

It had been years since Joe had gone to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But one day he decided he was going to do it – and walked into a confessional. He was shocked to see how much things had changed. On one wall there was a fully equipped bar – bourbon, scotch, vodka – even a tap with Guinness! There was also a dazzling array of the finest Cuban cigars.

When the pastor came in, Joe began: “Bless me Father – it’s been a very long time since my last confession – but I must first say that the confessional is much more inviting these days.”

The priest said – “You’re on my side!”

The great anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked what she regarded as the earliest sign of civilization. Was it an axe-blade, an arrowhead, a fishhook, or something more sophisticated, such as a musical instrument or a ceramic bowl?

Her answer surprised her questioner: “A healed human femur.” Not something MADE by a human, but something HUMAN; not an artifact, but a part of someone who once lived and walked this earth, who was hurt, but healed.

Doctor Mead explained that where the law of the survival of the fittest reigns, a broken leg means certain death – when you cannot make it on your own, you’re doomed. But a healed leg-bone is physical evidence that SOMEONE CARED. Someone gathered food for that injured person until their leg was healed; someone cared for them until they could once again care for themselves. The first sign of civilization was compassion. (CONNECTIONS, Jan 24, 2010, p. 3)

It is also the first sign of Christianity, according to the opening sermon of Jesus in the gospel of Luke.

First, a brief overview of Luke, very good theologically, but with a touch of whimsy and poetry, by Frederick Buechner:

Of the 4 evangelists, Luke wrote the best Greek and, unlike the other three, was almost certainly a Greek-speaking Gentile himself who put his gospel together for Gentile audience, translating Jewish names and explaining Jewish customs when he thought they wouldn’t be understood if he didn’t. In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul refers to somebody as ‘Luke the beloved physician,’ and without stretching things too far, we could point to 3 blocks of material in Luke’s gospel, not contained in the others, which might suggest that he was the same man.

First of all, there’s the parable of the Prodigal Son, the account of the whore who washed Jesus’ feet and dried them with her hair, and the scrap of conversation Jesus had with one of the 2 crooks who was crucified with Him.

Listen to how Buechner describes these 3 scenes: “Smelling of pig and cheap gin, the prodigal son comes home bleary-eyed and dead broke, but his father’s so glad to see him anyway that he almost falls on his face. Jesus tells Simon the blue-nosed Pharisee that the whore’s sins are forgiven her because even painted up like a cigar-store Indian and smelling like the perfume counter at the Five and DIME, she’s got more in of what the gospel of love is all about than the whole Ladies’ Missionary Society laid end to end. The thief Jesus talked to on the cross may have been a purse-snatcher and second-story man from way back, but when he asked Jesus to remember him when he made it to where he was going, Jesus told him He’d make sure they got

“This is not claimed as original material; it is the fruit of years of reading and research, collated by volunteers, but not always correctly footnoted, or not footnoted at all. It was created solely for the purpose of an oral proclamation in the context of the liturgy of the church. Every effort has been made to provide the necessary attribution to the authors of the sources.”

rooms on the same floor. Different as they all are in some ways, it's not hard to see that they all make the same general point, which is that though He could give them Hell when He felt like it, Jesus had such a soft spot in His heart for the scum of the earth that you would have almost thought He considered them the salt of the earth the way He sometimes treated them." I love the way Buechner writes!

Second, Luke is the one who goes out of his way to make it clear how big Jesus was on praying. He prayed when He was baptized and after He healed the leper and the night before He called the 12 disciples, and Luke was the only one to mention these together with a few others like them and was the only one to say that the last words Jesus ever spoke were the prayer, 'Father, into your hand I commend my spirit.' It's also thanks to Luke that there's a record of the jokes Jesus told about the man who kept knocking at his friend's door till he finally got out of bed to open it and the widow who kept bugging the crooked judge till he finally heard her case just to get a little peace, the point of both of which seems to be that if you don't think God has heard you the first time, don't give up till you're hoarse. Luke wanted that to be remembered too.

Third and last, Luke makes sure that nobody misses the point that Jesus was always stewing about the needs of poor people. He is the one who tells us that when Jesus preached at Nazareth, His text was "He has appointed me to preach good news to the poor" from Isaiah (Lk 4:18), and whereas Matthew says that the first beatitude was "Blessed are the poor in spirit," according to Luke it was just plain "Blessed are the poor" period (Lk 6:20). He also recorded some parables like the one about the rich man and the beggar which come right out and say that if the haves don't do their share to help the have-nots, they better watch out, and he's the only one to quote the song Mary sang which includes the words "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away." (Lk 1:53)

To put it in a nutshell, by playing all these things up, Luke shows he was a man who believed that you shouldn't let the fact that a person is jail-bait keep you from treating him like a human being, and that if you pray hard enough, there's no telling what may happen, and that if you think you've got Heaven made but don't let it worry you that there are children across the tracks who are half starving to death, then you're kidding yourself. These characteristics may not prove that he was a doctor, like the Luke in Paul's letter, but if he wasn't, it was a serious loss to the medical profession. (all of this adapted from Buechner, PECULIAR TREASURES, p. 93-95)

So that was a brief overview of what is to come in this year in the gospel of Luke. Second, a word about how Jesus came to know that His was a life of compassion, living out His identity as the Beloved Son of God, and how this might impact our own lives.

Jesus had had a religious experience when He was baptized. There were historical symbolisms: the heavens split, the dove descended and a voice spoke: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." However, it is only after the religious experience ends and consciousness shifts back to everyday life that we notice the experience did NOT come with a set of instructions. In the case of Jesus, the Spirit remained with Him, but it needed to lead Him into other experiences to complement His revelation that came while He was at prayer. He was led into the desert to be tempted. And in those temptations, which we will hear about on the first Sunday of Lent, Jesus was able to clarify His mission. After the temptations, He went home, where we find Him in today's gospel, in His hometown synagogue. Temptations and homecoming were needed to deepen His knowledge of the ripped heavens, the dove, and the voice.

This is a classic pattern of how religious experiences unfold. They begin with a sudden realization that we are grounded in God. Aware that this grounding is unconditional, we understand it as love. But then we have to return to the rough-and-tumble of our daily lives, and we are not sure how to translate what we

experienced into our conflicted minds and our concrete decision-making processes. But this becomes the task that often consumes the most important part of our life.

The experience makes us realize that we have a deep connection with God. This awareness may be triggered by a moment of profound beauty in nature, by the death of a parent, the birth of a child, the love of a spouse or dear friend, a moment of scientific or educational discovery, compassionate action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. The possibilities are endless. But in and through the event or activity, God's love breaks into our consciousness and grasps us, shakes us into a new understanding.

But this depth awareness is for but a moment. It slips away as fast as it had arrived. We live most of our time outside such moments. We have work, families, money issues, child-rearing, daily struggles. How do we let the momentary and fleeting experience unfold in our lives? How will we test out its meaning? How do we know it was real – or simply a bad case of indigestion? We can consult the Scriptures and our tradition, specifically the lives of the saints. If we do this, chances are the experience will be deepened and continue to grow in significance. The meaning and implications of the experience will be revealed. God wants this to happen, but it requires our cooperation, just as Jesus had to cooperate.

Although this way of deepening spiritual knowledge is sometimes the way God speaks to us, there is another way, a backward way, so to speak. The classic way begins with a God experience and gradually understands what the experience means for our ongoing everyday life. The movement is from the sacred to the secular.

The reverse way begins with the here and now, and only gradually realizes that our lives are grounded and inspired by God. The movement is from the secular to the sacred. We suddenly realize that God was directing our lives even when we often didn't even realize it. We can see this most easily when we look back at a time when we prayed fervently for something and it WASN'T granted – and we have now come to understand how good it is that our prayer was NOT answered the way we had asked.

Let me see if I can make this more concrete. Michael Novak has written about this deepening spiritual knowledge and in something that most people are involved in – business in some way or another. He wants to interpret business as a noble calling. He admits that, for the most part, business people do not see themselves in terms of responding to a divine call. He writes:

"I know from talking to and corresponding with business people that many have never been asked whether they regard what they do as a calling. They don't think about themselves that way. That has not been the language of business schools, the economics textbooks, or the secularized speech of our time....But most of them, they say, do start mulling the idea of calling once it is raised. Some confess that they could think of what they do as a calling, even if they have not. That would not be much of a reach from what they have already been doing. It's just one of those things that, so far, few people say." (BUSINESS AS A CALLING: WORK AND THE EXAMINED LIFE, p. 36). This is a crucial start to deepening spiritual knowledge: an openness to a possibility not previously considered and willing to 'start mulling the idea.'

This 'mulling the idea' does not immediately lead to the awareness of an eternal grounding for business. What it may lead to is recognizing values that transcend profits. We all know that the typical caricature of business as a ruthless bottom-line enterprise is far too lop-sided to account for all the good that is going on in the lives of so many of the business men and women that you and I know and love. People engage in their work because they have the gifts and talents for it and because it contributes in some way to the common good. And once they open themselves to the possibility that they are struggling with deep drives

for fulfillment and contribution, further reflection is inevitable. I know that many of you have told me that you love your work and are very aware that you make an important contribution to the world because of what you do.

Novak unravels the fulfillment and contribution drives. He suggests that people's work can give them a deep sense of fulfillment. Again, he writes: "But fulfillment of what? Not exactly a standing order that we place ourselves. We didn't give ourselves the personality, talents, or longings we were born with. When we fulfill these – these gifts from beyond ourselves – it is like fulfilling something we were meant to do. It is a sense of having uncovered our personal destiny, a sense of having been able to contribute something worthwhile to the common public life, something that would not have been there without us – and, more than that, something we were good at and enjoyed. (Ibid., p. 18). Sounds like a vocation to me! And everybody has one. It is just a matter of discovering it—and then allowing God to further unfold it.

Whether we discover it first with an experience of something beyond ourselves, something of God – or discover it in our day to day work, it makes no difference. What matters is that we use our gifts with the same compassion as Jesus used His, and that, we like Him, fulfill God's plan and purpose in our lives. We heal femurs – and souls – and our world – by using the gifts God gave us. This is Jesus' work, God's work, and ours as well. And TODAY, once again, this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing. Amen. (this last section adapted from Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, Cycle C, p. 29-31)