

Vocations

The First Sunday after the Epiphany - January 12, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." - Matthew 3:13-17

How many of us here, I wonder, can clearly name and simply describe our God-given vocations?

How many of us come from families with legacy vocations ~ gifts and practices and ways of being in the world that are passed down from one generation to another?

And then there were those of us who broke new ground or felt like the vocational odd duck in our families ~ the one who wanted to be a priest, or an artist or a soldier?

If we imagine we do or may have a vocation, what kinds of allies do we need to confirm or support us? How have you or I been allies to others in their God-given vocations?

How many of us believe we have a vocation but are unable to financially support ourselves or our households that way?

How many of us feel that the vocation train passed us by in our youth or that what we once felt called to has wound down? Can we still have a vocation, or a new vocation, late in life? How are our vocations encouraged or limited not only by age but gender or sexual identity, race, culture or health in body, mind or spirit?

Are there ways that a particular parish can have a vocation? Can a parish have a new vocation? When is it time to lay an old sense of vocation to rest? These last questions of vocation in community are on my mind this week as three parishioners ~ Kelly Colomberti, Marlea Edinger and Cheryl Peterson ~ prepare to fly to San Francisco this week for a conference titled Ministry for the Common Good.

The word vocation is not used anywhere in the Bible. And yet the Scriptures are permeated from start to finish with the notion that God creates us with skills and gifts and places us in circumstances rich with opportunities to reveal the glory of God, the creativity of God, the justice of God and the mercy of God. The Bible doesn't use the word vocation, but it does use the words 'called' and 'calling' and 'the angel said' and 'go.'

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, author Frederick Buechner explains that vocation "... comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work [in the world to which one] is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-Interest."

He goes on: "By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is

being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

“Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

We might all find things to admire or disparage about Buechner's notion of vocation, but many of us will have to admit that the whole concept of vocation can be as elusive as it is compelling. Feel free to use me as Exhibit A. Although a priest, I have been confounded in the labyrinth of vocation many times. I never found a right major in college but managed to get myself accepted to law school ... and then instead went to seminary. After five years in parish ministry, I left ... to run a bread bakery with my wife Brooke. Another time I left thinking that I'd just support my family of five as an artist. That didn't last long! Alongside of my sense of vocation as a priest, which has gratefully continued and deepened, I have come to recognize a sense of both marriage and parenting as additional God-given vocations.

All of this muse arises for me today on account of the Baptism of Jesus. We celebrate this feast each year on this First Sunday after the Epiphany, and we can easily treat it merely as a comfy and sensible postscript to the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle. Thematically, we may feel a sense of holiday closure as John the Baptist returns for a final important cameo before we consign him to his lectionary hibernation for another year.

Alternately, we can delve into any number of theological and textual questions raised by the story of Jesus' baptism. How was baptism understood and practiced by Jews at the time? And did John the Baptist mean the same thing by it? In the gospels of Mark and Luke the divine voice from on high at the end of the story is heard only by Jesus. Here in Matthew the announcement seems to be broadcast to all who are present. Why is that?

Backing up from these finer points, interesting as many may be, this story of the Baptism of Jesus is fundamentally about vocation. This moment further confirms the vocation of Jesus that we have anticipated and celebrated in Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. And it is announcing, preparing and inaugurating the primary earthly ministry of Jesus that will now begin to unfold. Furthermore, you and I partly hear this story on this Sunday because it ushers in questions of our personal callings and our collective mission—themes that will remain with us throughout all of the remaining six Sundays 'after the Epiphany' and before the beginning of Lent.

If we kept reading past the baptism in Matthew's gospel, it wouldn't be long before we saw Jesus standing on a hilltop, looking our way, taking our breath away and open our hearts when he says, “You are the light of the world.”

But what does that mean? How will we translate the beautiful notion of it into the present moments of our lives, in the context of the world's great hungers? How will you and I sense that God is in us and working through us? Pondering and answering and responding to questions like these will be our spiritual work together in the weeks ahead, and beyond. *Amen.*