

Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed monitor of the church's morals, kept sticking her nose into other people's business. Several members did not approve of her activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence and distance. She made a mistake, however, when she accused Frank, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his pickup parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She emphatically told Frank – and several others – that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing. Frank, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. He simply said nothing. Later that evening Frank quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house, walked home, and left it there – all night. You gotta love Frank!

First, let's dig into this gospel text a bit. We are told that Jesus "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit...." At His baptism, Jesus had a profound religious experience. He knew Himself as God's beloved Son who was filled with God's Spirit. This Spirit drove Him into the desert where the devil tempted Him. And the temptation was typically clever of the evil one – He tempted Jesus to understand and act out His Son of God identity as a personal privilege. Satan suggested that Jesus' beloved status meant He would always be physically full – turn these stones into bread; socially powerful (He would have all the kingdoms of the world), and religiously safe (the angels will rescue you if you jump from the top of the Temple). Jesus refused this self-centered understanding of "Son of God." His powerful "no" allowed the Spirit to fill Him more completely. The Spirit purified Him of any false understandings, and so it was "filled with the power of the Spirit" that He returned to Galilee. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah – but He searched for the words that would spell out the meaning of "Son of God." He found the Spirit-driven mission language of Isaiah. To be the Son of God is to be on a mission of liberation. Whenever human life is impoverished, imprisoned, impaired, it will become enriched, free, and enabled. All this will be done by the power of divine favor. Son of God is not a title of privilege. It is a call to transformative action.

This passage is in "the book of Isaiah *the prophet*." As such, the assumption is that it looks to the future, announcing something that is to come. It is a word of hope to a hopeless situation. But this is not the teaching Jesus takes from it. Sitting in the position of the teacher with the entire synagogue focused on Him, Jesus tells them the promise has been fulfilled. The waiting is over. When Jesus spoke the words and they heard them, they were no longer words of prediction. They were words of inauguration. That is the significance of the word TODAY this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing. Luke is giving us deeper knowledge, the theological point of view of the events that have been fulfilled among us.

Second, this then sets US up for a religious experience as well, for the Spirit is given to us – at our Baptism and Confirmation – but every time we receive the Eucharist. For where the Son is – there is the Father and the Spirit. And such experiences entail a shift of consciousness in which we realize that WE are also grounded in a transcendent reality. WE ARE GOD'S, WE ARE GOD'S BELOVED SONS AND DAUGHTERS. In the case of Jesus, this realization was expressed in the symbolism of the heavens splitting, a dove descending, and a voice speaking at His baptism: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." But once the religious experience ends, Jesus had to deal with daily life. The same is true of us. Knowing that we are the beloved ones of God is wonderful. But then we have to go to work or school or to babysit our grandchildren or figure out what retirement means as a disciple of Christ. Religious experience never comes with a set of instructions. In the case of Jesus, the Spirit remained with Him, but it needed to lead Him into other experiences to further clarify His identity and mission. Temptations and homecoming were needed to deepen His knowledge of the ripped heavens, the dove, and the voice.

This is a classic pattern of how religious experiences unfold. They begin with a consciousness of our eternal grounding in God – beloved sons and daughters. Aware that this grounding is unconditional, we begin to understand it as love. But then our consciousness returns to the rough-and-tumble of time. We often do not know how to translate what we experienced into our conflicted minds and our concrete decision-making processes. In other words, with deeper spiritual knowledge we still have to discover the path from transcendent identity to historical mission. What are we supposed to DO because we are the beloved ones of God? Even St. Paul struggled with this: “I do not do what is right....” I can identify with that. Perhaps you can too.

How do we get to this awareness of our beloved status? It can happen in millions of ways. It may be triggered by nature – a beautiful sunset over the ocean, by the death of a parent or someone we love, by the birth of a child, by the love of a man or woman, by the quest for truth, by a drive to work on behalf of the poor and needy, by the ability to create things of great beauty. In and through these events and activities, God’s love breaks into our consciousness and grasps us. And we’re never the same after that.

But this depth awareness is always fleeting. Ordinary reality always intrudes. There is work, family, finances, school. How will this deeper religious experience be courted and pursued? Will we test out its meaning with other ideas? Will sacred books be consulted? If they are, chances are that the experience will grow in significance. The meaning and implications of the experience will be deepened. The Spirit of the experience wants this to happen, but we have to cooperate. As I said, this is a classic way – we have a deep experience of God, and then we figure out what we are supposed to do because of it.

Third, there is another way, a reverse way. We experience something in this world, and only gradually realize the direction and action is grounded and inspired by God. The direction is from the secular to the sacred. We discover we are responding to God when perhaps we had not even noticed His presence. And here I’m thinking of our work. How often do we see our job, what we spend so much of our life doing, as a work of God? And for those who never worked outside the home – the domestic life is also a God place! Most women throughout history had this experience – and many became saints in the doing of home life. And retirement. This is the first time in the history of the world that people have YEARS of retired living. It shouldn’t be just a time for play and selfishness. It is a stage of our life. A potential time for deeper holiness.

Michael Novak tries to map this deepening spiritual knowledge in his effort to interpret business as a noble calling. He admits that, for the most part, business people do not see themselves in terms of responding to a divine call. Novak writes: “I know from talking to and corresponding with business people that many have never been asked whether they regard what they do as a calling. They don’t think about themselves that way. That has not been the language of business schools, the economics textbooks, or the secularized public speech of our time....But most of them, they say, do start mulling the idea of calling once it is raised. Some confess that they could think of what they do as a calling, even if they have not up to that point. That would not be much of a reach from what they have already been doing. It’s just one of those things that, so far, few people say. (BUSINESS AS A CALLING: WORK AND THE EXAMINED LIFE, p. 36)

Yet this is where most of us live! It is a crucial start to deepening our lives – our truly spiritual lives – with an openness to a possibility not previously considered and willing to ‘start mulling the idea.’ So my vocation can be going to work, taking care of children and grandchildren, making retirement a fruitful experience for others, etc.

This ‘mulling the idea’ does not immediately lead to the awareness of an eternal grounding for going to work every day. What it may lead to is recognizing values that transcend profits. The caricature of business as

a ruthless bottom-line enterprise is too lopsided to account for all that is going on in business men and women – especially those who come to church and are open to the workings of God in their lives. People generally engage in their work because they have the gifts and talents for it and because it contributes in some way to the common good. Once they open themselves to the possibility that they are struggling with deep drives for fulfillment and contribution, further reflection is inevitable. And God is endlessly innovative in letting us know that we are His beloved ones, and that He has a plan for each one of our lives.

Novak unravels the fulfillment and contribution drives. He suggests that people's work can give them a sense of fulfillment. "But fulfillment of what?" he writes. "Not exactly a standing order that we place ourselves. We didn't give ourselves the personality, talents, or longing we were born with. When we fulfill these – these gifts from beyond ourselves – it is like fulfilling something we were meant to do. It is a sense of having uncovered our personal destiny, a sense of having been able to contribute something worthwhile to the common public life, something that would not have been there without us – and, more than that, something we were good at and enjoyed." (p. 18)

I've had the privilege of meeting with some of our confirmation candidates over the last couple of weeks. It's given me a fresh shot of hope. And parents, you should be proud of these young people and the wonderful – even holy -- aspirations of their hearts. I mention to them that when they discover their vocation – as Jesus discovered His – it will make you happy. If it doesn't make you happy, it's not your vocation. My favorite definition of vocation is "Where the world's deep need meets your deep gladness."

Sometimes we come to this by searching out meaningful work, and then realizing that we have been responding to a call deep within us, a call that comes with the very fact of being alive. This type of approach backs into the sacred grounding of our secular lives. We don't need to apologize for the fact that we work in the secular world. It is GOD'S world. And therefore a holy place. God is in it all. The call is generally gradual and modest in what it comes to know. It discovers the impulses of soul and takes its time in establishing these as real. So if we stay with these impulses, we will arrive at the insight that they are indeed grounded. We will discover the rock in a weary land and the shelter in time of storm. Our knowledge will be deepened to include the ever-present but ever-elusive Spirit of God. Calling out to us through all the facets and stages of our lives: "You are my beloved ones. In you I take my delight." Amen. (adapted from John Shea,