

My name is Jonathan Sprang and I'm the Arts Pastor at Catalyst and I've got some shocking news for us today. The movie *Stranger than Fiction* convinced me God doesn't have a plan for my life... or yours!

In the film, Will Ferrell plays Harold Crick, an IRS auditor whose life is eat, work, sleep, repeat. The film spells out very specifically how every day he does the same thing, over and over. He counts how many steps it takes him to get to the bus, down to counting the number of strokes his toothbrush makes on each side. His system is meticulous. And it keeps him safe. But the film is very clear. It's not really living. He has no meaningful relationships and no one really likes him. He works for the IRS for crying out loud!

Then something happens. One morning, Harold begins hearing the narration we have been hearing all along! He asks what's going on, but gets no response. He tries to make sense of it, but fails. And all of a sudden, his system is disrupted by the narration of his own story.

Little did he know there is an author who is writing her next novel, aptly called *Death and Taxes*, and her voice is the one Harold is hearing. The title to the book is important because no matter what we do, *Death and Taxes* are inevitable. All the systems that we build to protect ourselves will not stop death from coming. And that means there's a serious problem for Harold, because he learns that all the heroes in this author's novels die.

Realizing that death is coming soon, Harold decides that he is going to let loose of the system he's built for himself, and embrace life. It takes him a while but he gets the hang of it. He begins a relationship with the woman he's auditing and feels, possibly for the first time in his adult life, what it means to love and be loved. Although he is experiencing a lack of control over where his life is headed, he feels more alive than ever. And in the end, he sacrifices himself to save someone from dying.

Harold had created a system that felt safe, but ultimately was not life-giving. The disruption of the narrator's voice broke him out of his monotonous system and enabled him to find love, and to give sacrificially to those around him. In essence, it helped him find REAL LIFE. Life isn't biological functioning. It's connection, relationship, LOVE.

Initially, it may be hard to relate to Harold. I mean, most of us don't count our toothbrush strokes, or our footsteps in an effort to be efficient. Most of us aren't OCD about everything to the point that it makes us socially awkward. But we all like our systems. We like having a schedule. We like knowing what our next step forward should be. We like having a plan for our life. And we like knowing we are headed toward the "right" destination. The good life. The systems that we build for ourselves make *us* feel safe, too.

Religion is one of those systems for many of us. It makes us feel safe, feel good. Religion itself is a system that we operate within that helps us feel safe. Honestly, that's why most of us are here. You've probably heard that "God has a plan for your life" and so you show up, eager to

find out if you are going the “right” way. We want to know that we are headed the “right” direction. So we can feel safe.

How does religion do that? Harold counted toothbrush strokes and steps. We count chapters in a bible read, days in a row we pray, dollars we give to the Church, hours spent packing boxes at Life Message, etc. Even here at Catalyst, we have our spiritual practices guide that we developed to help people know how to participate in this God life. With this system, we have the power. We’ve been given the list and it’s up to us whether we follow it or not. We like this because we are in control. So we say the prayer, we follow the rules, and we hope that it makes us feel better about where we’re headed.

Churches are full of people just like Harold. They've been following the System for years (decades!) and while they're walking around with a heartbeat, they're not LIVING. They're cold. Judgmental. Afraid. The reason for this is when we reduce the good news of the scripture to a formula, it doesn't lead to life. You can't explain how people are born of the Spirit. Life, faith, love... these are unpredictable, unmeasurable.

So if we can't predict it, measure it or explain it, how do we figure out if we're on the right track? If there's no formula, if there's no system, if there's no checkboxes, how can we know that we are headed to the right destination? Quite simply, If we don't know where we are going, how can we know how to get there?

Believe it or not, the followers of Jesus had the same question. So if you have a bible, turn with me to John 14. If you grabbed the bible from the back that's on page XXX and if you don't have a bible please keep that one. Jesus is actually at his final meal with the disciples. He spends the whole meal modeling what it means to be his follower. Jesus then tells them that he's leaving and they can't come with him. But they know the way. Which confused them. Obviously. They don't know where Jesus is going. They don't know the destination. Let's see how Jesus responds to their questions...

“No, we don't know, Lord,” Thomas said. “We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him!”

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don't know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you?”
- John 14:4-9

They are concerned with Jesus' destination. But Jesus' answers have nothing to do with where, and everything to do with who. Jesus says, "I am the way... you know me... so you know the way!" Not only that, but because they know Jesus, they know God.

What we're going to see today is that God's plan is not for us to reach a certain destination, but to become a certain person. In the movie, Harold thought the point of his existence was to keep it safe so he could survive another day, but what he learned was that real living was found when he began to love and be loved.

But I've seen the bumper sticker, and the tshirt, and the fridge magnet at my grandma's... **"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."** -Jeremiah 29:11 It says it right there! God has a plan. The problem with hearing this passage and interpreting through our 21st century lens is that "plans" have itineraries and roadmaps. When attached to something like "God's plans for us," we assume that means that we have to stay on a "right" path and have a "right" job and find the "right" partner. And if we deviate from that path, then we better find our way back or we're hopeless.

This is the problem with reading scriptures out of context. This word of encouragement was spoken to a group of people living as captives in Babylon. NOT individuals. A people. This is a big shift from the way we think. God is telling them, this isn't the final word for you as a people. You will not be exiles forever. I'm not finished with you yet. Ultimately God's goal for the people of Israel, God's plan, was not where they ended up, but who they would become: a holy nation. A nation of people that would all be connected to God. A nation of people that would be an example to the world of how this God loves all people.

When God's plan is a destination you feel like you've got to work really hard to make sure not to stray from the plan. You've gotta figure out the right job, the right place to live, the right college to go to. The right shirt to wear? You're stressed out, confused and worried most of the time because you never really know.

But when God's plan is to become a certain type of person, well that can happen anywhere. Wherever we work, or wherever we live, or wherever we go to school, or whatever we wear. Every situation now becomes an opportunity to be formed into a holy person.

And holiness is not something to arrive at. Holiness is about becoming more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient, more kind, more generous, more faithful, more gentle, and more self-controlled. You can't measure those. Those are not destinations. How can you measure if you've reached the destination of being love to others? Ask the most loving person you know and they'll still tell you they could be more loving. Because God's plan for us is not to arrive but to become.

But that's hard to do. That's hard to measure. That's hard to discern. It'd be way easier if we knew what the "right" job was, and the "right" house, and the "right" church. So if there isn't a

“right” destination, then how do we make sure that we are becoming who God wants us to become?

We see this in the movie. Harold had a plan. Everyday. Harold knew what his purpose was. Harold’s plan was working perfectly for keeping him occupied, but it was not bringing him life. He was in a cycle, not moving forward. But when his system was disrupted by love he found the good life. It starts by falling in love with one person, but loving that person begins to form him into a person who loves generously. Like when he pays for a coworker to go to space camp. He didn’t have to do that, but because he learned to love, he wants to be generous with his friends.

So what does it look like to be disrupted by love? If you want to read this story for yourself it’s found in John 4. Jesus sees a woman drawing water. This is unique because most women in the village would come early in the morning before the sun was hot so that the water was as cool as it could be. But this woman didn’t. She came to the well when she knew no one else would be there. Because she was excluded by the women of the town. She was used and abused and rejected by everyone. We find out later she’s had 5 husbands and the one she’s now living with isn’t her husband. No doubt all the other women in the town talk about her behind her back, and probably to her face for that matter. She’s lost hope that there could be a good life. There’s just her routine, her system, which she has put together to protect herself, to keep her from feeling pain. And then...

Jesus speaks to her. Asks her for a drink of water. Seems harmless to us, but in this culture, a Jew wouldn’t speak to a Samaritan, a man wouldn’t speak to an unrelated woman, so Jesus is breaking all of the cultural rules by speaking to a Samaritan woman. But Jesus does. He disrupts the system and for the first time in years, this woman feels valued. And when Jesus tells her he knows about the 5 husbands, I’m sure there was a hint of shame that welled up. But at the same time, He’s still talking to her. The things she’d done did not stop Jesus from talking to her, it didn’t stop Jesus from caring for her, it didn’t stop Jesus from offering LIFE to her.

And she can’t contain it. She runs back to the village and tells everyone! The same folks that she’d been shunned by for years. The same folks that had talked about her and abused her and shunned her. She went to them to tell them that there’s hope, because Jesus has come.

And this isn’t the only time Jesus did this. Let’s look at a few more examples: A man that had been born blind sat in front of the temple asking for money every day for years. This was his system. And Jesus walks up and heals him. System disrupted by love.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Hated by all for the over taxation and flaunting of wealth. Then one day, Jesus stops right next to him. Looks him in the eye and says, “Let’s have dinner.” And after this disruption, Zaccheus sells half of what he owns and gives to the poor, and throws a huge party!.

Pretty much all the disciples were just minding their own business. Going through their daily routines. And then Jesus shows up and invites them on a journey of changing the world. A disruption of love changed them forever.

story

How do we have this type of encounter with Jesus? They were safe and sound in their system and Jesus disrupted their lives. There are certain ways that we can allow Jesus to disrupt our lives. This is one reason we gather here on Sundays. We invite Jesus to disrupt our systems so that we can find the good life, the flourishing life. And that's not comfortable. We like our systems, and for those of us that grew up in the church, even our religious systems. And when those are challenged, even if it's by Jesus, we get nervous and scared. And some of us run away.

But if we are to follow God's "plan" it means we must become more and more like him. How do we know what Jesus would do? One way is we study him. We read about his interactions with people. The way He disrupts their lives and calls them away from the "system" and into becoming.

This week, I invite you to read a story a day of Jesus interacting with people. I've provided a list on your chair this morning, and we'll also post the scripture on our facebook page. I've also provided our spiritual practices guide. In it is a short explanation of how to read the scripture in a way to hear from God. Some can read it and hear from God easily, others it takes some help. This way of reading is called Lectio Divina, and it has you read the scripture a few times, focusing on a different thing each time so you can hear the Spirit speaking to you through the Scripture.

Now I know this sounds like just another religious system, but the point of this is not to allow the "Reading of Scripture" to be the goal of this time. It's not. Reading the scripture is not Not a box to check. You're not earning any brownie points or becoming more spiritual. You don't go to Hell if you DON'T do this.

This way of reading Scripture is designed to invite us to stop, to open our minds, hearts and spirits to the Spirit, so that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead can speak into our lives, disrupt us with love, and transform us into a people of life and hope.

My favorite part of the movie is at the very end. The author had a system. It was working. She was selling lots of books. But that system was one that lead to death every time. Once she encountered Harold, she grew to love Harold. Her system, her plan, was disrupted by love, and in the end, she chooses life.

What's more interesting here is that Harold, who built his whole life around avoiding risk, willingly embraced death to save someone else. But the film SHOWS us that in doing so, he's actually living far more than if his life had gone on longer.

We have a choice to make as well. We can continue to seek out a destination where all is “right” and we have everything figured out. We can continue to build systems to stay safe and protected. Or we can allow Jesus to disrupt our lives. We can trade our destinations for resolutions.

God has plans for Catalyst. We will be a holy people - a people who looks like Jesus. A people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness gentleness and self-control. Catalyst will be a place where people find out that God is love. And that changes them. We have to remain that. We will be diligent to the end.

What does it look like for you to be disrupted by love this week? How can you make space in your life to hear God’s disruption form you into the person you were made to be. How can you be an agent of disruption for the people in your workplace, your neighborhood, your family, so they can see God’s love is for them as well. That they haven’t wandered too far. God is there and wants to call them to a flourishing existence.

Communion Set Up

[Communion Slide] For us, it begins today, at this communion table. It's an odd thing, a very odd thing to make a space in our lives every week where we stop and remember someone's death, especially someone from 2,000 years ago. It's an odd DISRUPTION. This is my body, disrupted for you, do this in remembrance of me. This is my blood, disrupted for you, remember this disruption. Enact it. Be disrupted by it.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to take communion today. If you're someone who wants to be disrupted by God's love so that you can find true life than you are welcome to join us at the table. I'm going to say a prayer for us and then you are free to come as you are ready.

Prayer of Consecration

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STORIES FOR HANDOUT

Blind Man (John 9)

Woman at Well (John 4)

Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)

Man Healed At Pool (John 5:1-15)

Calling of Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:18-22)