

Mildred was the self-appointed monitor of the church's morals, and kept sticking her nose into other people's business. Several members did not approve of her extra-curricular activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence. She made a mistake, however, when she accused Frank, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his old pickup parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She emphatically told Frank (and several others) that everyone seeing his truck there would know what he was doing.

Now Frank was a man of few words; he just stared at her for a moment and then turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. He 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!

And I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I only have 2 points. The bad news is that your homiletical torture will be about as long as usual. Go back to sleep....

Today's reading from Luke is the story of how Jesus joined us in the mud. It is a story that each of the evangelists tells a little differently. Just before Luke described Jesus' baptism in detail, he tells us that Herod has put John the Baptist in prison, so that in his story of Jesus' baptism, there is no mention of the Baptizer at all. But what was Jesus doing there in the river in the first place? John made it clear that his baptism was for sinners, sinners who came to him to be washed in the waters of repentance and rise from them to go and sin no more. What need did Jesus have of a bath like that? He was, according to every eye witness, a man set apart by his sinlessness. He had nothing to repent of and nothing to be forgiven for. How much more appropriate it would have been if he had walked up to John and said, "Thank you for all your preparations, my friend. I will take over now." But that is not what He did. In fact, there is not a single story in all of the gospels about Jesus baptizing anyone. His disciples baptized, Paul baptized, but Jesus did not, because He did not come to claim power but to give it away.

So He did not take over John that Baptist's ministry. Instead, He got in with the whole crowd of sorry-looking people and took His turn in the Jordan like everyone else. Nothing unusual so far. It was after His baptism, as He was praying, that the remarkable thing happened. Heaven opened, the clouds parted, light poured through and a figure that looked a lot like a bird, but most of all like something straight from the heart of God, settled on Jesus as a voice from somewhere other than earth told what it means. "You are my son, my beloved," the voice said, "and I am very pleased with you." What words! What acceptance! They would have been wonderful coming from any person on earth, but for them to come from heaven makes them all the more wonderful. Still, what had Jesus done that was so pleasing? It was the very beginning of His ministry and all He had done so far was to say yes to it. Oh, and to join humankind in the Jordan. Yes, He did that. He joined us in the mud, and a voice from heaven declared, "You are my beloved son, and I am very pleased with you."

Now anyone standing around who knew the Bible could probably have told you that when God said that, He was quoting Himself! "You are my beloved son" – that part was from the second psalm, a coronation psalm used to proclaim a king. But the second part, "with you I am well pleased," was a direct quote from the book of Isaiah, 2 chapters later from what we just heard, in which God talks about His suffering servant, His chosen one, who will redeem the world but only by sacrificing Himself. Put the 2 together and you have a God-given description of who Jesus is and what He has come to do, a public declaration of what His ministry is to be about.

So that is part of what happens in today's story – Jesus goes into the waters of the Jordan a carpenter – and comes out a Messiah. He is the same person, but with a new direction. His being is the same, but His doing is about to take a radical turn. That is, by the way, not a bad definition of repentance: to turn around, to go another way, God's way. So in that sense, it is true enough that Jesus repented – if not of any sin, then of going His own quiet way in peace. He went into the waters of baptism His own person, a private man, and came out God's person, a public figure at the center of controversy for the rest of His short life. But that still does not answer our question. Why baptism? Why not an eloquent speech or a simple ordination to mark this great passage in Jesus' life? It is as big a mystery as the Christmas mystery of the incarnation. Why did He become human when He could have stayed God? Why was He baptized with us when He could have stayed on the banks of the Jordan and supervised? Why does He come to us where we are, over and over again, when He could save Himself the grief, the pain, the death, by insisting that we come to Him where He is?

Because He loves us, that is why, and because He is, unbelievably, pleased with us, and because He has come to lead us through the waters of life and death into life eternal. It has never been His style to shout directions to us from a safe place of His own. He has always led us from within our midst, joining us in the water, in the mud, in the skin to show us how it is done. If Jesus had not been baptized, now THAT would have been sin for Him – if He had chosen to separate Himself from us as He had every right to do. But He did not. He took the plunge right along with the rest of us, and so it came to pass that He who was without sin was baptized in the river Jordan to avoid the sin of standing apart from us. (adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, MIXED BLESSINGS, 1998, p. 55-60)

Second, so what does this have to do with us? Everything! Jesus found His vocation through His baptism; He was doing what He was sent to do. This is the challenge of each one of us with our own lives. The will of God for us is that we fulfill what we have been given, what we were born with, what we are in the raw.

To do what we are meant to do in life we must have whatever natural potential it takes to do it. And our vocation will be something that we enjoy! Because we are equipped to do it! And more than that, we must be willing to pay the price to succeed at it. Perhaps the saddest, most damning words in life are "He or she never lived up to their potential." Nothing comes from nothing attempted. The greatest geniuses practice before they play in public.

To do what we are meant to do in life, we must have passion for it. What we do with our life is our gift to the world. To do it well, we must give it everything we have so that the work of God on earth can be done through us. The effort we fail to give to what must be done will only delay it's coming to life. To say that we are committed to doing peace work but do it poorly, or with anger, or seldom only means that many will go on suffering even longer from the effects of violent words and deeds.

To do what we are really meant to do in life, we must see what we are doing not only as the real purpose of our life but also the ultimate legacy of our life. It is what we will leave behind us for future generations to build on. God did not finish creation; God started it. It's ongoing development God leaves to us. That's why our theology calls us STEWARDS of creation – we are to take care of our world. What we do in life makes us the hands of God in living flesh and blood.

So there are some cautions to be considered as we go stolidly on from day to day, trying to discover the raw potential in us, our deep passion, our holy purpose. It doesn't matter how long it takes for us to feel all the pieces come together inside of us, we just need to remain committed to the pursuit. I was anointing someone in the hospital recently and the TV was on. I was just in time to hear a young middle-aged woman being interviewed about her work with people who suffer from chronic depression. "What made you do

this?” the reporter asked. And the woman answered, “I got into it by accident,” she said. “I responded to a situation and discovered that I was good at it. Now all I can say is that I know that this is what I’m meant to do with my life.” When we find ourselves able to say that, we have begun to become a fully developed human being, and have entered upon the path to holiness, we have discovered our vocation.

We must also trust that we are being led in that direction. It is simply a matter of doing what our natural gifts and our greater world demand of us. At the end of that search is the true self, the holy self, the completed self. And we must have patience – for life is a journey. The society around us has created arbitrary checkpoints which in turn create arbitrary definitions of our own self-fulfillment. At 21 we are supposed to take on adulthood in all its dimensions. Except that all of those dimensions can’t possibly be grasped at 21. Experience counts; passion counts; opportunity counts.

At 65 we are supposed to be finished with what we were meant to be in life. Except that there is another third of life left to live yet at that age and a great deal more for our older, wiser selves to do.

A career is at best a part of life, not all of life. A job and a life are not necessarily equivalent. Simply to have a job does not mean that we are really doing what we are meant to do in life. That is for us to figure out. God is not a vending machine that prints out our fortunes or our futures -- or a Global Positioning System that tells us where to go. We have been created with everything in us that we need in order to determine what we are meant to do in life. That is where God wants us to be, that is what God wants us to be doing, that is the will of God for us. The Hasidic Masters tell a story that says it all, perhaps: *One day a Jewish disciple asked the Master, ‘What good work shall I do to be acceptable to God?’ ‘How should I know?’ the Master said. ‘Your Bible says that Abraham practiced hospitality and God was with him. Elias loved to pray and God was with him. David ruled a kingdom and God was with him too.’ ‘Is there some way,’ the disciple went on, ‘I can find my allotted work?’ And the Master answered him, ‘Yes, search for the deepest inclination of your heart and follow it.’*

It is coming to the completion of our best selves, it is in the following the magnet in our hearts, that we become our whole selves. Then we will have come to fullness of life, to the flowering of our best gifts, to being what we were meant to be, to finding the reason for which we were born, the reason why we were baptized. Then, having followed the deepest inclination of our hearts, we will have discovered what life is really all about – our vocation. And that is surely the will of God for us. And it will involve us hearing the same voice that Jesus heard: “You are my beloved one; in you I am well pleased.” Amen. (adapted from Joan Chittister, FOLLOWING THE PATH, p. 185-188)