

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, May 19th 2015

“I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do.”

Jesus says these words shortly before He was betrayed by Judas and arrested by the guards. He is separating His earthly calling from His forthcoming return to God following His resurrection and ascension. He knows the impact He has had on the disciples, on US vicariously, and He asks God to protect we who remain in the world (especially from the “evil one” as a subsequent verse states).

Paul is talking about being martyred, and Jesus is talking of separating Himself from worldly concerns to eternal existence. Their time is short, and they realize it. Both are sending almost last messages to their listeners. So what should we make of these messages?

What is the work that God has given me? Given you? Is this the right career, the right person to be with, the right place to live? How do I/you know if this work right now is the work God intends? How do I balance all the competing voices clamoring for me at this point in time and know which is the one that God is asking me to answer? How do I/we know when we have accomplished our life work? Tough questions, not with great or easily confirmed answers. But there is some guidance for us.

From all accounts the early followers of Christ must have felt they were accomplishing the work they were given. They formed communities that united around the most vulnerable among them, they prayed and fasted and worked for each other, they lived simple, non-materialistic lives. They must have died convinced they had accomplished the work they were given. Today we see Jesuits and vowed religious and others who live committed lives that seem focused on a higher calling than to themselves. They lead simpler, non-materialistic lives of service to others. When I have been privileged to be with them as their deaths approached, I think they were confident they had accomplished the work God had called them to do.

So, as I reflect on this work that I think I have been given, perhaps the answer is that my work is not only the what I do but the how I do it. It is a combination of attitude and a punch list of specific tasks and accomplishments. How do I live the life I have been given? What impact do I have on the people and property and other living things I encounter? How do I share what I have been given to benefit the greater good rather than merely myself? How selfless am I when I interact with people? What do I think of and who do I see when I think of poverty, or chemical dependency, or homelessness, or domestic violence, or sexual assault?

Jesus reminded us in several parables (e.g., the poor woman giving pennies, the Pharisee praying loudly in the synagogue) of the need to have good attitudes with good actions. In our continuing quest to fully understand God’s personal call to each of us to engage in our unique life work, it seems like we can greatly benefit from being aware of our attitudes as we live each day and each moment. If we are successful in being aware of how we live our lives as we live our lives, we too should be able to say to God “I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work you gave me to do.”

And so my prayer today is for the grace of awareness of my attitude in the moment, and the gift of discernment of God’s call to me.

Tom Purcell -Creighton University Accounting Department