



The
Episcopal Diocese
of New York

Homily of
The Rt. Rev. Mary D. Glasspool
at the
Diocesan Convention
Saturday November 5, 2016

Ephesians 4:7–8, 11–16
John 3:14–21

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Vocation

I'm one of those preachers who, when the lectionary or whoever picked the lessons hands me something like "Matthew 5:21–24, 27–30, 33–37" or "Exodus 19:1–9a, 16–20a; 20:18–20" goes straight to my Bible to see what the lectioners left out. To me, this is a form of biblical gerrymandering. What verses didn't they want me to see? or, perhaps in more solidarity with the preacher, What did they think it would be impossible to preach on? I do not suspect the good people who selected today's lesson from Ephesians of any such motivation. To the contrary, it seems as though the lesson from Ephesians was selected to hint to the preacher that she should preach about differing gifts or growing up into the Body of Christ or, at very least, *supporting ligaments* as we *live the way of Jesus in unity and mutual accountability*.

That said, I do think it important to properly set the context of Ephesians by referring to Ephesians Chapter 4 Verses 1–6 which reads *I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with*

one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

The writer of Ephesians – be it Paul, or a disciple of Paul's – *begs* us to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. The word we use is *vocation* = *calling*, a word which, until relatively recently, was exclusively applied to those persons called to ordained or monastic ministries. Thankfully, it has come to be applied to all of us as Christians as we respond to God's call. But the writer of Ephesians makes it sound easy. The qualities of the Christian life are humility, gentleness, patience, and loving forbearance. It is also the case that God – the one God – through Christ, gives each person different gifts to exercise different functions within the Church. He specifically lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Even if these jobs do not exactly name modern-day careers; we certainly get the idea that there ought to be some definiteness to our vocation – something that we can give a name to, so that we can say, when asked what we "do" – "I'm a doctor." or "I'm a teacher." or "I'm a high tech engineer."

But there yet seem to be quite a few people on this earth who never get to that kind of specificity. And many of these people are worried about that. "I don't really know what it is that God is calling me to do." they say. "I just need to figure out what God is calling me to do – and then do it!"

There's a wonderful children's story entitled *Alberic the Wise*, by Norton Juster [Picture Book Studio, 1992]. It's a story about wisdom; but it says something about vocation, too. The story goes like this. Alberic was a young man who knew nothing of the world other than the little village in which he lived. One day a stranger came to town, an old man with a large sack on his back. Out of curiosity Alberic began a conversation with this traveler who told Alberic tales of faraway places full of mystery and wonder. For several days after his encounter with this old man, Alberic could think only of the larger world which lay outside his village. Eventually, the allure of the unknown proved greater than the comfort of the familiar, so he packed his belongings and set out for these faraway places in search of the wisdom they might offer.

Before long he came to a walled city more grand than anything he had ever imagined. This city was renowned for its manufacture of stained glass. Satisfying himself that beauty was the true aim of wisdom, Alberic became an apprentice to an old craftsman for whom he worked for two years, doing

everything he was asked to do and learning all he could about the art of stained glass making. Finally, the day came for Alberic to prove his own skill and show what he had learned. He labored meticulously over his stained glass creation, but alas, the finished product was of inferior quality. He would never be a glassmaker.

Alberic moved on from that city to another famous for its stonecutters and masons. "Beauty isn't everything," he thought. "The true measure of wisdom is utility. I'll do something useful." So, again he set about the task of learning a trade, this time as a stonecutter. But his ability at stonecutting was as lacking as his efforts at making stained glass and so he moved on to the next town.

"Usefulness isn't everything," he decided. "Innovation is surely the measure of wisdom. I'll do something original." And soon he arrived at a village where the goldsmiths crafted objects of unsurpassed beauty and elegance. But for Alberic, this third attempt only produced a third failure.

And so it went, city after city, try after try, year after year. Still, wisdom and skill eluded Alberic. Now old and alone, Alberic reached the capital city where he stopped to rest with his accumulation of objects and memories. Intrigued by his strangeness, some of the youngsters of the town came up to him and inquired of him where he had been and what he had seen. Alberic began to relate to them the stories of his pilgrimage. Each day brought more and more people to hear his tales of faraway places and to marvel at his knowledge. Even the king came to listen and seek advice. So impressed was the king that he moved Alberic into a castle and gave him the title of Alberic the Wise.

After the novelty and the newness of his recently acquired fame began to fade, Alberic began to experience self-doubt. No matter what anyone else said or thought, Alberic knew he was not wise. However, the more he tried to disown his reputation for wisdom, the wiser he was thought to be by the townspeople. Alberic grew more and more sad and less at ease with himself.

Finally, to the utter astonishment of everyone, Alberic packed up his belongings, gave up his palace, his wealth, his servants, and his exalted position, and headed out on a journey for an unknown destination. Alberic had discovered the one thing that for him was true wisdom. "It is much better," he said, "to look for what I may never find, than to find what I do not really want."

Alberic discovered that wisdom, unlike knowledge, is not a state of being, or a destination at which one finally arrives. Wisdom, like faith, is bread for the

journey – a companion for our pilgrimage through life. And vocation – our call – is the journey itself. In reality, vocation isn't something we figure out and do. Vocation is the becoming part of life – and we're always becoming.

Whenever I say that I am a Christian, I hear a little voice in my head always wanting to qualify that statement. What I really want to say is, that I am becoming a Christian; and, God willing, I will be becoming a Christian for the rest of my life's journey. Are we ever there? Short of the reign of God coming on earth, or our return to God in heaven, I think not. That's the journey! That's the pilgrimage. That's our vocation.

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ... " The Greek word that gets translated "to lead", as in "to lead a life", is more accurately translated 'to walk', as in "to walk a life" or, really, "to walk the calling to which you have been called'.

The prophet Micah puts it this way: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (That's Micah 6:8, which is kind of the John 3:16 of the Old Testament.) That is every Christian's vocation: to do justice; to love kindness; and to walk humbly with God. In fact, just about the only qualification to this matter of Christian vocation, is that no matter what one's vocation is; no matter what your particular gifts are; you can't stay in the same place! If you're going to "walk with God" – you've got to walk. You've got to move.

Consider these words from Gustav Mahler in a letter to a friend while he was working on his Fourth Symphony:

This one is fundamentally different from my other symphonies. But that must be; I could never repeat a state of mind – and as life drives on, so too I follow new tracks in every work. That is why at first it always seems so hard for me to get down to work. All the skill that experience has brought one is of no avail. One has to learn all over again for the new thing one set out to make. So one remains everlastingly a beginner! ... It is and always will be a gift of God – one that, like every loving gift, one cannot deserve and cannot get by asking.

[Knud Martner, ed. Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler (New York, 1979), p.242]

So, my friends. The good news in all of this is that God is with us. With respect to our vocation, we don't have to get there, wherever there is. We don't

have to "figure it out", or do anything in particular. What we need to do is accept the gifts God has given each one of us. We need to be willing to walk with God. And we need to understand that the journey, itself, is what life is all about.

In the Name of God – Amen.

The Rt. Rev. Mary D. Glasspool