

A number of years ago in a different church in a different place, I visited a parishioner who had recently been moved to a nursing home. She was coming to the end of a medical condition that she had lived with for close to 20 years – actually the result of successful treatment of a different and life-threatening condition.

She had done well and lived most of those years active and able to do the things she had always done. But the inevitable always happens eventually, and she was coming to the end of her journey as we all will. She was dying. Her doctors knew it, her family knew it, and she knew it.

She had been what we call in church circles a “Martha-type,” as in a comparison between the Sisters Mary and Martha in the New Testament – friends of Jesus. Mary was contemplative and prayerful; Martha’s faith was expressed in action, often the action of serving others.

This parishioner of mine was a doer. She was a mother hen who liked to fuss over others, both family and friends. Reflection wasn’t her thing. Just give her a job and then get out of the way. If she wasn’t a founding member of that church, she was close to it. It was important to her, a central part of her life. She had served on every committee except the vestry. She didn’t want leadership, she wanted a job. She had been on the Altar Guild forever. It was ideal for her – a demanding job with no visibility and little recognition.

One day when I went to see her she was depressed more than usual. Almost immediately, before I could say anything, she told me that she was ready to throw the towel in. Those were her words. I still remember the face with which she said them. I told her that I understood that, but unfortunately it wasn’t a decision that was hers to make. At least not all by herself; that maybe God wasn’t through with her yet.

She said with a mixture of frustration and depression, “I am serving no useful purpose. I can’t do anything but lie here. I’m not making any difference.” I don’t remember verbatim what I said, but it went something like this:

“You don’t know how God uses you. You don’t know the effect or the impact that you have on other lives. God doesn’t measure importance by the same standards that you and I use. The notion that one purpose is grand and another minor is only through the arrogance of the world.

It may be that the purpose you serve is to give me someone to visit. It may be that the grace we discover in praying together – or at least the potential for that grace – is one of God’s grandest purposes. It may be that your purpose is the purpose of love.”

I don’t know if that helped her or not. Like I said, she wasn’t a particularly reflective person. It wasn’t the kind of thing she would talk about. But it helped me.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

It is the spiritual language of call, the language of vocation. It is about purpose, not biology. There is something that God has in mind for me and for you. It isn't so mysterious, so hard to find. It is given to us. It is but for us to do it, to live it.

Do not say, “I am only a boy or only a girl; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you...Now I have put my words in your mouth.”

As many, maybe most, of you know I have been on sabbatical for the last four and a half months. I left after services on Easter Day, and this is my first Sunday back. It has been a full and rich time and I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity. I am – as I am repeatedly – humbled by the generosity of this Cathedral.

We did some travel, spending a week in Tokyo with oldest son, Wes, and his family who live there. I spent eight days in Germany building up to the Passion Play in Oberammergau. I spent about four hours at what remains of the concentration camp outside of Dachau. I am still sorting that experience out, and I expect you will hear more about it. It was for me deeply moving and deeply troubling.

I did some writing and produced a lengthy paper entitled: “Same-Sex Marriage: a Pastoral Perspective.” I did it for my own sake really, but it is posted on the website or soon will be – if you want to take a look at it.

Elizabeth and I went to Church somewhere essentially every Sunday in various places in three countries – all Episcopal Churches. We went to grand places, and we went to place where a handful of people gathered to celebrate the presence of the risen Christ in their lives. And I can say with great conviction that we are glad to be home. There is no place like this place.

It was also a time of prayer and reflection for me. I spent long periods of time doing little other than reading and thinking. You can't do that much down time without thinking about the purpose you serve in life – at least, I can't.

I came to the realization that my sense of purpose – my vocation if you will – is tied up with Christ Church Cathedral. For more than 170 years, this has been a place of mission with a vocation to serve the world beyond it in ways both large and small. More often than not that mission has been expressed by a smile or an outstretched hand with open arms more than with some great accomplishment. It is, and always has been, a mission of love. It is my purpose. It is what I believe God wants from me and for me. It is tied up with this place because this is where I happen to be.

My day to day life is more wrapped up in the Cathedral than yours is perhaps. Some wise person once said that the only person who should be spending a whole lot of time at the church is the priest. Your vocation is different from mine. You live out your baptism in different places than I do. It is my day job.

But I believe this is a place of purpose for you we well. It holds the potential of purpose. It is a place of focus on mission, a place to bring oneself back to an awareness of having a vocation to serve the world in God's name. It is a place of prayer. It is a place to encounter the risen Christ with the question: "What would you have me do?" It is a place to be sent from. It is a place to know the love of God for the purpose of sharing that love. It is a place to be forgiven and to start over one more time.

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy [or a girl or whatever other frailty you may imagine gets in the way. Do not say, 'My faith is too little. I only come every once in while]' for you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you."

You have a purpose on this earth. It is a grand purpose, indeed.

Amen.

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Dean