



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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## The Blessing of Limitations

### (Genesis 2:15-17)

M. Craig Barnes

*President M. Craig Barnes delivered this farewell to the graduates at the Seminary Commencement service at the Princeton University Chapel on Saturday, May 21, 2016.*

*Holy God, on this extraordinary day we pray that in these moments you would be gracious to our seeking of a holy Word from you. In the name of the Word made flesh, Amen.*

**T**here is a hole inside of you. It was there before you knew it, but by now you confront this hole almost every day of your life. I do not know what that is. I do not know what's missing in your life. Maybe it involves a relationship or your family. Maybe it is a health issue. Maybe it is something about your past. It does not matter how many degrees you collect, I promise you will never have a better past. Maybe it is a dream that will always elude you. It is not the same thing for all of us. The only thing that is the same is that we are all missing something in our lives. Your future depends on how you handle this hole in your life.

If you are a person of prayer, you have claimed such verses as, "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you." Over the years, there has been a lot of asking, seeking, knocking, and still the hole remains. At times the yearning grows intense. If you allow it, it will take over your life with

an insatiable thirst for something more.

Those of us who hang around churches may think that such persistent yearning is a result of living in a world that long ago fell from paradise. But I am not so sure. We only have a few pages of the Bible that describe what God had in mind from the beginning, just this very little bit in chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Genesis. Then we get to the third chapter where humans messed that up, and the entire rest of the book is a recovery plan. So these opening pages of the Bible that describe what God had in mind for us are very precious. Let us attend very carefully to what they tell us about what God had in mind for us in creation.

We are told that we were placed in a garden that God created, and we were told that we could freely eat of almost all of the fruit of that garden. Almost all of that fruit was given to us, blessed by God. And to eat of any fruit that was given was to experience doxology – to praise the God from whom all these blessings came. But there was the fruit of one tree that was not given, not blessed for us. Which means that from the beginning we were never meant to have it all. By created design, something will always be missing in your life. Again, be careful with the text: this is not a punishment, this is before the Fall. This is God's idea of a good creation.

And do you remember where God placed this tree with the forbidden fruit? It was not off in some corner of the garden where it could be easily ignored. No, it was placed in the midst of the garden. That meant that Adam and Eve had to walk by that tree every day. So do we, and it drives us a little nuts. There can be 999 trees to which we can freely go and enjoy the blessings given to us, but where do we pitch our tents? Underneath the one thing we do not have. We think about it all the time. We cannot figure out why God has not given us this fruit as well. "Let the rest of the garden go to weed," we decide, "What am I going to do about this one thing that is missing?" And we are then so tempted to reach beyond our created limitations to just take that which was not given. And the way the text goes, when you do that is when you lose paradise. And on the way out you realize it really was a pretty good garden. Even though something was missing, it was pretty good. But now it is paradise lost.

When my daughter graduated from college I was stunned to hear the commencement speaker peddling the same dribble I heard at my graduation. He looked out over 5,000 graduates, and he said, "You are among the best and brightest we have ever seen. Set your goals high, dream your own dreams, chase your own star, and you can be anything you want to be." Really? He might as well have said, "I am sorry, we have nothing for you. You are on your own. It is all out there; it is a la carte. Do the best you can."

We have long given up the notion that an identity is an inheritance from those who have gone before us or a calling from the community around us or from the God above us. Instead, we now believe that identity is a self-construction, that we self-create our lives. And the way we do that is by making choices. Now we can just choose the life we want. And if that choice does not work out well, we should be free to choose again, and again, and again. And anyone who has been in ministry for a long time has parishioners who are using up their fleeting years constantly trying to find a fulfilling life, while really only rearranging its furniture, thinking that they can choose their way into getting all of the garden.

Over against this silly temptation, a way to surely lose your life, stands a pastor in front of an altar holding a broken loaf of bread. As the organ whispers with tender music or perhaps a choir sings, a procession of parishioners line up in front of that altar, in front of the holy sacrament, and they shuffle their way forward not to receive wholeness, but just a taste of holiness. They come up one after another in front of their pastor, the pastor

who knows them well. And just before they break off a piece of bread there is a tender moment when the pastor's eye greets the parishioner's eye, and in that glance is a memory of a job that was recently lost, of an older lover that was recently left in a fresh grave, of a terrible diagnosis of a terrible disease, or of a prodigal daughter or son. But all the pastor says is, "The Body of Christ." It is all that can be said. It is all that needs to be said.

Jesus Christ did not come to show us the way back to paradise. Jesus came to bring us God. He came as the incarnation of a God who is determined to be with us, who walked our roads, who healed our sick, who fed our hungry, who cast out our demonic evil. The God in the flesh who went to the cross was dying to love us, dying to love the world. The God who rose from the dead, not to prevent death, but to ensure that there would always be something beyond death and every death-like experience. The God who before his ascension commissioned and called us to work as his witnesses for the coming kingdom. But there is nothing in any of this that sounds remarkably like paradise.

Remember, Paul's thorn was never removed from his flesh. That was beside the point. The point was that he had received a call, a mission to fulfill. So have you. There is a mission to your life. Do not try to get your life right before assuming your mission. Keep your mission ever before you. That mission, in the words of John Calvin, is to leave the garden better than you found it. Leave the Church, the ministry, the classroom, the students, the parishioners, better than you found them.

But you cannot do that until you have figured out how to steward the thing that is missing in your life. Maybe even how to honor it as the mark of your freedom. This is the choice you can make. You can choose to let it make you crazy with yearning or you can turn it into the altar where you pray and once again hear the still small voice of the Spirit that says, "My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness." Just because you have a holy mission, don't expect God to remove the thorn or fill the hole.

When I was a child in Sunday School, the state-of-the-art technology was a thing called the Flannel Graph. This was a large board perched on an easel with flannel wrapped around it. As the teacher taught a Bible story she would place paper characters on the board (There was always a palm tree and camel already on the board as background.) The paper characters had some felt glued on the back of them, which allowed them to stick on the board. I can still see Mrs. Williams sliding her long fingers over the characters in order to smooth them out.

Well, any time she used the Apostle Paul in one of her Bible stories he would take a lot of extra smoothing out because he had been overused in the stories. The great honor was to be able to hand the characters to Mrs. Williams, and one day Johnny Burke and I got in a fight over who would hand him to her and in the process we tore off his little head. So she had him taped together. Some kids from Vacation Bible School had spilled Kool-Aid on him, so he was purple. But there he was still used in the story- taped together, purple, trying to get smoothed out. And it was as if Mrs. Williams was proclaiming a Holy Mystery to us as children, which is this: God is not easy on the people God uses.

When you look at the other characters of Scripture who get used a lot in the biblical drama, the very best of them are discolored and taped together by the end of their lives. The Apostle Paul himself was chased out of many of the cities of the Roman Empire, usually with a shower of rocks behind him. But what is he writing about in his prison epistles? He's writing about his surpassing joy. In spite of the hardship, he wants to write about his joy. Why is he so joyful? Because he got used in God's drama, which is all he ever wanted. He's chained up, he's bruised, he's still got that thorn, but he is so filled with joy because God called him and gave

him a mission and a place. So have you.

About this I am certain, as both scripture and church history proclaim, no one who was of use to God lived without a hole in her or his life. The reason they were so useful to God is that they neither fell into the abyss of that hole, nor did they waste their days trying to flee it. Instead, they just took it as a call to prayer, and they stayed in prayer until they realized the surpassing worth of the yearning they had for the one to whom they were praying.

That option is always available to you. It is the only way to truly enjoy your garden, the ministry to which God is calling you, your very life. It is a garden that will always have something missing, but a garden that is still pretty good. It is a garden you were created to serve. But you cannot do it unless you have that altar, the altar where you can exchange your yearning for a holy mission.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.