, "Boss, I don't know what's going on with the secretary, she's just a nervous person, I guess, but as to your other question, I've been meaning to tell you - we want to go out on our own. Start our own company. We've got an idea for a product - no, it doesn't compete with your widget - and we want to see if we can make it go."

"Okay, boys, that's the way the high-tech world is these days. Just turn in your keys and you're free to go and start your new adventure."

You might think that Marco and Polo would be glad to hear this, but in fact, Marco was in a panic. All the new company files were on his company computer. Polo knew this, too, and got squirmy. "Well, boss, we've got some personal files on the computers. Okay if we copy them to disks before we go?"

"No, guys. You need to make a fresh start. We'll just reformat the hard drives on those computers right now, and they'll be ready for your replacements. After all, the computers aren't your property - they're the company's, so you know you shouldn't have put personal stuff on them, right?" Perhaps the big boss had a clue about what was going on after all. Perhaps Marco and Polo were not so clever as they thought.

Visibly pale, the two men went into their offices to pick up their framed pictures of their families and a couple of other personal mementoes, and left, wondering how they were going to survive without those computer files, those damning computer files, but there was nothing to be done. They were escorted out of the office after turning in their keys. The secretary breathed a sigh of relief and silently prayed that Marco's replacement would be a more honest person.

Not what you'd call a good exit strategy, eh? Hiding their imminent departure, lying to the boss, to other employees, trying to start something new while still on their employer's payroll and not meeting the obligations of their jobs...you might think that this was something of a made-for-TV drama. It's way too melodramatic for real life, right? Actually, it's true story. I was the boss that showed Marco and Polo the door.

Okay, let's contrast it with Fred, a financial manager for a small nonprofit. Fred was approaching retirement age. He had a plan in mind of when he wanted to retire, but he wanted to make sure that his departure was not an undue burden on the nonprofit. He went to his boss and said, "I'm thinking about retiring next year, but I want to make the transition a good one for you, the organization, and me I'd like to lay out a plan for bringing everything up to snuff with the financial systems, documenting everything I have been doing, and getting the employees under me working in systematic structures that will run smoothly until my replacement is up to speed. My hope is that this kind of a plan will

keep our donors comfortable that things are running well so they don't stop giving, and that it will keep the other employees in my department from jumping ship because they are worried about the future."

The boss, being a wise person, said, "That sounds like a good plan. We'll miss you, but we've been expecting you would be retiring soon. This helps us transition without having to rush to hire a new person who most likely won't be up to speed immediately. Let me know what I can do to support the plan and communicate it with the staff." It was a good exit strategy, one that honored the employer, Fred's fellow workers, and all who were a part of the organization and who benefited from it.

This second example must surely be a romanticized picture of the good goodbye, right? In fact, it is not...it was precisely what a man very similar to Fred did, and his employer reacted precisely as Fred's boss did. The foundations that funded the nonprofit were pleased that the transition of a key employee like Fred could be handled so gracefully, and the employees were comfortable that things would continue well after their beloved Fred retired. It was a good exit strategy.

Exit strategies are important, because we're all going to exit someplace sometime, whether it be a job, or a relationship, or even this human life...

...and we've got a marvelous example to follow. No, not Fred, although his is a great story.

Actually, I'm talking about Jesus. If you think about it, Jesus started his ministry with his exit strategy already in place. He gathered the disciples around him so they could do the work when he was gone. He trained them, both by having them watch what he did, and by his direct words of instruction. He sent them out to give it a try. And when they came back, he debriefed them, and corrected their errors, encouraging them to try again. He knew that he would not be on the earth in human form forever, so they needed to be prepared when it was time for his exit. And unlike Marco and Polo, he was clear that at some point he would leave and they would need to take over the work.

I expect at Fred's retirement dinner, where they gave him the set of golf clubs he'd always wanted, he got up and gave a brief and emotional speech at the end of all the accolades. It might have gone something like this: "It's been an honor and privilege to work with you all. I hope you will continue to be faithful to the mission of this organization, which has helped so many folks. Know that I leave with many happy memories, and keep up the good work!"

Is Fred's farewell speech all that different from Jesus' in today's gospel? "It is almost time for me to go. Keep at the good work we began together. Love one another and know that I will never forget what we did together. It's the way you do the work that will mark you as one of mine, one of this great venture."

Jesus was able to say this with grace, with no anxiety, because he knew better than any of us, the truth about exit strategies. When you exit, it is simply a pathway to a new beginning. Even the worst exits lead to something new. Marco and Polo, as clumsy as they were, tripped across one threshold and into a new business. Fred, more graceful and grace-filled by far, shut the door of his professional life behind him and looked ahead to what rich experiences he might enjoy in retirement.

Jesus visited with his disciples for a brief period of time after his death, just giving them a final pep talk that was the culmination of all his work of preparing them for his departure, and then ascended into Heaven, where he took his place at the right hand of his heavenly father and continues to await what is to come.

The disciples felt the door closing, knew that they would no longer see him in his human form, grieved that, but then went about the work they were trained to do. The exit was the beginning.

I thought about that this week as I spent time with clergy colleagues in Texas, and how all the exits I made in my life, particularly the professional ones, meant that I had learned something that I could bring to you as your priest. Without the exits, there could have been no beginning.

It's my expectation that I will be with you for quite some time and I rejoice about that. But in fact, I will one day leave, as Rufus Womble left, as Tom Clemons left, as Bruce Campbell left, as Marty McCarthy and Gale Cooper left, as Keith Emerson left, as Charles Poindexter left, as Donnie Dunn left. With each of their leavings, they had prepared you for a new beginning.

My prayer is that however long God plans for me to be here, my exit strategy will always be on my mind: bring souls to a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ, prepare the structures and systems that help the church run sustainably for the future, teach you all how gifted you are as leaders and as followers of Christ, and let you know that the presence of God is always at your right hand, and remind you that you always face a new beginning.

As we read in Revelation, an echo of a phrase from Isaiah, God says "I am making a new thing." Exits are a fact of life, but as Jesus showed us, they are not only an ending. They mark a new thing, a new beginning, and there is rejoicing in that!

Amen.