Your One Wild and Precious Life

Stephen Van Kuiken
Lake Street Church
Evanston, IL
May 15, 2016

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.
—Isaac Watts

Invitation to Worship: from “The Summer Day,” by Mary Oliver
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Ancient Witness: Mark 1:16-20

There’s a documentary film that came out a few years ago by Tom Shadyac, a director who made several other successful Hollywood movies such as “Ave Ventura” and “Bruce Almighty.” Shadyac was a huge success by all the typical standards. He had several mansions and expensive cars. He would travel using a private jet.

But then something happened. He was riding a mountain bike along a trail and took a nasty fall, severely fracturing his arm and suffering a bad concussion. His condition deteriorated into a debilitating syndrome often associated with people who have had frequent and serious concussions. He had terrible headaches, dizziness, confusion, memory loss and insomnia. He was totally incapacitated. The days turned into weeks, the weeks into months. And he began to suffer clinical depression, also a symptom of this syndrome.

After many months his condition finally began to improve, and he was eventually able to start working again. Only he wanted to do something different. He decided to do a film unlike his previous lighthearted comedies. He interviewed people from various disciplines—history, science, religion—and asked them two questions: “What is wrong with the world? What can we do to fix it?”

Shadyac had decided to use his life, his resources, has talents to pursue meaning and purpose in his life. And he shared his own personal quest to help others in their pursuit for deeper meaning and purpose, too. It’s an amazing story, and the film, “I Am,” is a very worthwhile and even inspiring experience.

The film concludes that while happiness depends upon a certain minimal level of comfort and health, consumption and the accumulation of wealth actually distracts us from true happiness.
Overconsumption has become a kind of mass cultural insanity that distorts what it means to be truly human. And as human beings, we have been created and have evolved into beings that are compassionate and cooperative at our core. It’s part of our DNA. Helping others is essential to our true happiness.

It took Shadyac going to the brink of death to discover this, and he seems to be trying to live it out. He sold his mansions and established homeless shelters and foundations. He bought a small modest house and bikes everywhere he goes. His discovery was that he had been part of the problem, but he was also part of the solution. And he chose to change his life’s work.

His answer to the poet had changed:

\[
\text{Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?}
\]

This is a basic religious question, isn’t it? No matter where we are on this life’s journey, we can ask ourselves this question.

My mother died when she was 56 and my father when he was 70. One can never know, but based on genetics I figure that I have maybe 10 to 12 more years. How do I want to live these years? The rest of this miracle I call my life? What do I plan to do with this remainder of my one wild precious life?

The prophet, Micah, framed it differently:

\[
\text{What does God require of you, O Mortal?}
\]

\[
\text{Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. (6:8)}
\]

We understand that we are called to do justice, to be a transforming presence in the world. We know the difference between justice and charity, that justice is about addressing the root causes of suffering and inequality in our society. It is about the responsibility of the whole nation, the entire citizenry. As a justice-seeking community, we advocate for those who are marginalized—those who are poor, homeless, exploited and excluded because of sexual orientation, race, or gender.

We also understand that we are called to love kindness, that as a congregation we are supportive, respectful, caring and nurturing toward each other. We strive to provide an inclusive and accepting environment for all people to seek the divine, surrounding one another with kindness and grace. We examine our own motives and nurture a compassion in our hearts that does not make nice with mean, destructive forces in our lives.

And we understand that we are called to walk humbly with God, that none of us has “arrived,” none of us has all the answers. God has new things to say to us.

But today I want to talk of what underlies these basic aspects of what it means to be a community of faith. And that is the word, “require.” What does God require.

It may strike us as odd or even offensive that God has requirements of us. After all, God accepts and loves all people deeply and unconditionally. And regrettably, this love has often been presented as conditional and contingent upon some set of requirements. So we might, quite rightly, bristle at the mention of the word.
But to say that God requires something simply means that God does not leave us alone. God is never finished with us. God calls us forward to greater commitment, awareness and maturity. God continually beckons us to grow and become. God urges us to deeper lives of faith, risk and adventure.

And so a faith community is marked by justice, kindness, humility and commitment. It is a place where each individual is encouraged and challenged to deepen their commitment to the God of love and justice, and to live this out in real and tangible ways.

As a congregation we welcome persons to this place no matter where they are on their journey of faith. We are happy with any friendly association with us, no matter how small. We accept and value all these friendly connections. We are accepted as we are, and yet this is also a place to change, to grow, to evolve and to deepen one’s commitment.

I know, talking about requirements and commitment is hard for us liberals, God love us. Sometimes we act like it’s a four-letter word. But the unconditional love of God is not inconsistent with the absolute demands of God, although sometimes it feels that we must choose between the two.

There is an obvious tension here that is captured by that progressive, activist, Southern Baptist preacher, Will Campbell, who said, “I don’t want to be a member of a congregation that will accept me just the way that I am.”

In the jarring words of Jesus, we are called to strive toward total commitment and a radical and complete change to participate in the reign of God. So this morning, I focus on the radical call to change, to commitment, to letting oneself go.

There’s a Hindu story about how in India, hunters had a proven way of catching monkeys. A half coconut would be hollowed out and a hole made that was only large enough to let a monkey’s open hand pass through. The coconut was then pinned to the ground and tempting food placed beneath. A monkey would approach, intent on getting hold of the food beneath the coconut but, alas, as soon as it grasped the food in its fist, it found itself unable to pull its hand and the food out of the coconut. Imprisoned it would stay, caught by its own unwillingness to open its fist.

When we are able to open our fists, to let go of our smaller desires, then we are able to find freedom and enter the realm of God. We need to be willing to let go of our attachments and goodies to find our commitment. I must say that this is not necessarily a one-time, huge thing; it is continual, unquenchable. But this is a radical thing, this call of God.

We seldom hear laypersons talk about their calls anymore. And I don’t know what that means. Ministers are about the only ones who use the term these days. When someone enters the ministry, they do so because they believe that they were called by God. And when a minister is hired by a church to be their pastor, we say that God speaks through the church to that minister. So a call is more than just a church offering a job to a woman or a man, it is the voice of God speaking to that person’s soul.

But the word, “call,” is for all people, not just the professional clergy. If we believe in the priesthood of all believers, then it follows that each one of us has been called by God to be a disciple. All Christians have a call.
And so, there is an important distinction we need to make: the difference between a career and a calling. Sometimes the calling is related to the career. I count myself fortunate that my call and my career are closely related. Sometimes it is more difficult to find the connection. Sometimes, like Paul, who was a tentmaker, the career merely enables us to pay the rent and fulfill our calling in the rest of our time. One difference between a career and a calling is that a calling involves the whole person; it is larger. It has to do with every waking breath, the essence, the passion of a person, what we do in our families, in our free time. A career is only a small part of that larger calling.

William Sloane Coffin pointed out another important distinction:

*A career seeks to be successful, a calling to be valuable. A career tries to make money, a calling tries to make a difference. A calling seeks the common good, not private gain.*

Each of us has a calling to fulfill our humanity which goes far beyond a job or career. God calls each of us, in our own unique way, to contribute to the common good. This morning I want to look at the characteristics of a call. What is it? How do I know what mine is?

Let’s look at this story in Mark when the first four disciples are called by Jesus. As we read our story, Jesus is casually strolling along the Sea of Galilee, just kind of meandering down the shoreline. And he sees Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the sea, just like they had done hundreds of times before. If we read into the story, the character is that of just an ordinary day—business as usual—along the Sea of Galilee. And going on a little further—again the impression is that these were informal meetings of chance, almost as if we were to meet each other in the park or bump into one another at the supermarket—going a little further down the coast Jesus meets James and John, who were fixing their nets as they had done time after time. This was their trade, and this day was the same as any other. How would have they known? How could have they known that his day was to be different?

This often is how our call comes to us. In faith, we are called out of our routines. It disrupts our lives. Think about what you do almost every day; think of your routine. It is when we are doing our average, run-of-the-mill activities that the call may come, filtering up through our subconscious.

Another characteristic of a call is that it comes with urgency, like hearing voices. In fact, one person that I talked with who had a schizophrenic episode described it as having a feeling of *awful urgency*. And this person said that for him, it was not exactly like hearing a voice, but it was like a message was coming through to his mind with such importance and magnitude, that it might as well have been a voice. The difference being that the message is a good message—it is one of love and not fear, bring with its urgency a sense of peace and contentment, not a feeling of paranoia and panic. It is the difference between being overwhelmed by a great light instead of a great darkness.

Let me warn you, however. Sometimes it looks crazy when we see the results. Look at the four—Simon, Andrew, James and John. They had good jobs, good livelihoods. We do not have many details in our story, but maybe some of them had families and children to feed and support. And along comes this stranger, and they leave their jobs and follow him! Whoa! Hold on a minute, guys. Are you sure you know what you are doing? How about your careers? The business? How are you going to live? One can imagine that more than a few eyebrows were raised when they left all that they had worked for to go follow this man, Jesus. John and James
left their father and the family business with just the hired help. *They just dropped their nets.* They must have been out of their minds!

Not many of us respond to this radical call the way we could. I know I don’t. Most of us, no, just about all of us, suppress this call when we get it, in the name of “sanity” or “common sense.” Many times the urgency frightens us, so we turn a deaf ear to it. It’s only natural. But there are some who, for whatever reason, open themselves completely to the call of the Holy One. And they become enveloped—embraced—by it.

Don’t you doubt for a minute that mothers and fathers, with every good intention, tried to talk some sense into them. People like Simon, Andrew, James and John. They just dropped their nets and went.

Each of us has a calling to fulfill our humanity that goes beyond a job or career, beyond involvement in a church. It involves every aspect of who we are—our entire “wild and precious life.”

The Holy One calls us to lives of radical contentment and gratitude, to being fully present to one another, to compassion. God calls each of us, in our own unique way, to contribute to the common good. God calls us to deeper and deeper levels of commitment. God, though Jesus, calls us to “drop our nets.” Continually. Over and over, again.

**Call to Commitment:** written by the Rev. Clinton Marsh (1916-2002), Peace Activist and former Moderator of the United Presbyterian Church (USA)

*And now, I am supposed to say to you, "Go in peace." But how can I say, "Go in peace," when you are going out into a world where you are insecure, whether at home or on your neighborhood street?  
-- Out into a world where race is set against race?  
-- Out into a world where people are hungry and homeless, while their governments squander billions of dollars on instruments of destruction that they dare not use?  
--- Out into a world where every night millions of mothers watch their children sink into a hungry slumber, only to awaken (if they awaken) to another hungry tomorrow?  
With a world like that out there, how can I say to you, "Go in peace?"

But I dare to say, "Go in peace," because Jesus says "I give you my peace."

But - remember - he who says, "I give you my peace” also says, "If you would be my disciple and [thereby] have my peace, take up your cross and follow me!"

So I dare to say, "Go in peace!" -- if you dare!*