

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
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3rd Sunday of Year A Mt 4:12-23

Probably one of the most famous recruitment posters in the United States is the picture of Uncle Sam pointing his finger and saying, "I want you." In the years when the draft was still in effect, if one received a letter beginning, "Greetings from the President of the United States of America," stating Uncle Sam wanted you specifically that would hardly qualify as "good news." Now of course the ads for the volunteer army are much more enticing, promising that the military will make you "be all that you can be." In the coming months recruiters for colleges and corporations will spread throughout the schools of the nation attempting to lure the young people of America to their respective universities and businesses. In general one characteristic which marks these recruits—whether it be to the armed forces, to a college, or to their first real job—is the enthusiasm, the eagerness, with which they will respond. Often, they have a sense of adventure, of limitless opportunities, of fulfilling a dream, of making their own personal contribution to some worthwhile endeavor. I, though, wonder how often do people "over-commit" themselves to those projects on which they will embark? They may say to themselves that they will meet any test, face any obstacle in order to pursue their chosen goal, but how many really know what they are getting themselves into? A sense of unreality is often mingled with the best of intentions.

It is not just in matters of career or employment that people can "overt-commit" themselves. It can happen just as often in marriage or, thinking of my own experience, when one becomes a priest. When I was ordained almost fifty years ago, the musical, "The Man of La Mancha," adapted from Cervantes' novel about the idealistic Don Quixote, was very popular at the time. I remember how some of my classmates, in an attempt to be relevant to the times, tried to update the standard commemorative holy cards that were customarily given out at Ordination. Instead of having a traditional image of Jesus on the holy card, some decided to put the words from the hit song, "The Impossible Dream," on the card, expressing their sense of what it meant to be a priest in the modern world. You may remember the lyrics:

*"To dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable
foe, to bear with unbearable sorrow,
to run where the brave dare not go.
To right the unrightable wrong, to love pure and chaste from
afar, to try when your arms are too
weary, to reach the unreachable star...
to be willing to march into hell on a heavenly cause.*

*And the world will be better for this, that one man scorned and covered with doubt, still strode
With his last ounce of courage...to reach the impossible star."*

Where are they today, all those who began with such lofty goals? Of the fifty or so ordained together, less than half remain in the priesthood. And most striking of all was the classmate who was ordained in St. Peter's Basilica, only to return to Rome a year later—this time to be married in Rome's City Hall.

Noble intentions, loyalty aspirations, even strong convictions, are no guarantee as to how successful or content one might be in staying with their initial decision. People have told me that they were never so sure of any decision they had ever made in their lives, as when they walked down the aisle to be married—only to find themselves a few years later in Divorce Court. So, what accounts for the disillusionment, the evaporation of the euphoria that was so much in evidence at the outset, the abandonment of what once seemed so certain? Probably there is no one simple explanation, but let me offer one that is hinted at in today's Gospel story of Jesus calling His first disciples. And that is the sense of commitment to a fantasy; embracing the dream other than the reality

St. Mark paints a very idealized scene of Jesus inviting Simon and Andrew, James and John to come and follow, and of their dropping everything to go after Him. They must have had some scenario in mind as to what it would mean for them to be "fishers of men," undoubtedly something better than being stuck up in Galilee being just simple fishermen. Today's reading from the Gospel doesn't specify what exactly they had in mind, but succeeding passages make clear that what they had in mind wasn't what Jesus had in mind for them. It was only their continuing and constant association with Jesus that would expand the initial self-serving or, at least, self-referential expectations, to be as expensive as inclusive as the mission to which Jesus would gradually introduce them.

Perhaps it is the case that people need a large measure of enthusiasm, of romance, even illusion, when setting off on some difficult course, just to give us the push to get started, to take the risks involved. But if we are not willing to have the script we have written for ourselves revised along the way, if we are unwilling to have the dream checked out against reality, it may just be a matter of time before the commitment gives way to a sense of loss, of betrayal, of disillusionment, of abandonment. In all fairness we should ask ourselves who was fooling whom; who was stringing whom along; how realistic were those original expectations in the first place? Those first disciples of Jesus would have to endure the confusion of His

crucifixion. They would have to see their ideas about God, about the nation, even about themselves turned inside out and upside down, before they would be able to return, now more seasoned and chastened, to take up the invitation they had so blithely embraced years before on the shores of Galilee. It is the moment of saying "yes," to the invitation a second time--that's when the real promise is redeemed, when the illusions are stripped away; when the reality of what we've gotten ourselves into is staring us in the face. That is the time of testing; but also a time of growth, the time of dealing with reality.

The story of the first disciples response to Jesus is given for our reflection at the beginning of the year, so that throughout the months ahead we might continue to see how they grow, how they are transformed by the time they spend with Jesus--and see in them a model for ourselves. Those first disciples learned much about God, about life, about themselves during that time. That invitation is given to us, too, if we are willing to take the chance of discovering what will be disclosed to us. That discovery may bring joy, peace, but will also bring its measure of upsetment, as we see some of our cherished ideas prejudices cut down before us.

Let us pray that we can always have the good sense to know what we are getting ourselves into, that we may never use others to compensate for our own inadequacies or to fulfill our dreams, and then become enraged with them or feel betrayed by them when they turn out to be just human. Let us pray that like disciples of Jesus we may have the ability and openness to keep on listening and learning, learning about ourselves and others, and then use our energies and talents not just for our own well-being, but that God's redeeming will for humanity might be achieved in and through us.