

Comedian Garry Shandling once commented on the phenomenon of wake-up calls in hotels. He says: "Here's a little tip: Wake up calls – one of the worst ways to wake up. The phone rings; it's loud; you can't turn it down." So he says, "I leave the number of the room next to me, and then it just rings kind of quiet, and you hear a guy yell: 'What are you calling me for?' 'Then you get up and take your shower. It's great.'"

I taught college theology for a couple of years at St. Francis College in Loretto, Pa. Most of my students were seminary students, and one of the more perceptive young men asked: "How do you account for the fact that Jesus called Judas to be His disciple?" I said, "Oh, I have a far bigger problem than that. I have no idea why Jesus called Judas. But a bigger problem for me is why did Jesus call John Durbin?" I often think of my spiritual director telling me: "If God can make penicillin out of moldy bread, John, He can make something out of you too."

First, a word about call. We all have one. It comes with our birth – and is refined further with our baptism. It has nothing to do with our worthiness, goodness, brilliance, or anything we have done. Look at who God calls in the Bible and we see a big motley mess of losers and misfit toys. There's a place for you. A place for me. Noah had to build an ark and lived in the middle of the desert. Abraham and Sarah were living in a nursing home, had no children, and were told to pack up the camel and travel to a land that is not promised to them – but to their great-great-great-great-great-great grandchildren. "But we hath not offspring, so how cants thou saith that there be-eth progeny to the 6th generation? And the camel be-eth of great age?" (they always talked King James translation in biblical times!) Moses was a confirmed stutterer and was asked to speak to the most powerful man in the world in order to free a bunch of powerless Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt. "I need them to build my pyramids, and one for King Tut," Pharaoh insisted. Jeremiah was but a boy, Mary a teenage girl. The list is endless. So don't think that just because you are a teenager God isn't calling you. Or retired. It can happen anytime. And EVERYBODY is called. Our life's purpose is to figure that call out – and respond to it.

Today's scriptures make the notion of call very obvious. But in a sense, every word from the Bible is also a call from God. That's why we study and pray with the gospels. We really expect God's word to be spoken to us, maybe not every time we read the Bible or every time we gather here in church, but often enough to make our listening to God a very risky undertaking.

Every verse of scripture is lovingly, attentively read by us because every verse is a potential summons from God. When we read a passage in the Bible, we should not so much ask "What do these words mean?" But rather read asking, "What is God calling me to do through these words?" God speaks a word because God has an assignment for us. Perhaps we ought to listen to every sermon, not asking "How many more points?" or "Do I agree with this 3 point nut case?" but rather, "How does God expect me to change my life in order for this sermon to make sense – and for me to live it out?"

In a sense, every sermon needs to be finished by the hearers. The preacher just starts the process. But we could ask ourselves today: How is this story of the call of the first disciples also OUR story? How does this story remind us of the story of OUR call? (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2007. The fact is that EVERY ONE OF US has been called. The deeper issue is – what have we done about it? Have we responded? Are we living out our divinely inspired purpose – the reasons we were put on this earth? Is our life the life that God wants for us – or the life that our culture sells to us? Is God primary in our life – or just a distant also-ran – after job, stuff, bank accounts, vacations, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or whatever else we put before Him.

Second, the call for all of us includes in some way sharing our faith. I read that the average Catholic invites somebody to church every 14 years! Are any of you overdue? Could we make that AT LEAST once a year?! Missiologists – that’s those who write about the MISSION of the church – which is to share the good news – say that the sign of a healthy parish is the number of people seeking to enter it. Our numbers in the catechumenate aren’t all that hot – let’s just say that there’s lots of room for growth! One day I was whining to one of my colleagues in the North American Forum on the Catechumenate about the fact that no one had ever entered the church because of me – little old, wonderful ME! Joanna Case was a wise grandmother and an excellent evangelist. She said, “Well of course you haven’t, John. Shepherds don’t make sheep. Sheep make sheep. It’s not your job! It’s ours!”

Look, this doesn’t have to be a big deal. Just invite someone to come to church. Say: “Would you like to have brunch with us on Sunday? We’ll pick you up for church and then come home and have brunch.” Or pick up Duncan Donuts! Or even easier yet – invite them for dinner on a Saturday night when we have wine and cheese after Mass! We don’t need to get all preachy about it. And don’t ask anyone who already has a church. We’re not into robbing other church’s flocks. Just ask those you know who don’t have a church. Which is almost half of Americans.

Often our assumption is that the only remaining mission fields are some remote jungles or deserts. No, the United States is the third largest mission field in the world. Only China and India have more unchurched people than the United States. (adapted from LECTIONAID, Dec-Feb 2000, p.37)

Now a very common problem is that a lot of religious people view secularity as the enemy, that it is anti-church, anti-Christian, amoral, and the root of most of our problems. The antithesis of religion, it is assumed, is our secular age. A couple of years ago there was a symposium on evangelization, and the presenters took a very different view, seeing secularity, not as the enemy of faith, but as largely our own child, the adolescent offspring of historical Judeo-Christianity.

This makes a lot of sense to me. Seen in this light, it becomes understandable that secularity will often be belligerent, angry with us, accusatory, full of adolescent grandiosity, and occasionally downright hostile. You who have raised – or are raising – teenagers, might agree. But no matter how much teenagers can drive us nuts, they are never the enemy, even when they are hostile.

Watch a typical, moody adolescent interact with his or her family in public. Picture a 16-year-old girl in a restaurant with her parents and younger siblings. She is at the far edges of both the table and the conversation, embarrassed by her family. It is obvious that she is simply enduring her family with less than a subtle patience. Her speech, manner, body language, almost everything about her suggest disaffection. Yet we know enough to not take her attitude all that seriously. It is unfortunately somewhat natural and common. When we are 16, our family can do nothing right, we are ashamed of its faults, and our parents and siblings seem to exist only to block our freedom, potential, growth, and fun. And primarily to embarrass us.

We could view this as an apt image of how many people within secular culture, wanting to appear mature and sophisticated, relate to our Judeo-Christian roots and churches. Nurtured in a culture that was born largely out of a Judeo-Christian womb, many stand at the edges of their religious heritage, hypercritical about the religious family they have been born into, and convinced that their Christian roots are what stand between them and proper freedom, achievement, and enjoyment. Whether it is expressed or not, recognized or not, this is the spirit that undergirds much of the anti-Christian, anti-Catholic, and anti-clerical feeling within our time.

This metaphor, taken from the writings of Kathleen Norris, captures more than what is evident at first glance. What it suggests is that in both a hypercritical young person and in the attitude of many of us today toward our religious roots there is a lot of adolescent grandiosity, but that this is natural and something that is generally outgrown. A lively, struggling, even angry adolescent, hypercritical of her family, is not bad, just unfinished. She only needs to grow up more to come to appreciate who and what gave her the freedom, tools, and self-confidence to stand on her own and be so critical. (This adapted from SECULARITY AND THE GOSPEL, Rolheiser, p. 26-27)

OK, I know that was a bit classroomish, but here's why it matters, and so my third point. Every one of us has a desire within to live an authentic life. We desire not only to witness with authentic lives, but also to live an authentic life. We genuinely want to be true to our calling and true to God. At times, we have perhaps resolved to live such a life with all the fervor we could muster. But, distracted by the sweet seduction of pleasure, prestige, possessions, power, and money, we have wandered from the narrow path. We know the truth, but we often lack the discipline and strength of character to align the actions of our lives with this deeper truth. We have given ourselves over to a thousand different whims, cravings, and fantasies. Our lives often become merely a distortion of the truth we know and profess. We know the human family's need for kindness, compassion, generosity, forgiveness, acceptance, freedom, and love, but we have divided our hearts with a thousand contradictions and compromises.

At every moment, the entire modern world kneels before us, begging, pleading, beckoning, for some brave man or woman to come forward and lead them by example of an authentic life.

Amidst the abundance of this age, which at times may seem all-prevailing, there is a great hunger in the people of today. We have a universal hunger for the authentic. Why did the whole world stop when Pope John Paul II died? Or Mother Teresa, a Catholic nun who was given a public funeral by the Hindu state of India? The world LONGS for authentic men and women, and as followers of Christ, this is our calling. (Adapted from Matthew Kelly, REDISCOVERING CATHOLICISM, p. 12-13). But even using John Paul II and Mother Teresa as examples can allow us to easily dismiss them – we see them as so far above ourselves.

But just look around in our parish, and in the towns where we live. There are hundreds of people who are working very hard to make a difference in the world. Feeding the homeless through Brown Bag and Western Wake Crisis, building homes with Habitat for Humanity, feeding and educating kids through Haiti Goat, sponsoring refugees from Ukraine, adopting children, the list is literally endless. Are they saints? Maybe not the canonizing type, and not necessarily YET, but they are well on the way – they are trying to live authentic lives, and they are everywhere in our midst, hundreds of them right here in our own parish.

I believe the best way for us to evangelize is to celebrate. Celebrate life. To live our lives to the fullest. To embrace life with both arms wide open, to lay our lives enthusiastically at the service of others, to love deeply the people who cross our paths, and above all, to embrace God. Life should never be wasted. Not one moment, because life is precious.

I believe the best way to share our faith is to celebrate it. The best way to evangelize our Catholicism is to live the faith more fully with each passing day, allowing it to reach into every corner of our lives. When Catholicism is the foundation of our family life, our social life, our spiritual life, our community life, and our professional life, then we will have established a whole life – a life of integrity. That unity of life will speak more powerfully than any words can ever speak. And if just a handful of people in one place and one time will give their whole selves to seeking, discovering, embracing, and living this life, we can change the whole course of human history.

What are we celebrating as a culture? What are you and I celebrating? We become the person we are because of the things we celebrate.

We can celebrate anything we wish. We can celebrate money and sex, prestige, power and greed, contempt and violence, unforgiveness and bigotry, pride and lies. OR, we can celebrate life and faith. We can celebrate love and honesty, mercy and forgiveness, kindness and generosity. We can celebrate truth, beauty, goodness, and redemption.

But one thing is certain. We become what we celebrate. This is the one immutable truth found in the life of every person who has ever lived. We become what we celebrate. And I believe that celebrating the life that God has given to us, life to the full in Christ, is the best way to share the great good news that we have been given.

We become what we celebrate. It is true not only in the life of a person, but also in the life of a family. It is true in the life of a nation, and it is true in the life of the Church. Share the good news, my friends. Let the celebration begin. Amen. (Adapted from Kelly, OPCIT., p 50-51)