

BIBLE READINGS: Acts 1:6-14 John 17:1-11

SERMON

Here in John 17 we read of the final scene of Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples. Even though there were untold thousands who had not yet been healed at the end of Jesus' ministry, Jesus prayed to God, "Father . . . I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:1, 4). The Greek word that John uses here for "finish" or "complete," comes from the Greek word, *telos*. *Telos* has to do with purpose. Jesus was praying in effect, "Father, I have fulfilled the purpose for which you sent me."

How on earth could Jesus say he had "finished" the work his heavenly father had given him to do? We tend to view "finishing" something as a static target whereas in the biblical sense it has to do with a dynamic walking with God, being present where God is among the loveless, the poor, and the hurting. God's purpose, *telos*, is the purpose for which God created us - to love God, others, ourselves, and all creation - to love "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine" (Matt. 25:40).

As Christians we affirm that Jesus was fully God, but yet also fully human. As fully human, he had limitations of time and energy just like we do. Jesus did not heal, visit, or teach everyone. In the midst of never-ending demands, his life was directed by his mission from God, not the urgent needs of the moment. His divine calling was not to work twenty-four hours a day, but to do the will of God. There was clearly an unending amount of work for him to do - always more people to heal, more people to save. But yet at the end of his life he prayed that he had fulfilled the work God gave him to do.

That Jesus did not endlessly make himself available to meet the needs of others is important for us in our own boundaries, rest, and renewal. This is a crucial consideration for those of us who feel indispensable in the face of the never-ending needs we encounter in our lives, whether at home, work, or church. If Jesus was fully God and fully human and yet needed to retreat from the overwhelming demands of life to rest and renew, how can we do any less? Jesus understood what we too often forget: bodies cannot be everywhere or do everything. Bodies need rest, food, water, and companionship. As a result, we will need to respect our God-given bodies/limits and those of others.

Like Jesus, God has not called us to meet the endless needs of the world, but to do the will of the one who has sent us into the world in our body, in our family, with our personality, and with our energy level. We need to accept our limitations and acknowledge when we have done what we can. That Jesus did not heal or minister to everyone can help free us from much of the false guilt we may feel about being all things to all people at all times. When we have done what we can, we can trust God and then let go of the rest.

There will always be more work than can be finished in one day, whether at home, work, or the church. For this reason it's important for us to come to a point at the end of each day where we can say to ourselves: "I've finished a fair day's work. I've helped everyone I can. I've loved with my whole heart. Now I am going to leave the rest for tomorrow and to God." Like Jesus, we can lie down and rest at night, confident that God continues to save, heal, and work while our bodies and minds are refreshed by the gift of sleep.

Here is a story about completing the work God has given us to do. It comes from the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. In 1968 the last race was the marathon. As the last runners were crossing the finishing line, there was word that one more runner was still struggling to finish. No one left the stadium. John-Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania had been injured during the race, but he continued to run in spite of incredible pain. He hobbled the last lap around

the stadium and stumbled across the finish line. The stadium went berserk and applauded him as if he had won. He was later asked, "Why didn't you quit?" He answered, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6oW9uYtJnA>

Was he a failure because he was injured and finished last?! Absolutely not. He succeeded because he did not give up. He was faithful to his mission - to run his race well, whether or not he won a medal or was able to stand on the Olympic podium. The way John-Stephen Akhwari ran the marathon in the 1968 Olympics in spite of excruciating pain is a wonderful example for how we are to run the race God has set before us. God does not call us to win, but to remain faithful in our loving in the midst of the challenges and setbacks of life.

We see this same sense of mission in the Apostle Paul. In Acts 20:24 Paul uses a form of *telos* that again has to do with our goal - God's calling for us, the direction in which we're following Jesus: "I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." If we listen carefully, there are echoes of Jesus' own words in Paul's farewell.

God asked Moses: "What's in your hand?" Only an ordinary staff - nothing that was going to change the world or lead a nation. Yet that staff reminded Moses that God had uniquely called and gifted him to carry out God's calling and purpose.

Your hand and fingerprints are unique. They are unlike that of anyone else in the world. In the same way God has uniquely gifted you like no other person in the world to carry out God's purposes. You don't need to try to be like me and I don't need to try to be like you. I can't wear your armor and you can't wear mine any more than David was able to wear Saul's armour (1 Samuel 17:38-40).

We serve God with what's in our hand however unimpressive it may seem. Moses had a staff. David had five smooth stones and refused to wear Saul's ill-fitting armour. David's five little rocks were not very impressive, but that's all it took - that which was right in front of David was all he needed to slay his giant. What about you and me? What's right in front of you that you may have overlooked so far? What's in your hand?

St. Teresa of Avila can help us to understand that our calling is not necessarily to do big and impressive things. She says in her book, *The Interior Castle*: "the Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it." When we view life through the lens of love, the pressure for us to make things happen on our own is removed. We are liberated to serve in whatever capacity God leads us. It may be in a small or insignificant way. Or, it may be in a visible and highly influential position. The most important thing in fulfilling God's purpose in our lives is love, whatever shape it may take.

When we follow the lead of Jesus and Paul, we can rest assured that when we have loved and run our race faithfully, we, too, can pray: "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do."

A question or two:

What has God uniquely called me to do during 'such a time as this' (Esther 4:14, NIV)?

What is the purpose of our church in this particular place and time?

How do we faithfully reflect the love of Christ during the time of Covid-19 in our churches, families, schools, and jobs?

Acknowledgement: Joe Gorman