

The Journey to the Sacred, Part 3

“What is a Sacred Vocation?”

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Scripture: John 14:12-14; Colossians 3:15-17

Poetry: “Two Tramps in Mud Time” by Robert Frost

Note: Manuscripts for this series contain a portion of the sermon that is actually preached. For the full sermon, visit Countryside’s video channel on YouTube.

Jesus makes two seemingly outrageous promises to those of us who follow him. He promises that we will do not only the same works he does but, “far greater things than these.” And he promises that, “I will do whatever you ask in my name.” (John 14:12-14) Do you buy these promises?

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never been able to perform a miraculous healing like Jesus did, let alone a more extraordinary one. I have also asked for many things while invoking Jesus’ name that I never received. Yet, I do believe Jesus’ claims are true. I believe they are true because I see them coming true seemingly wherever I look in the world today. Because I see these promises are true with my own eyes, I do not happen to be one of the many people who observe the social and political turmoil we are experiencing in our world and think that the sky has begun to fall on us. If you are one of these people, I suggest turning off the news and spending some time in the gospels for some perspective. If you understand what Jesus really meant by his promises, and begin to see that he is faithful to them, it’s hard to cower in fear.

To be sure, the world is a tough place in which to live. In certain respects, it’s getting tougher. Yet, the biggest danger we face is not that we fail to recognize the dangers before us, but that we fail to recognize all the possibilities before us. Jesus provides us the necessary vision to see the possibilities in our day and to respond to the chaos in productive ways. He never promised that we would save the world if we take up his vision – or even our own lives – but he did promise that we would do greater things than he did, and that he’d be here to help us do them ... if we’re paying attention.

The key to understanding the intent behind Jesus’ promises is to recognize that, as a follower of Jesus, you have a sacred vocation. The word “vocation” literally

means "calling," as in "calling from God." As Christians, we may work at different jobs, but on a certain level, we all have the same calling or vocation. Our vocation is to act on Jesus' promises by doing greater things than he did.

This may sound like an impossibly high expectation. Yet, bear in mind that Jesus does promise his help. When Jesus says, "I will do whatever you ask in my name," he doesn't mean we can have that shiny new car provided we invoke the name of Jesus when we pray. He means that God is ready, willing, and able to help us when we seek to do things that are in accordance with God's will and intention for our lives.

In case you are wondering, God helps both Christian and non-Christian alike in this regard. Anyone who expends their efforts in ways that Jesus himself would do in our day can expect God's help. A lot of it, too. So the only real advantage to being a Christian with respect to our sacred vocation is that we have Jesus' example to follow in case we're wondering about what God wants us to do. Also, when great things are accomplished through what we do, we know where the credit belongs. Not to us alone, but to our Creator.

Let's consider a concrete example of what I'm talking about.

If a few thousand faith healers suddenly showed up in Omaha, laying their hands on people and praying, and these people were actually healing broken hips, dissolving brain tumors, and curing people of literally thousands of different ailments and diseases, how would we respond? In addition to being bewildered, we'd likely be shouting "Hallelujah! God is truly present with us!" Even if not every single person was healed by a faith healer but the vast majority of them were, would any of us doubt that God truly cares about human suffering and God acts powerfully on our behalf?

If all this faith-healing was going on, not only here in Omaha but across the country, it would be hard to imagine people thinking the sky is falling, despite our present social and political challenges. We'd be a lot more hopeful!

Yet we do have all kinds of people being healed of all kinds of maladies that people would have died of not long ago – everything from the common flu to cancer, from broken hips to broken skulls.

We have even turned healing into pills and shots that can be transported anywhere in the world and administered by people with little or no medical

training – and certainly no theological training! The fact that handing out pills, or giving shots, or performing surgeries seems so ordinary to us is part of what makes this all so extraordinary. Just as Jesus promised, we are doing “greater things than these,” without hardly thinking twice about many of them! We are performing greater healings than Jesus did because centuries of people have responded to God’s call into the medical profession, studying the human body, and developing remedies that are so powerful that you don’t need to be a holy person – or the Messiah of God – to administer them.

Isn’t it sad how blind we are to God’s presence and power when it works through people as “ordinary” as you and me instead of Jesus? The greatest danger we face is not failure to acknowledge the dangers around us, but failing to recognize the possibilities within those dangers – possibilities made possible by God acting through “ordinary” human beings – who happen to be created in God’s very image and likeness.

Here’s another example. Recently, NY Times journalist, Nicholas Kristof, published a story proclaiming that 2017 was “The Best Year in Human History.” He wasn’t being ironic. Nor is a hard-edged journalist like Kristof, who regularly travels to the most desperate regions of the world, any kind of Pollyanna. Before stating why Kristof really believes 2017 to be so phenomenal, ask yourself this: If Kristof is correct in his assumption that 2017 was humanity’s best year ever, how dangerous is it not to be aware of this when all of us were alive to witness it? If we are all cowering or giving up hope thinking that the sky is falling in the “best year in human history,” imagine what we’ll be doing in worse years, and how ineffective we will be at meeting the challenges before us.

Here are just a few of the many reasons Kristof calls 2017 the “Best Year in Human History.” First, the number of people living in extreme poverty around the world (i.e., less than about \$2 a day) went down by 217,000 people *per day*, according to Oxford University professor, Max Roser, who runs a website called Our World in Data. If you’ve been reading Kristof for awhile (or listening to my sermons) this statistic may sound familiar. That’s because last year he pronounced 2016 as the “Best Year in Human History.” Now he argues that 2017 was even better.

Every day in 2017, for instance, 325,000 more people gained access to electricity. 300,000 more gained access to clean drinking water. Each day! None of these people received access to water, or access to electricity, or emerged from extreme poverty by happenstance. Someone *helped* them. Millions of

“someones,” in fact, who have devoted countless months and years of their lives to do it. Do you think God might consider their vocations sacred – not to mention the recipients of their hard work?

By the way, speaking of clean drinking water, do you remember the definition of “holy water” that was proposed at the beginning of this series? “Holy water” is any water that reminds you, or reveals to you, that *all* water is holy. No one in our world recognizes the holiness of all water more than someone who has no direct access to it. So each and every day, a million more gallons of “holy water” flow in our world to those who had no direct access to clean water before.

We in the West, who have most all the water we could ever need, might have been more impressed by this situation if Moses had returned and drawn water out of a rock with his staff, as he is said to have done in the book of Exodus. Certainly if 300,000 more people *each day* were receiving water from a rock, we’d be saying, “My God! Miracles are happening right and left!” Yet to people who had no direct access to clean water before a well was dug in their village, this water is no less holy.

I would venture to suggest that the means by which this water has been made possible is no less holy than if Moses had drawn it out with a staff. In fact, I’d say we are doing it today in a more holy way than Moses. It’s more holy because, again, you don’t have to be a mystic or one of the great spiritual leaders of the entire Bible to create it. Instead, hundreds of thousands of people have responded to a sense of call to drill wells, to lay pipe, to raise funds, or even to work as an office administrator in order to make such a miracle possible. If we ordain ministers like me, why aren’t we ordaining everyone who has responded to such a holy vocation that makes holy water flow in the desert?

Kristof cites many more examples of mind-boggling “miracles” that happened in 2017. I highly recommend reading it.¹ If you do, I encourage you to think of all the people who have made these amazing statistics possible – people who are engaged in what should properly be considered “sacred vocations.” When people say that fewer and fewer people are going into the ministry these days, I say there have never been so many people going into ministry!

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/opinion/sunday/2017-progress-illiteracy-poverty.html>

Many of you who are reading this are engaged with sacred vocations that you yourself have never understood as sacred. I'll leave you with just one example not cited by Kristof:

Many people in Omaha work for the railroad, including several of our members. As the folk song goes, they've "been working on the railroad, all the live long day." If you are one of these workers, then perhaps you are more aware than most that railroads are the most environmentally sound way to move freight over land. On average, trains are four times more fuel efficient than trucks. Greenhouse gas emissions are directly related to fuel consumption. This means that moving freight by rail instead of truck lowers greenhouse gas emissions by 75%.

Do you think God cares about climate change – especially when the poorest countries of the world will suffer the worst of its consequences in the years to come if something is not done now? If so, do you not think your "working on the railroad" is sacred work? Heck, if I were allowed to, I'd ordain you. And "I've Been Working on the Railroad" would be in our hymnals. Dinah, why don't you blow *that* horn!