

WHAT'S YOUR VOCATION?

Matthew 4: 12-22; John 1: 43-50

Jack had worked as an investment banker for over 20 years. He was very good at what he did, and he made a lot of money doing it. But then, he suffered a massive heart attack. He almost died. In follow up appointments, after reviewing his medical history and that of his family, the doctors determined that the attack was not due to any congenital or genetic predisposition. Rather, it was stress that had caused the attack, stress accumulated in Jack's body over many years. Something had to change or else the next time Jack would die. The attack was a wake-up.

So, Jack left his high paying job and his high-end lifestyle. He trained to become a yoga instructor. With his savings he bought a studio with a small apartment on the upper level. When I met Jack, he had come into town to help manage his mother's health and transition her to a senior's residence. After having come to worship with his mother he told me his story. He also wanted to share with me his own personal spiritual journey as he felt a certain kindredness in what he experienced in the worship service. He spoke about having found a pathway to peace and harmony in his soul. He was living simply, but he was alive and happy, and even though he still embraced the Christianity with which his mother raised him, he had found spiritual community at a Hindu temple not too far from his studio. He hoped I would visit him if and when in Ottawa.

Then there was Simon. Simon was a funeral director. I met Simon on a drive up to a cemetery north of Toronto. People told me he was a very sensitive and caring person, someone who put people first, well above the business end of things. On our drive up to the cemetery Simon told me his story. In a previous life he had been the division head of a large company. He was successful. But then he burned out and fell into a debilitating depression for months. His family didn't know how to help him other than getting him to various medical and psychiatric appointments.

When Simon emerged out of his depression, Simon knew what he had to do. He knew he had to find something to do that involved helping people, people in difficult circumstances, people struggling emotionally and spiritually. Even though he was now making a fraction of the income he used to make, he was happy and at peace. He was involved with his church and his family life had come alive again. They were living far more modestly, but life now had meaning, purpose and even joy. No doubt, the shadow of depression was always there for Simon, but engaging people and supporting them through their loss filled his soul with deep

satisfaction and that had become the best antidote to those depressive currents, keeping them at bay.

And then there was Suzanne. Suzanne was involved in a Franciscan religious community and was a psychotherapist by profession. I met her at an ecumenical gathering. She told me that although she had grown up in Quebec in a religious household, faith had never been real for her. She had become a lawyer and got a big break when she landed a job on Wall street in New York. She had made it. Within a few years, her star was rising in the firm. But she herself was becoming more and more miserable with every promotion. It wasn't so much her firm or her profession that was the problem. It was her. She was discovering that she was not a fit for this kind of work and its lifestyle. She was living behind a façade of ego, competitiveness and falsity, and she was so immersed in it all no one could see it, not even her. But then, one day, she had a call from a big client who was not happy with her work. In fact, being a big client for the firm he felt it his right to berate Suzanne and even say some nasty things about her personally. Suzanne had learned how to be tough in that Wall Street world, but for some reason on this day and with this client, she just lost it. The call ended rather abruptly, and the next thing Suzanne knew, she was on the floor sobbing uncontrollably. She collected herself discreetly, went to the bathroom to wash up and left the building. She never went back.

Suzanne knew she had to change something or else she would break. And so, began a whole journey of self discovery. She spent three months in a little hermitage on a Franciscan retreat property near the church I was ministering in rural Quebec. She lived in a shack by herself with minimal outside contact. She would go to the chapel on the property to pray, worship and seek out God. She was looking for direction. After three months she heard God speak to her, inside her soul. She began studying to become a psychotherapist even as she was also undergoing spiritual direction. Her goal was to help people and she was determined to take on clients who could not afford a full price therapist. She would cover her expenses by living simply and out of savings she had accumulated from her earlier life. She had found her bliss in the form of deep inner peace.

Ok. One final story. His name was Nathaniel. Nathaniel had grown up in poverty among a people who had known slavery, experienced freedom, even tasted glory here and there, but were now under the thumb of a large, brutal empire. Nathaniel's options for living, working and doing something meaningful in life felt very limited. Finding meaning and purpose was a luxury for those with options. Nathaniel would have to do whatever he could to find some contentment in making enough to survive. But Nathaniel wanted more. He wasn't satisfied living on the surface of things just to get by. He wasn't content living falsely just to get people to like him or find a good job or just get ahead. Nathaniel wasn't energized by the prospect of getting recognition, popularity or making it any which way he could and

however many ways he had to flatter, lie and pretend to achieve it. Nathaniel was hungry for the real thing. What was that?

Well, his friends who had a fishing business told him about this man called Jesus. What Jesus had to say was one thing, but what he was asking of people was another. He was calling people to follow him on a journey. Everyone was looking for some saviour, some path to freedom out of the poverty and limitation all around them. And some, like Nathaniel, were also looking for something more, something genuine and real they could sink their core life into. Peter and Andrew, who ran the fishing business and would take it over when their father retired, were even now preparing to leave the business and follow this would-be saviour, with no guarantees of financial security, stability, or even safety, especially if there were revolutionary ideas being thrown around. And now, another one of this group, a friend of Nathaniel's – Philip, was asking Nathaniel to come and check this Jesus out. Nathaniel was already skeptical and cynical. But he was also restless inside and curious too. Was this Jesus for real?

Well, our scripture reading tells of an encounter... It's not that Jesus said much. But what he did say opened something up in Nathaniel. What Jesus said opened something up in his heart and soul he hadn't known was there. How did Jesus know what was in Nathaniel so deeply that Nathaniel himself hadn't really known? What did Jesus see? "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Jesus said. Nathaniel was not interested in just doing time. Nathaniel was not interested in just building up his ego, his advancement, his success, his power, wealth, popularity, friends and all that... No. Nathaniel was hungry for something much more real – for real truth and real life. How was Nathaniel going to serve the real with his life? **Now that's the core vocational question: How are you and I going to serve the real in and through our lives?**

Well, preacher, what's the real? Well, the real is not just information about the real, how it works and how to make it work for you. No. The real, as Nathaniel is feeling it in his heart and soul and doesn't yet have language for, is all about love. Love requires all of you in order to reveal itself. Love requires your heart and soul hungry and thirsty, ready to be fed by something much more real than the deceit of what success, power, friends, entertainment, travel and all that can deliver to you... You've got to give it all for love, whatever the cost, the time, the attention and the focus... with all you have and all you are... and when you do that, give it your all that is, you will find real life... "Eternal life" is what Jesus calls it in the gospel. Eternal life is not just life after you die. Eternal life is fullness of life now, so full in fact, that even death now becomes a transition rather than a termination. The meaning of your life is much bigger and richer than the span of it, because filling it with love – given and then received, has meaning and fulfillment beyond the physical duration of your life.

So, what Jesus is calling for are disciples. The word disciple means student or learner. Are you hungry to learn real life? Do you have a passion for real life? If you don't and if you are caught up and entangled, as most of us are at various levels, entangled in layers of self-deception about what will fulfill us and give us meaning, then our first prayer has to be for God to fill us with a greater and purer passion, hunger and thirst for a real life rooted in the kind of love that the divine in Jesus has to offer. Your call and your vocation, as it is mine, is to become a disciple of a worthy teacher and Lord.

Maybe your job and your profession will serve this discipleship. Maybe it won't and a change is needed? Maybe it's a question of relationships or priorities. Maybe we are slaves to our fears and insecurities. Maybe we are stuck in our misery and discontent or our addictions and compulsions because they're familiar and safe even as they are sucking the life out of us. Well, church, this church anyway, is about the journey of discipleship. We are not alone. It all started with Peter and Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel. They made many mistakes along the way, and their self-discovery included some painful failures and cowardly fear in going all the way with Jesus... But eventually, a larger love found them, embraced them and empowered them to go all the way, however imperfectly they got there. And so, they told their story.

What about you and me and us together? Today is only Epiphany. It's still early in the journey with Jesus. Easter hasn't come yet. All we're being asked is to make a new beginning, to dig deeper, to reach a little higher, to ask for more out of life... we're worth it. We deserve all the real we can get. It's all about love. It's risky and demanding. It requires focus, attention and work. So, what's your vocation at this time of your life? Is it real? Does it engage your heart and soul? Is it about love? The world needs what you have to offer. God wants to reach into the world through you. Jesus is calling you to follow. How will you respond?
Amen.