

WHY WE GATHER Finding Purpose

“Shared Purpose”
(Ecclesiastes 3-4)

Dan Collison
May 14, 2017

Introduction

1. Margaret Mead is a famous American cultural anthropologist who is known for saying that married couples should have three marriages between them in their lifetime: The first for love, the second for parenting, and the third for companionship.¹ I can attest to the reasoning behind this notion as my wife Holly and I will be celebrating our 27th wedding anniversary this coming Friday, May 19. We are deep in the parenting phase and imperfectly sorting through what it will mean to be entering the companionship phase with our youngest son entering college four short years from now.
2. When Holly and I first entered into the love phase we fell hard into wonder and a powerful sense of purpose.

[PLAY VIDEO “HOLLY AND DAN WEDDING SHORT” TRT 1:57]

VIDEO THUMBNAIL



We were engaged to married in our senior year at a music conservatory and true to our “all in” personalities, and my “get it done” manner, we strategically planned our wedding date on the Saturday between the last day of classes, and the weekend of graduation.

The wedding was dubbed “The Coronation” because we invited all of our music school friends and more than 60 musicians agreed to play and sing in the wedding in exchange for free food! We most certainly cashed in all of our friendship “blue chips” that day! The music playing behind these photos of our wedding was recorded live by a music engineering student and the performance directed by a master’s level conducting major led the orchestra and singers through an arrangement of the Lord’s Prayer crafted by one of our groomsmen. We think that everyone was

¹ <http://notsalmon.com/2016/09/10/why-you-should-get-married-3-times/> (accessed 5-13-17)

willing to play for food because we were the first of our peers to get married and it was a bit of a novelty.

All I know is that we were in love and our wedding was a *great* day!

3. Looking back to that day twenty-seven years ago...when I had hair and our bridesmaids had huge marshmallow shoulders--I can safely say that our marriage has been better than we imagined it could be, and we had *no idea* what we were getting into. We are what you call an “opposites attract” couple. That means we think and feel in *very* different ways but “intuitively enjoy an energetic exchange of perspective.”

For instance, one life principle I favor is, “A consistent daily routine creates peace of mind and the best set up for predictability.” Holly’s favorite principle? “Treat every day as a brand new and unpredictably creative adventure.” Can you tell that we are really good for one another?! And, that we are very different from one another! We have learned to turn those opposites into strengths and it has helped us in our journey of purpose finding. And, we do it all very imperfectly.

And, in this way, we are no exception to everyone else. We let each other down. We say hurtful words that we regret. And, sometimes we just don’t listen very well to one another. Or, said more transparently, I tend to be the one who doesn’t listen very well--like last Sunday driving to church together and we struck up a friendly conversation about coffee preferences and the dialogue surprisingly escalated into a pretty tense moment, largely because I was telling Holly what I believed were best practices for coffee consumption, and for some reason she insisted to have her own opinion about the matter! I kept saying that I was listening to her, and apparently just saying you are listening isn’t actually listening.

On a more serious level and over the arc of our 27 years--during the complexities of life we have started to fall away from one other and have to look back to the original wedding covenant moment and say, “oh...that’s right...now I remember why we made this choice in the first place and how this all works.” And, we are also helped by looking across the span of our shared history in which we have helped one another, even in spite of our foibles, our lives are much better together.

4. Partnerships such as marriage and other close relational partnerships different than marriage, (friendships, business partnerships, co-operatives) operate in some similar and shared ways—they are dynamic, they are life giving, they go through rough patches, some fall apart, but in the end, the idea of moving through life together is one that our Creator put in place as immensely meaningful to the human experience. The Scripture for today points this out in an interesting way.
5. The book of Ecclesiastes is in the Hebrew portion of the Bible and is only 12 chapters. You could probably read the entire book in less than 30 minutes. And, I could encourage you to do so! Yet, I also advise you to be aware of what’s in this book because it was written by a monarch who appears to have nearly lost his mind.

One scholar asks these questions of Ecclesiastes:²³

Is [the king] coherent or incoherent, insightful or confused? Is he a stark realist or merely faithless? Is he orthodox or heterodox? Is he an optimist or a pessimist? Is the ultimate message of the book, "Be like [the king], the wise man," or [the king] is wrong, make sure you don't fall into his trap"?

These questions are important to hold as we reflect on the text, particularly because of what we find in chapters three and four which are the most famous of the entire book.

6. After the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes saying to us: "wisdom is meaningless," "pleasures are meaningless," "toil is meaningless, and virtually "everything is meaningless"--chapter three begins with a pause in meaningless rant to land on an existentially poignant poem referenced in more literature and movies than can be counted, and what many call "A Time for Everything"

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
² a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
⁶ a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
⁸ a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. NIV

With no clarification as to the moral quandaries that these verses raise, the author quickly returns to his mental toil leading up to the main point of emphasis for today, which is found in chapter four:

⁷ Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

⁸ There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,

² In this quote I swap out the Hebrew name "Qohelet" for "the king" to simply the point. Read more at: <http://thecenterforbiblicalstudies.org/resources/introductions-to-the-books-of-the-bible/ecclesiastes/> (accessed 7-16-16)

³ Peter Enns. Ecclesiastes (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (THOTC)) (Kindle Locations 104-106). Kindle Edition.

yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”
This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!

⁹ Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
¹⁰ If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
¹² Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12. NIV

This is both perplexing and beautiful at the same time! And, so true to partnerships, right? There is something almost absurd about the way partnerships work, and yet there is a mystical dynamic in it all. In reference to the metaphor of “a cord of three strands” the biblical author is asserting that two people, together, and by choosing to be together, invite a third strand of presence to exist. And, the Christian tradition has long interpreted this to be the presence of God in a marriage. It is that, and wider than that as well, based upon the many and varied partnerships that we see in the sweep of biblical literature, and the nature of relationships that is self-evident overall.

7. Like a good sermon, a few important points about shared purpose stick out in verses 7-12 beginning with “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor.”

A. Double Coverage

1. There is something simply practical about the idea about doubling our coverage! From singles who choose to have close friends as roommates or travel companions to people who choose to go into business with one another--pooling and sharing resources can expand our capacities. Married couples who are not able to have children, or choose to not have children can have more financial flexibility if they have two incomes and no children compared to those who choose to have children. I realize that this seems quite obvious, but it really is shocking how much it costs to raise children today.

The average cost of raising a child born in 2015 from birth to age 17 is....(drum roll please!)



\$233,610!⁴ Ouch. That is pushing towards half a million dollars for a family with two children. It may be best to just do what Holly and I did when deciding to pursue having children: not think about the cost and find a creative way to pull off financial miracles.

2. The power of partnership for those who can and choose to have children, or choose to adopt children, requires immense creativity in our time. I met one couple in which the wife, a successful author and blogger, describes herself as the “Chief Financial Officer” and her husband as the “Chief Domestic Officer.”⁵ The roles worked famously until the Chief Domestic Officer broke his foot and ankle and was stuck on the couch for at least six weeks. The daily work load shifted to one person, awakening this young family to the reality that *single parents* face every day of their lives: a single parent is in a constant state of scrambling.

The young adult couples’ advice for others who have the privilege of co-parenting and partnering is this: whatever you do, relentlessly attempt to stay on the same team. If you can do that, everything will be okay. Good advice.

First, “double coverage” is a good thing, says the writer of Ecclesiastes. Second, they pointed out that if either of a pair falls down, one can help the other up.

B. Helping Up

1. The Bible is filled with examples of partnerships in which two were better than one. Some of the partnerships were conventional and some were quite out of the ordinary:
 - Sara and Abraham were a remarkable and flawed nomadic couple who experimented with everything from lying about her being his sister when afraid of a threatening king to having Abraham have sex with Sara’s personal attendant to have a child that Sara was not able to bear. Later, they had a biological child and learned to have a deeper faith in one another and God.
 - Moses had working partners ranging from Aaron in the building of a new liturgical way to worship God to Joshua in organizing a massive and mobile people group.
 - The prophet Elijah was homeless at one point in his life and was welcomed in by a widow and her son. The widow was from of different religious tradition, but living together the three of

⁴ <http://money.cnn.com/2017/01/09/pf/cost-of-raising-a-child-2015/> (accessed 5-13-17)

⁵ <https://onbeing.org/blog/courtney-martin-whatever-you-do-stay-on-the-same-team/> (accessed 5-13-17)

them survived a serious famine in their land. Jesus pointed out the beautiful faith and courage of the widow of Zarephath in his inaugural sermon recounted by Luke in chapter 4 of his gospel biography.

There are many more, and some of the partnerships are just as unconventional:

- David was a very close friend and companion to Jonathan, the son of King Saul. The same Saul who was trying to kill David.
- Esther partnered with her uncle Mordecai against systemic societal oppression.
- Ruth chose to convert to Judaism and partner with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. One of the most beautiful phrases in all of Scripture on partnering is what Ruth said to Naomi when Naomi released her two daughters to return to their family of origin which would have had a much higher degree of financial security. Ruth refused to leave Naomi saying:

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

Ruth 1:16-17. NIV

- In the New Testament Jesus had Peter, James and John as a close knit travelling partnership. Paul partnered with Barnabus for a time. Then Silas. Then, with Timothy. And, I could go on because all throughout Scripture we see people partnering, sometime married to each other, other times working together, and in every case—helping one another up when the other falls down.

Double coverage, helping up, and a third reason to partner is as the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote: “if two lie down together, they will keep warm.”

C. Keeping Warm

1. This has often been interpreted to be speaking about sexual intimacy. Yet, there is no reason to believe that the author either meant or didn't mean sexual intimacy. In nomadic times as in many places around the world today where housing is nothing more than a simple thatched or tin roof overhead--staying warm is something that couples and families do to stay alive.

It is also important to think for a few minutes about sexual intimacy as well. Discussing sex in the many marriage counseling sessions I have with couples over the years...(I bet you would like to know how we talk about sex in counseling sessions, wouldn't you!) the main point that I share with couples is this—sex is a holistic idea. Good sex demands commitment and investment in taking the time to know one another completely. Healthy sex is about safety, sacredness, and pleasure. Even more, the great secret of healthy intimacy is the practice of serving one another... holistically serving one another. The good lover is always asking “what does my spouse want? What can I do to create pleasure for them?”

Does it feel warm in here? Warm is good, right?! The final point of emphasis is in today's Scripture is "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves."

D. Defending One Another

1. A reporter covering a special 50-year anniversary event retells the account of Kathrine Switzer being only a few miles into her history-making run at the Boston Marathon on April 19, 1967.⁶ (For reference, that was one year before I was born)



...when Jock Semple, the co-director of the famous 26-mile race, suddenly appeared behind her and tried to shove her out of the competition because women were not permitted to run the Boston Marathon. Semple's lunge at Switzer was captured by national news photographers. What happened next changed running forever. Switzer's boyfriend, Thomas Miller, threw a block that knocked Semple out her way, allowing the 20-year-old runner from Syracuse University to finish the race at a time when women were thought to be too fragile for long-distance running.

It wasn't until 1972 that women were officially sanctioned to run the Boston Marathon and 1984 until Switzer was successful in leading the effort to have the women's marathon to become an Olympic sport. Just as Switzer's boyfriend blocked for her in 1967, she blocked for other women from that point on, and today, Switzer runs an organization called "261 Fearless", named after her 1967 running number, to empower women around the world. This past April she ran the 2017 Boston Marathon at 70 years of age to a very different experience than 50 years ago.

2. Switzer had a defender, and then became a defender. This is what partners do in the incredible complexities and dangers of our world. We run interference, we watch each other's backs, we look for obstacles that trip one another up. And, when it seems the whole world is against us, we still have one another. I can't tell you how much the words of Ecclesiastes got this one right. In the wild and crazy flow of my life, it has been Holly who has looked out for my good, and I have always sought to do the same. And, there have been a few moments, thankfully only a few, where it felt that the headwinds of life were going to blow us away, that it was being together that gave us the strength to keep walking into the wind.

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/04/17/fifty-years-ago-kathrine-switzer-was-attacked-as-she-ran-the-boston-marathon-the-reason-she-was-a-woman/?utm_term=.9c38f3cfb22d (accessed 5-13-17)

Conclusion

1. Double coverage, helping up, keeping warm, and defending one another—these are solid points of affirmation about the benefits of supporting one another. So, what about the whole idea of “the third strand”? How does the presence of God factor into the way partnership helps us in purpose finding? I have an illustration that I use in wedding ceremonies from time to time that is applicable here. And, while essential for marriages, it is also applicable to partnerships of all kinds who seek to have God present in the shared journey. I say this because it is important for those who are single to be celebrated and find their way into shared experiences and purpose finding as well as those who are married.

Church communities do not encourage and inform the path of singleness near as much as they should. Which is shocking, because the Apostle Paul said to the first Century church in the city of Corinth that he wished everyone was single!⁷ For these and other reasons, next week Pastor Sara Wilhelm Garbers is going to speak to singleness and purpose finding.

2. Author Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a famous book titled, “Letters to a young Poet” in which he gave advice to a single young man on how a poet should feel, love, and seek truth while creating art and trying to understand and navigate the world around him. Rilke gave this marriage advice to the young man:

“The point of marriage is not to create a quick commonality by tearing down all boundaries; on the contrary, a good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of their *solitude*, and thus they show each other the greatest possible trust. A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky.”

3. Let me repeat one phrase from this quote: “a good marriage/partnership is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of their solitude, and thus they show each other the greatest possible trust.” It is assumed that partners spend a great deal of time together. It is assumed that partners have a sure affection for one another. And, we are urged to give one another the space for individual flourishing that can only take place when each other has guarded one another’s solitude and provided space for God, the third strand, to work in transformational ways. With God as the third partners, we grow in our respective and unique loves for God and our world and learn what mutuality looks like over time.

For Christ followers, space for the third strand of God in the weaving of our lives and our partnerships is the gift where our imaginations for one another will grow alongside the imagination of our Creator so that as Rilke wrote, we can “see one another as a whole and before an immense sky.”

⁷ 1 Corinthians 7.

Prayer

God of the third strand of our partnerships and our marriages---help us to learn more about shared purpose finding. I recognize the pain of those who seek for this in one form or another, and it seems ever elusive. Help those who seek meaningful friendships, partnerships, and marriages to find the other. And, bring healing and new vision to those who's shared journeys have become a broken road. Bring healing and hope.

Holy Spirit, for those of us in relationships and partnerships and marriages, we invite your presence to be with us as a third strand, bringing strength, helping up, giving warmth, and protection in our complex world. God—creator, Son, and Spirit, three in one—help us to see one another as a whole and before an immense sky.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Benediction

As the new week begins, may we value and invest in healthy relational partnerships as an essential means to journey with others through the complexities of our world and to find purpose together with others in our daily lives.

Go in Peace. Amen.