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About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Are We What We Do?

By the Rev. Ted Karpf

Are we what we do? Anxiety in the face of retirement can be attributed to the lack of doing the things that distinctively mark us as church workers or, specifically, as clergy. When there is no church to go to as a workplace, or Holy Eucharist to celebrate, babies to baptize, or couples to marry, we are compelled to redefine who we are and how we are to be in the communities around us.

We who work and live in the industrialized northern hemisphere have also been acculturated to believing that we are valuable so long as we are productive. The formula appears to be Productivity = Value. When stricken with life-changing illness in midlife or later in life as the result of aging, many of us become lost and may experience ourselves as being without value. As the late Dr. Paul Tournier observed, the natural process of aging becomes a socially constructed problem and as such, the question arises, "What is society to do with us?"

Productivity, for too many of us in church work or any profession involving the care for others or the cure of souls, is measured by attendances, numbers, and ministrations. Is there another way to talk about meaning or meaning-making?

"Yes," we say, but note we were not so much called to *do* things as much as to *be*." Ministry is about being complete enough in our own life to give witness to the larger community as a follower of Christ; less about bringing faith to others than it is about living it ourselves.

What does it mean to be a follower? Jesus makes it clear in his commandments to love God and love each other. Loving is about being: being ourselves, being love to the larger community, and being in love with God. Our relationship with God and each other is less about doing and more about being, authentic and open.

Personally, I have discovered this when church-goers ask me, “What will you do now that you are retired?” People also ask whether I will take up supply work or serve a parish. “Perhaps I will, one day,” I say, and continue, “This is a time in which I am called to be still, to rest, and pray.” “And what will you do when you finish praying and being still?” they ask — as if to say that praying and being still cannot be a calling but only a mid-step between doing one thing and another.

I became a priest in order to live into my love for God and God’s community of faith. How far have I come in implementing that love in work and justice seeking, in service and liturgy? Yet, I am still hungry for the intimacy of prayer and reflection. This is where I see my witness being lived out today.

We have this gift of ministry in earthen vessels and as such it is important to acknowledge that these vessels break and are broken. Are we of value when the pot cracks? Are we valuable to ourselves? Could it be that God has called us into a greater maturity by giving us time for contemplation; spaciousness in which nothing has to happen; and an invitation into that emptiness that God may fill us with grace and truth? It sounds easier than it is. I have found that it takes a great deal of trust to live *being* rather than *doing*. After a lifetime of being a worthy servant, what does it mean for me to be a worthy recipient?

There is a steep learning curve, as many writers, thinkers, psychologists, and sociologists agree. Learning how to age may be the last and most formidable psychological and spiritual frontier of our lives. We may have issues of loss to deal with — loss of bodily vitality; loss of physical assets like vision, hearing, locomotion, and digestion; loss of independence (so highly vaunted and valued in our culture); loss of personal wealth or financial stability; and even wellbeing. This is an important and real daily struggle for me as I face loss of wellness and loss of friends. And I know I am not alone in this.

Nonetheless, I have found that this can be a time of richness and spiritual and psychological development. We may finally begin to enact the deeper truths of our faith and the wisdom of our tradition. We are given the opportunity to explore our own spiritual and faith development so that we can move toward the peace which passes understanding.

As a recent retiree, I have experienced this daily in the silence of my small ranch in northern New Mexico as I spend time watching and waiting for a sunrise or gazing at the constantly changing clouds at sunset. I reflect upon the meaning of creation and the achievements and failures of my life in the past 45 years. What strikes me is that in our professional lives, we invited people to be loved; perhaps it is only now we can begin to embrace that truth in our own lives, exploring the dimensions and dynamics of God’s love and how it works in us day by day in the face of loss and change.

As I have discovered in my own post-working life, this may be the greatest time for opening myself to a deeper spirituality. This may be my best time ever for discovery and reality-testing, for exploring a thesis and finding synthesis, for peace-making and meaning-making. It is my hope that with ongoing encouragement to grow and become all that God has for me, I may come fully in God’s presence on that last day with grace and peace.



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