SEEKING THE “SOMETHING MORE” OF GOD’S KINGDOM

A few years ago, when our parish staff gathered for a mid-year Enrichment Day, each member had an assignment to bring: “Find out about the daily work of the parishioners you serve.” Prior to the gathering each staff member was to ask three parishioners a set of questions: What do you do for a living? What excites you about your job and stirs your enthusiasm? What are the challenges you face in your work and the difficulties you encounter? By finding out a little bit more about some of you, I thought it would be beneficial for me and our staff to understand and appreciate your life-situations a little better. It turned out to be a fruitful endeavor as the staff sat attentively and listened to each other describe some of you in your Monday through Friday reality. Through our little survey we discovered that our parish has many determined and capable members who are making wonderful contributions to society and to the lives of many people. It became apparent that all jobs are filled with challenges and frustrations, difficulties that you face day in and day out. No one is immune from the need of God’s help on a daily basis to make it through the day. Finally, we recognized that for each of us, there is a “call within a call” – a hidden purpose to our lives that’s like an “encrypted” message – not clearly visible, but only discovered over time, fully known only to God. This “call within a call” is what brings meaning and purpose to even our most mundane jobs.

This is one of the themes of our scriptures today. Our first reading was from the prophet Isaiah – one of four songs about a mysterious suffering servant whose pain will bring healing to others. The Church has always seen these “suffering servant songs” as applying to the Lord Jesus. They can also apply to us -- His Church and His people. In our reading, the suffering servant says that God formed him and called him to bring the people of Israel back to their God. He would be faithful to that call. Then the Lord continues that it isn’t enough for him to bring back the people of Israel. He would be a light to the whole world. That mysterious servant thought his mission was local. “Encrypted” within it was a purpose for his life that was much larger. That’s the call within the call.

The second reading, actually only a greeting, from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians has an intriguing detail. St. Paul refers to his brother Sosthenes. This Sosthenes appears only twice in the New Testament. This citation is one of them. The other is an incident that occurred earlier in Paul’s life, when Paul was preaching in Corinth, Sosthenes was the synagogue leader who had Paul arrested and brought before the Roman governor. When the governor dismissed the case, the members of the synagogue who were against Paul became enraged and turned on Sosthenes,
beating him to a pulp. This sparked his conversion to Christ and he became an assistant to St. Paul. As events change our life, we don’t know the direction in which the Lord has yet to take us. We all know people who have experienced sudden and dramatic turns in their life even in the late afternoon and evening of life. That call of Christ, mysteriously encrypted in suffering more often than in prosperity, shaped their life and soul, as it did to Sosthenes. That is “the call within the call.”

Lastly, our Gospel reading gives us John the Baptist’s recollection of Jesus’ baptism. John says that he didn’t recognize Jesus at first. When the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove, John realized that here is Someone who would not only take away the sins of Israel but of the whole world. Later in his life, John would say: “This is why I was sent, not only to preach repentance but to identify the Messiah.” That is his “call within the call.”

We all have a vocation on this earth. Every one of us was brought into being for a reason. We always need to pray for vocations to the priesthood and to ministry within the Church. We desperately need men and women who will make it their direct purpose in life to preach the Gospel, to speak to others about God’s abundant mercy, to serve publicly and formally in the name of Christ. But we also need men and women who preach the Gospel through their daily work in all the various jobs and endeavors in our society. The vocation everyone sees is the obvious part of it. But hidden within it is a deeper purpose that isn’t always known to us. We can’t choose it. We can’t plan for it. It’s “encrypted” in our life by God. We are here in this place, at this time and with these people for a reason. The things that occurred in our lives in the past happened for a reason. The prosperity we’ve known and the sufferings we’ve endured are for a reason. It might be that we will speak saving truth to someone, trigger soul-saving events for another, or invite another to Jesus Christ. None of us fully knows the complete purpose of our life here on earth and what use God can make of it. We will know the impact of our life at the Last judgment when we will see the full effect of our life here on earth. For now we’re simply called to be faithful. This is an awesome truth to bring to mind in our prayer and meditation.

Like that mysterious suffering servant of the first reading, there is a mission and significance to our lives larger than we can imagine. Our focus is local; God’s purpose for us may be much larger than we think. Like Sosthenes, our life can move along one path when, suddenly, a reversal, a tragedy, an eye-opener dramatically reveals whole new worlds to us. It tears away our illusions and turns us more deeply to the Lord. What was at one time an omission in our life now becomes our mission. Finally, like John the Baptist, we can be called to point the way to Christ for others.
I discovered this again in a small way just this past week when I returned to Michigan to visit my oldest sister, Mary Ann, who had been hospitalized for a couple months. I intended to be with her and my other sisters for support and comfort. I didn’t suspect that my sister’s health would worsen to the point of needing palliative care. Providentially, that visit allowed me to be present with my family at the medical conference with her doctors and nurses, and helpful in finding a Hospice facility that was able to receive my sister. I could leave knowing that she was receiving the best care possible, and with a poignant reminder that everything that happens to us has moment, mystery and purpose.

If the Church and society are called to be more than we presently are, that can only happen if each one of us accepts his or her vocation to be a “light to the nations.” What is the “something more” to which God is calling you? calling our parish? How will you bring more fully to this world and to this community the grace and peace that you have received from God in Christ Jesus? Only you can answer that question. Only you can remove any layers of skin that cover your soul so you can see the light and hear that “call within a call” and live your faith more abundantly. Blessed John Henry Newman, beatified a few years ago by the Church, found his vocation through many twists and turns in his own life. At long last he came to this realization:

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God has created me to do him some definite service. God has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. God has not created me for nothing. I shall do good. I shall do his work.
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Let’s pray for an increase of vocations to the priesthood and to ministry in the Church... and then, pray for the boldness of spirit and grandeur of vision that opens you to the “something more” that God has in store for each of you – to the “call within your call!”

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