

Our Christian Vocation

“*walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called*”. [Eph. 4:1]

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This is a Sunday with many words which need some explaining. The first word we need to clear up is the word “prevent” which we heard in our opening Collect: Lord we pray that thy grace may always “*prevent* and follow us”. This does not mean that we hope the Lord will stop us from good works. Rather, prevent is being used with its original, today archaic, meaning from Latin “*prevenire*” meaning “to go before”... smoothing the way so to speak. In modern usage we instead would say “guide” or “direct”, as we do in some of our newer prayers. In short then, we prayed for the Lord's grace to *surround* us.

The second word is “vocation”. A vocation has not historically been really the same as a *job*, although it frequently today is used as such. Instead, it comes from the Latin verb “*vocare*” meaning to call. Thus, a more accurate definition would be to say that a vocation is: a calling towards a particular course of action. Today it most frequently is used to refer to those who believe they are *called* to religious life as either monastics or ordained clergy. But we also speak of doctors having a “call to heal”. Paul, however, is using the word here to say that **all** Christians have a *calling* to live a certain life, or in modern parlance/lingo, a certain “lifestyle”.

Paul was writing to his fledgling church in Ephesus which was one of the great, wealthy cities of the Roman Empire. Ephesus had one of the great seaports and also three major roads passed nearby. It was a major metropolitan center for trade. One could find or sell anything there. Ephesus also was the site for the Panionian Games which rivaled the Olympics. The

city was also mighty in religion being the site of the Great temple of Artemis, also called after Diana, which was over 400 feet long and more than 200 ft. wide. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world and covered with many jewels. It was in this city where Paul in his ministry spent more time than anywhere. Paul felt the need obvious to remind his flock, is this literal fleshpot, of the universal battle of good vs. evil.

Ephesus also figures prominently in the Book of Revelation. In its second chapter St. John the Divine writes of his revelation for the Ephesian church that they were mighty in orthodoxy and works, but lacking in charity. This missing ingredient is one of the characteristics of living out the Christian vocation of which Paul referred today. Along with “lowliness”, “meekness”, “long-suffering”, and endeavoring for unity, Paul had charity as a fifth element calling it “forbearing in love”. These also need some... explanation.

“Lowliness” can be understood as humbleness, humility. Next, while we today think of shyness when we hear “meekness”, it really meant, when the NT was being written, closer to Aristotle's concept of “balanced”. One was *meek* if he was never at the extremes, for example, not someone who never ever got angry or one who always seemed to be angry, but, rather, one who never got angry over slights to himself, but did get angry over others getting hurt. “Long-suffering” of course means patience, but also with a spirit of never giving up/ never giving in. Finally, “forbearing in love” is referring to *agape* or charity which is involves compassion.

We clearly see this last characteristic of the Christian vocation, forbearing in love, or compassion, in the first half of our Gospel. Jesus had compassion on a man long suffering from dropsy (or swelling), even though Jesus would be once again “working” on the Sabbath in the eyes of the Pharisees. Indeed, the Gospels recount Jesus curing on the Sabbath seven different times. We heard today of how the lawyers and Pharisees “watched him”. They were

obviously hoping to catch this troublesome teacher violating one of the Mishnah's copious rules governing the Sabbath. It is more than a little plausible, especially since we know that there were lawyers present, that the dropsy sufferer may have been planted there simply to test Jesus.

By even coming to the Sabbath dinner, however, Jesus, who would have known he was intensely disliked by people such as his host, manifested one of St. Paul's other characteristics named in our Epistle, namely, "long-suffering", in the sense of not giving up. Jesus never gave up on the Pharisees which may be why at least a couple, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, ultimately became followers of his and saints on the Church's calendar.

In contrast to Jesus' compassion for the sufferer, the Pharisees' lacked in compassion. In fact they may have **used** him. Over the preceding centuries their study of The Law had led them to conclude that healing was working and thus could not be done on the sabbath which God had ordered to be a day of complete rest. So, one could keep a wound from getting worse by putting a bandage on it, but not pour oil or wine on it since that would help it to heal which...would be work.

Jesus found such rules contemptible. He pointed out that his listeners would have no problem working up a sweat to save an animal on the sabbath, so why not a human creature? The Pharisees had lost sight of the fact that the purpose of the day of rest, which God did ordain, was TO restore and... heal the body. Thus, healing on the sabbath was very much in keeping with the **spirit** of the Law. The Pharisees reasoning had become faulty since it had led them to oppose something very much in keeping with the Law. The Pharisee's were not allowing themselves to be influenced at all by their emotions. Thus, they lost their compassion.

Jesus' parable which follows the healing clearly deals with another characteristic Paul

mentioned today, humility. Along the lines of singing for ones supper, a visiting teacher would have been expected to pass on some words of wisdom, to leave guests with something to mull over.

The parable makes all too apparent the shame that one can suffer from having been too proud, from having presumed entitlement to an honor. The pharisees would have understood **that**. Yet, Jesus is also making a point to the ever proud Pharisees that the humble guest who might decide that he should sit at a distant table could realize **more** honor than if he had guessed correctly and automatically sat somewhere closer to his actual social status. That one could gain honor from humility would have been “*a new one*” for the Pharisees, and something definitely worth *mulling* over.

At this point we hopefully may find ourselves asking how we can grow in these characteristics, such as how we can grow in compassion and humility? Regarding compassion, we might pray for a sense of empathy and reflection, as well as pondering about our own life's worries or travails. This should enable the *meat* of our human logic at least to be *spiced* by our heart. This will lead us to ask ourselves probing questions. Is the challenge another presents to us really all that big a deal? Just how devastatingly important was what we were doing or heading to do? Or, what if we were in the same boat someday? Have we *been* in the same boat? Was his insult so bad that we really need to make a federal case out of it? Do we never insult others?

Becoming more humble is perhaps a little bit easier to accomplish. First, we need to keep in mind that the world will continue once we are gone. There will be no massive suicides by millions proclaiming no reason to go on living once we finally goes to our Maker.

Beyond this, we can keep our pride in check by always comparing our *best* to the REAL

best. Any scratch golfer is humbled to play with a **real** pro. Any one who is proud of not having given into the easy life is humbled to visit any monastery, (such as the one north of Fort Collins, St. Walburga's Benedictine abbey). Any budding Billy Graham is humbled to hear in person a “living saint” bringing the Gospels to life. In short, to grow in humility we should not compare ourselves to others immediately around us, but to those outside our circle, and ultimately to God, who is always perfect in all things. He never needs any improvement.

Compassion for others' troubles and humility are just two of the great characteristics of someone **walking worthily** the Christian vocation he received at baptism. But growing in them will help us grow also in the other sister characteristics which Paul listed: growing in balance, growing in patience with hope, and growing in seeking peace and unity.

We can aid our growth in both humility and compassion by keeping in mind that the world will go on without us, by comparing our strengths to perfection, by never giving up on anyone, and by allowing our logic to be seasoned by our heart. All of the above aids, however, ultimately themselves will be aided by... prayer. Let *us* pray:

“O Lord, may I honor thee in my rest today; surround me with thy grace; fill me humility and charity that I always may see **the** good within... as well as **seek** thy good **for** my neighbor, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Amen. +