



Sermon of August 15, 1999



Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder

First United Methodist Church of San Diego

(619) 297-4366

Fax (619) 297-2933

"CRYSTAL BALLS"

Genesis 1:27-3

Luke 4:1-8

The little girl listened closely as the Sunday School teacher read the Bible. "May I ask a question?" she asked. "Sure. Go ahead. Ask your question," replied the teacher. "Well, the Bible says that the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea.. the children of Israel built the temple.. the children of Israel did this and the children of Israel did that. Didn't the grownups ever do anything?"

The reality is that we adults spend a great deal of our time "doing" things. When the little girl in our story gets older, she will learn the hard reality that we all have to work for a living. She will be asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" By the time the girl is in high school, people will be asking her, "What are you going to do?" "Are you going to college?" If the girl goes to college, she will soon be asked, "What are you going to major in?" The sad reality is that she will most likely avoid any class not directly related to the pursuit of a career. Often she will not get the opportunity to take a whole variety of classes in liberal arts and the humanities before she is forced to choose a major and a career path. And probably, the young woman has not had the chance to really reflect on her career choice. When the woman is older and in a new social situation, she will most likely be asked, "What do you do?" And when she is retired from the work world, she will be asked, "What kind of work did you do?" We are identified, by ourselves and by others, with our life's work.. with what we DO.

Secular society has a pragmatic approach to work. There are books, seminars and career

counselors who help us find the so-called perfect career or the good job. Research is done on where the jobs will be in the future, what jobs will be in demand and provide the higher salaries. While there is some basis in statistics and demographics for such predictions, the future is open and changing with such rapidity that much of this analysis is not much better than looking into a crystal ball trying to predict possibilities that most of us cannot even imagine.

As we approach the millennium, we will continue to be bombarded by all kinds of predictions. But no matter what method is used, by putting one's faith in some system or person, we are really taking away a deep faith or trust in our own ability to make the choices that are best for us as opportunities present themselves.

But there is another way. And Jesus models that way for us. For in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus makes a career change. At age thirty, Jesus must have had a pretty good start at a successful carpentry career, good union benefits, the promise of a secure living, even a little extra to put away into 401(k's) to plan for retirement. And yet he quits his job. It wasn't easy to give up all that security. This morning's Gospel lesson reveals the all too human side of Jesus as he struggles with what this career change will mean. He goes off into the wilderness for forty days and is tempted by the devil. The very first temptation is to turn a stone into bread to which Jesus answers, "One does not live by bread alone." There goes all that financial security out the window. He even turns down the opportunity to build an empire or pull off a spectacular PR campaign for the good of the kingdom. Why does Jesus reject these offers?

You see the Gospel approaches life work much differently. The Gospel keeps allowing us to ask ourselves, "What do I believe God wants me to do?" This question keeps popping up throughout our lives, and it is not an easy question to answer. What this question is really dealing with is integrating our spirituality and our work life.. who we are and what we do. And it is a question that is just as important for those who are retired. In fact, those who no longer have to work to earn money may discover a whole vista of new opportunities when they ask themselves, "What does God want me to do."

We spend so much time doing things, either for pay, as a volunteer or out of the necessity of our circumstances. We often lose energy at work because we give to someone or something outside ourselves. One definition of energy is the ability to do work. Most work is an outward expression of energy. Most of us work for someone else, and the pressure and stress of having to meet goals and expectations depletes us of energy.

But work need not be that way. Every life also needs the possibility of inner expression, growth and creativity. A spirituality of work allows for both the inner and external energy to grow and flourish. Any choices we make about our life's work need to engage a process of reflection and discernment. The focus needs to be on that process rather than the product.

This requires a re-visioning of the way we think about work and the way we do work. Our goal is not just a career, but a balance in life in which our work is one aspect of who we are. Those persons most satisfied in their jobs experience a world of work that reflects their values, priorities, and a deeper sense of who they are. Discovering one's vocation emerges out of a process of integrating rather than separating our work life from the rest of our life.

I identify with Jesus' mid-life career change. I was quite happy for fifteen years as a Kindergarten teacher. But something kept pulling at me. It wasn't until I took three years off after the birth of our son, Matthew, that I finally had the time to reflect on my career choice. I had been on automatic pilot, following a logical path which led to a rewarding career as a teacher. But something was missing, and I was feeling more and more empty inside. It was during those three years that God called me in a new direction which made no sense. My own dessert experience that resulted from that call to a radical and illogical career change, would lead me to leave the security of my teaching job and commute to seminary for four years to receive the education necessary for entering the ministry.

Recently I received a brochure advertising a Vision Quest. The Vision Quest has traditionally been one of the puberty rites among Native American boys. The adolescent boys would be taken out into a scary place, often in the forest, and left for four or five days with nothing but a small fire to keep the animals away. The idea was that everyone has some degree of internal vision. Visionary experiences were not solely the realm of the tribal shamans.

There is no way of evoking a vision. There is no way of using a crystal ball to predict that a vision will come, much less what form it will take. But there is a strong belief that if left alone to listen to the voice within, a vision would come which would announce what the boy's career choice was to be, such as a great warrior, a chieftain or a shaman. The boy would be told by the vision what kind of fetish or medicine bag to make as a reminder of his own vision and his character. He brought this wisdom gained during the Vision Quest back into the village...into the community.

Often, like in the Biblical stories, there was a name change to reflect his new found identity. Later, if the young man no longer felt his vision, he was free to go out and have another Vision Quest to determine who he had become. I've often thought a Vision Quest would be just as important as we approach retirement as it is when we are first discovering who we are. Reflection on one's life experiences may result in being called to follow an entirely new path.

I like to think that Jesus was on a Vision Quest of sorts during those days in the desert. He had the time and opportunity to sort out what would bring wholeness and balance to his life and how he could best answer the question for himself, "What do I believe God wants me to do?" "What am I being called to do?" We usually think of the tasks we do every day as work. I suggest we think of all we do as vocation. The Latin root for vocation is vocare and it means "to call." In its earliest meaning, the word vocation meant that a person was called by God to his or her work. Today we often limit the term "vocation" to ministers, priest, and those who take religious vows.

Having a vocation means that you have a sense that nothing else will satisfy you, and you believe that you are able to serve others through what you do. Dorothy Sayers describes it this way. "Work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he (or she) finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction." I believe vocation is often characterized by a sense of passion.

Too often our life work is drudgery. It is truly work. People dread getting up and making that commute to the workplace or doing the chores they need to do at home. Few things are more disturbing than our work or our careers. There are many pressing issues that we must address in

the workplace...the rights of women and minorities, sexual harassment, the unfair distribution or misuse of power. But we also understand work to be an essential part of God's purpose for human beings. And so nothing is more socially explosive and personally dehumanizing than people who want to work, but are not able to find work, or people who are denied the job training they might need to acquire necessary skills for work.

For those who do have jobs, there is the insidious nature of work defining who they are in terms of their identity. A New Yorker cartoon shows a woman sitting at her office desk. In front of her, on the desk, is a name plate which reads, "Barbara Smith - based on an actual person." Too often we define ourselves by our work.. I am a minister, a clerk, a teacher, a homemaker, a business person or whatever we do. How do we get back to the "actual person?"

Jesus models two ways of doing this. The first is listening to ourselves and others with a discerning heart and mind. The second is taking risks. Listening is an essential part of our task and praying is a vital part of listening. I've spent some time at Benedictine monasteries. The informal motto of Benedictine life has long been known as *ora et labora*, prayer and work. The motto is not work and prayer but prayer and work showing that there must be a balance of prayer and activity in human life. Prayer and work are inseparable because prayer opens us up to the grace of God. It helps us to discern what God wants us to do instead of what we may have been taught or expected to do. And prayer can help us to distinguish between the desires of our ego and the desires of our soul. I find it interesting that corporate prayer or the word "liturgy", which is the prayers we share here in church, is translated as "the work of the people."

Listening to others who genuinely know and care for us is another way of discovering what God would have us do. I remember when I was agonizing over the decision of whether to leave my job as a teacher to pursue the ordained ministry. A friend who had no idea of the internal struggle I was faced with, casually commented, after we had spent the afternoon together, "You know you have many gifts for ministry. Have you ever thought about the ordained ministry." Little did my friend know that her words were an affirmation to what I was feeling in my heart. When I finally did share my decision with others, however, there were some who tried to discourage me, pointing out that I already had an important career and ministry would be a difficult vocation for a woman.. and a mother. So we need to learn to listen to others with a discerning ear while always being attentive to the leadings of our own soul.

The second way Jesus models finding our true vocation is our work lives, it the ability to take risks. Being willing to take risks and to embrace change is difficult for most of us. We resist change. In doing so we may miss opportunities God has in store for us. We don't want to say, "Opportunity knocked on my door. But by the time I unlocked the two bolts, turned off the alarm and opened the door, opportunity was gone." Jesus was ready to leave the security he had as an established carpenter and move on to a new and greater opportunity. Timing was a key to Jesus' ministry. He knew when it was time to change vocations. Sometimes family responsibilities such as caring for a child or an elderly parent call us to put other pursuits aside. During his ministry Jesus balanced a time of moving out into the world with time to protect and replenish his energies within. This balance of giving time to replenishing one's own energies is especially important for those who find themselves in a caregiving role. Allowing time for quiet reflection allows God to open new possibilities, new perspectives and fresh insights to all that

we do.

There are two creation stories in the first chapters of Genesis. Most of us are more familiar with the second one from Genesis 2 and 3 which tries to explain the presence of evil in the world by telling the story of the fall. The punishment for eating from the forbidden tree is pain in childbirth for the woman and drudgery in work for the man. Some people today still think we are meant to suffer at work... that we are destined to endure the bitter fruit.

Look at the contrast of this point of view with the first creation story read for you this morning from the first chapter of Genesis. In this story we are called to a harmonious and joyful intimacy with God. We are called to cooperate with God in the ongoing unfolding of the world. Every living thing is special and individually precious to God. And so our call is not only to relationship with God, but to all of creation. Both stories of creation are needed. The second creation story reminds us that we often fall short of our potential, while the first calls us back again and again to relationship.

Finding one's true vocation involves integrating all parts of oneself in daily life. It is finding the sacred and the holy in whatever we do. It is bringing a sense of balance into our lives so that one part of our life does not suck all our energy allowing little time for creativity, imagination and just plain fun. I heard of a CEO of a fortune five-hundred company who had "fun" as one of the corporation's goals. That didn't mean they were holding wild parties, although I did hear that they put all their year-end reports through a paper shredder and the employees jumped and played in the shredded paper as a child would play in a pile of fall leaves. With fun as a company goal, each person, no matter what position he or she had in the company, was given the freedom and encouragement to bring his or her creativity and imagination to work with the expectation that change and growth were as important to the individual as they were to the corporation. In letting go of a repetitive, linear system controlling the workers, people became empowered, engaged and energized with spontaneity. With this shift in attitude from the management, profits soared. But, more importantly, people loved coming to work.

Dr. Andrew Weil has said, "Healing is making whole, restoring a state of perfection and balance that has been lost." Most of us live very hectic, busy lives. We often use the expression, "I'm juggling too many balls," or "I can't keep all the balls in the air." I invite you to shift your thinking about the title of this sermon, "Crystal Balls." Instead of thinking of crystal balls as tools for fortune telling, imagine that the most important parts of your life are beautiful, fragile crystal balls. Naming the crystal balls will be different for each of us. For many of us our crystal balls will include such things as our faith, our true self, our family, our friends, our passions, our hobbies, and maybe even aspects of our work. Now imagine that all the other balls we struggle to keep in the air are rubber balls. As we juggle all these balls, it is all right if the rubber balls drop now and then. They will bounce back. But if we drop one of the precious crystal balls, it will shatter... and be lost forever.

Let us pray:

May the light of your soul bless the work you do with the secret love and warmth of your heart. May you see in what do the beauty of your own soul. May the sacredness of your work bring healing, light, and renewal to those who work with

you and to those who see and receive your work. Amen.

[Click here to send your comments via e-mail to Rev. Mark Trotter.](#)

If you find these sermons of benefit, please let us know. Printed or audio tape copies of all sermons are available by subscription. Your e-mail is welcome.

[Click here to send e-mail to the church staff.](#)

Sermon text converted by Dave Watters

[NEWS](#) * [SERMON](#) * [MUSIC](#) * [KIDS](#) * [YOUTH](#) * [COUNSELING](#) * [MAIL](#) * [HOME](#)