

21 January 2024, 3 Epiphany
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20
Psalm 62:6-14

Vocation in the World

The Rev'd Michael Thompson, Esq.

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

The other day, a friend asked to speak with me about bivocational ministry because they thought they might be called to this path. So, we talked. This was a great opportunity for me to revisit my own call to bivocational ministry and why I felt called to this way of being a priest.

Often, we conceive of bivocational ministry as a person having a secular job and a sacred calling. And we talk about bivocational ministry like it is avant-garde. If we put aside preconceptions of what bivocational ministry looks like, though, I think the concept goes back to the earliest Christians.

In the Church's earliest days, we know that there were individuals and communities that withdrew from the world to focus their lives on prayer. Indeed, the New Testament implies that Jesus' followers abandoned their secular lives – work and family – to focus on spreading the Good News. Perhaps they did. Perhaps some did. Perhaps the New Testament writers didn't think it important to discuss most of the ordinary lives of Jesus' followers.

I have to think that most early Christians, even priests and bishops, had secular lives and even secular employment. It makes sense.

For one thing, Christianity was new, and ministry wasn't professionalized as it is today. Perhaps some early Christians left secular employment to spread

the Good News full-time, but in the early days of Christianity, it was probably impractical for all or even most people to do that.

Also, early Christians endured periods of persecution. If Christianity were your sole vocation, you most certainly had a target on your back. A lot of people, perhaps even most, led a double life. They were, publicly, members of society engaged in day-to-day work, but, privately, they were followers of a crucified rebel called Jesus.

We also know that some early Christians held all their possessions in common, supporting one another, and that the wealthy supported the nascent Jesus Movement financially. I have to think that at least some of those folks had secular jobs that provided income for their community.

We also hear of stories of entire families and households accepting Jesus as their God and savior. Those families and households probably stayed together, working together to live their everyday lives in the truth of the Gospel.

This all speaks to my own sense of call. To be sure, my vocations as a lawyer and as a priest support one another. I bring some of what I have learned practicing law to my ministry as a priest, and my vocation as a priest colors how I practice law.

But my calling to be a lawyer and a priest is about something more fundamental and widely applicable. It's about living as a Christian in the world with all its challenges. While some do, most of us do not live entirely removed from the world. We grapple with supporting ourselves and our families financially. We deal with responding to less-than-charitable people, including ourselves. We live as Christians in the world, struggling to balance our faith against life's practical demands.

The way in which I have discerned that I am called to do this is by serving as a lawyer and a priest. My calling is rooted in experiencing the day-to-day challenges of living as a Christian while being pulled in multiple directions, having to make a living, having to balance the secular and sacred, and, most importantly, inviting God's presence into all aspects of my life. In that sense, bivocational ministry is a misnomer. It is one, integrated vocation.

To be sure, my ministry is not the only way to live as a Christian in the world. It is no better or worse than any other way of living as a Christian in the world. This is just the way in which God has called me to live as a Christian in the

world. But the challenge is one most of us face every day. How do we honor our Christian faith and values in everything we do every day? How do we reflect God's love in the world when someone cuts us off on the Mass Pike? How do we spread the Good News while worrying about paying bills? How do we respond as Christians when roofs leak and boilers malfunction?

But Bivocational ministry and the idea of living as a Christian in the world seem to run counter to our readings today.

Jonah, in today's reading, does what God asks of him. He goes to Nineveh and tells the people to repent – and they do! Those of us familiar with the story know that Jonah wasn't so quick to heed God's instruction. At first, when God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah runs in the opposite direction. As Jonah is fleeing, the boat he is on encounters a storm. Those aboard sense this is no ordinary storm: someone has angered a god. They figure out it is Jonah and eventually do as Jonah asks. They throw him overboard. Jonah is swallowed by a "big fish," put in timeout to think about what he has done. After repenting, Jonah is purged from the big fish. Today's reading gives us take two. God tells Jonah, once again, to go to Nineveh, and this time Jonah listens. Jonah finally drops everything to do what God has called him to do.

We also get Paul seemingly telling the Corinthians to eschew life in the world, specifically marriage. And we have the Psalmist seemingly giving up everything to rely completely on God: "For God alone my soul in silence waits."

Then we get to Mark. Jesus has been baptized and tempted, and John the Baptizer has been arrested. It is time for Jesus' ministry to begin. Jesus proclaims, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John, all fishermen, to follow, and they seemingly drop everything to do so. They leave their nets and family and off they go.

These readings all seem to indicate that bivocational ministry and ministry in the world are not the ways we should go. Rather, these readings seem to counsel that we drop everything and abandon all secular aspects of our lives. What if that weren't the only way to look at these readings? What if these readings create space for the kind of Christian ministry in the world – rather than despite the world – that I discussed earlier?

Let's revisit Jonah. When Jonah goes to Nineveh to warn the people to repent, they listen. They put on sackcloth, a sign of mourning. The king of Nineveh orders that everyone, humans and animals, fast, wear sackcloth, and cry out to God in repentance. We are not told that life in Nineveh ground to a halt. I imagine that people continued to work, but it was different. God was present and top of mind in their lives. Perhaps we can make a loose analogy to Lent, a period of extended fasting and reflection for us. We still work during Lent as we deepen our spiritual lives.

The Psalmist puts all their trust in God, but we are not told that they detach from everything else. Indeed, this Psalm might take on new meaning if we were to consider it a statement of steadfast reliance on God in all aspects of life.

Even Paul leaves some room for more than abandonment of worldly life. Today's lesson is an excerpt of a longer discussion about marriage. Paul makes clear that he prefers that people be celibate, but, following the verses of today's reading, he says that people for whom celibacy is too difficult should marry. Even in Paul's seemingly strict call for celibacy, even if it is best in Paul's view to eschew worldly anxieties, there is space for living as a Christian in the world.

What about Jesus' calling of his disciples? Jesus calls, and Simon, Andrew, James, and John leave their nets to follow him. James and John even leave their father. The implication is that they entirely abandon their past for a future with Jesus. Even if that is true, I don't think following Jesus necessarily requires complete removal from the world. In fact, his ministry seems to involve the opposite.

John the Baptizer was in the wilderness and, in his ministry, people from everywhere came to him to be baptized. John the Baptizer's followers removed themselves from the world for some period, even if brief. Jesus' ministry is different.

Jesus goes to Galilee and proclaims the arrival of God's kingdom. Jesus goes to the people to whom he is bringing good news. He likewise calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John into the world with him. Just nine verses later, there is an indication that following Jesus did not require complete detachment from one's family and the world. Jesus, Simon, Andrew, James, and John go to Simon and Andrew's house and heal Simon's mother-in-law.

Christ makes room for multiple forms of Christian vocation. For most of us, Christian vocation is, in some way, lived in the world rather than apart from it. One of the more obvious ways is that we are faced with numerous secular concerns and must discern how to operate as Christians amid those concerns. But it comes up in other ways too.

After the service, we will have our Annual Meeting, during which we discuss the life, work, and business of the parish. Some of those discussions may seem detached from our Christian life together: boilers and utilities and the like. But all of it goes to supporting this parish's mission and living into our vocation as Christians witnessing to God's presence and love in the world.

That is the point. The line between secular and sacred is something of a fiction. It all belongs to God, so it is all about God. God is alive and with us on Sunday mornings during worship, but also when we work, when we cook, when we brush our teeth, and when we are driving in Massachusetts. Thanks be to God especially for that last one!

The calling to follow Christ is a calling to invite God into our whole lives, even the mundane aspects, even the aspects we would rather hide. The calling to follow Christ is a calling to integrate God into everything we do, to live into the profession that God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

As we continue our journey through the Epiphany season, in which we testify to God's presence in Christ in the world, I encourage you, as I encourage myself, to invite God into all aspects of our lives. Let's integrate our secular and sacred lives and, in so doing, see how putting our whole trust in God in all we do transforms us and the world around us.

Amen.