

“Doing the Best You Can”
Mark 6:1-6; 2 Timothy 2:15
7/22/18

Fortunately, I was raised by parents who tried to instill strong values in each of their ten children, including me. Through the years five of my siblings have died, as have all but one of their spouses. Even now in reflecting on those that have left this earth and those of us who have not, it seems apparent that my parents were largely successful in their efforts. We all followed different paths. At one time, we pursued careers in Traffic Management, postal work, as a prison guard, a NYC policeman, an owner of a small business, as ordained ministers, a legal assistant, and a small bookstore owner. All of us had various jobs on the way to our careers. Some were more financially successful than others. But all of us reflected basic values, learned at home.

All of us married and had children, some more than others. Some stayed close to Brooklyn, where we were raised. One or more of us settled in California, Utah, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut. We were, and are, very different, religiously, politically, and economically, along with other differences that might have separated us from each other. But the truth is, as much as geography separated us, we were, and are, bound by a common set of values. One of the values, taught by our parents, may be summed up by the expression heard many times through the years, “family is family.” No matter what mistakes we might have made, even those which were far from what we had been taught, this value never seemed to leave any of us. We were, and always would be, family. You see, our parents believed that God wanted it to be that way.

They laid the foundation for increasingly seeing the world as family, loving as we were loved, caring as we were shown to care. Like all of us, my parents were not perfect, nor am I, nor any of my siblings. But all of us learned that to not forgive and continue to love each other was simply not God’s way. Reflecting on it now, I know how strongly they were doing the work of God.

They may not have acknowledged it, but they, in the words of Paul to Timothy, did their best to present themselves to God, as ones approved, workers who had no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. Which is where this sermon has its origins.

Paul, as a mentor in the faith, writes to Timothy, a young preacher who witnessed to the love of God found in Jesus. In the midst of theological and social perspectives, he tells Timothy: ***Do your best to present yourself to God, as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.*** I remember reading these words when, in my early teen years, I was wondering why I was drawn to the ordained ministry. Even then it was apparent to me that I would never be the best preacher or pastor in the world and that I was not a likely candidate for the role. I remember my struggle with so much of scripture, and still feel, with its stories of a vengeful God, who nearly wiped out the world with a flood, tales of a God who led the Israelites to kill and connive on their way to ***The Promised Land***. The stories of cruelty, marital infidelities, and other inhumane and unethical behavior, all appeared as awful stories. Then, and now, such stories make no sense to me. I remember the emphasis on obeying the laws of God, usually in terms of the Ten Commandments and the ***thou shall nots***. I recall my question of how anyone could possibly obey them all the time, and how I had always had trouble with ***you just can't do that***, always wondering ***why not?***

So even while arguing with Paul on some of his theology and vision on such matters as slavery and of women, and what seemed like arrogance, I found this verse to be grace filled and directive. It was written, it seemed, for me. ***Do your best to present yourself to God....*** These words recalled those of my mother, who had been accustomed to seeing my report cards with good grades, suddenly seeing a barely passing grade in Trigonometry. ***Is this the best you can do?*** That was her question. Who knows how often she asked my sisters and brothers the same thing? When I told her I did my best, she said that was all she could ask. Her words and Paul's words were exactly what was needed. I retook Trigonometry, passed it with a decent grade, and moved on. Expecting only my best, she had motivated me beyond my best. Paul's words to Timothy did the same for me.

Do your best . My concern of ability, and worthiness for ordained ministry became less important as I claimed these words. I did not have to be perfect. I did not have to even pretend I was. I only had to do the best I could do, always recalling the power of love to lead the way. That was all God wanted.

Do your best to present yourself...with no need to be ashamed...rightly handling the word

These are words not simply for those in ordained ministry. These are words for everyone and anyone. These are words for those called to be parents, or teachers, or nurses, or computer techies, or mechanics, or whatever. These are words for young

and old, and all the ages in between. These are words for living a life that is aware of divine grace, aware that we are acceptable and deeply matter to the lover of all. They call us all to accept the gifts we have been given and to use them to the best of our ability and thereby show ourselves as ones approved. They make the call of Jesus to ***Come, follow me*** a real possibility.

Our Gospel reading from Mark speaks of the one who, not only did his best, but was and is the best model of becoming who God calls us to be. He came, we are told into his hometown, to people who ñknew him whenø and they questioned. They were astounded at his wisdom, even as they were astounded that he knew what he knew. ***Where did this man get all this? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...? And they took offense at him.***

Perhaps some found it challenging to know ñone of their ownö now claimed another identity than they thought possible. Perhaps some were offended by the apparent arrogance of coming home with a vision other than their own. Perhaps we will never know what lay behind their reception of him. One thing is sure. The message is clear. He was more than they thought possible. And the offense was likely their defense against truly following him. He challenged them to see other possibilities than they saw. The implied message to all of us also seems clear. We all are more than we think possible. We are made in the image of God. We all can answer the call to follow him. Not because we have to be the best, but because we all can ***Do our best.*** We can do so because that is what our Maker has in mind for us.

So on this warm Sunday morning, hear the words spoken to you, to me, to us, to the world and to its leaders. No matter the situation in your life, no matter your age or experience, no matter your finances or education, God speaks today and every day. God speaks, even as Jesus speaks, ***Come, follow me.***

What we do with that call is ours to make.

As individuals, it is ours to make.

As members of families, it is ours to make.

As members of a larger circle, of a community, of a nation, it is ours to make.

As members of this congregation, it is ours to make.

We don't have to be the biggest or the best. We simply have to do our best.

That is the nature of the call to *Come, follow me*. God help us to be able to *present ourselves before God...to be unashamed...to be able to say...I have done my best...I have kept the faith*.