

## **Review: Vocation, Fulfillment, and Communion**

If you've been here the last couple of weeks, you know that we're smack dab in the middle of a homily series. This entire year, we've been focusing on the universal call to holiness: that each of the baptized is capable and able, by God's grace, to become a great saint in this life—and that we're called to get there.

In the first half of the year, we focused on that generally. But in the second half of the year, we're getting more specific in terms of a very important aspect of the universal call to holiness, and that is our vocation. Again, as a reminder: how many of you have a vocation? Very good. You're paying attention. All of us have vocations. All of us are called by God.

In the first week, we focused on the fact that a vocation is a divine calling, which means a vocation comes by God's initiative. It's always God calling us. But whether you're already married, whether you're discerning your vocation, God is always still calling us and taking initiative within our vocation, within my vocation. And so the question becomes, in terms of discernment: What is God up to in my life? Where is He calling me? What is He calling us to at this time, in terms of our vocation?

I shared in that first homily, and reiterated last week at St. John Vianney, that our vocation is very much linked to our fulfillment. But our fulfillment does not come from having our felt needs met, or by achieving worldly ambitions or aspirations. You are only fulfilled when you become a blessing to others. That's the key to fulfillment: being a blessing to others. Our vocation is very much connected to the way that God has wired us, in terms of structured relationships, to be a blessing to others. So it is very much related to our fulfillment.

Last week, we focused on the fact that vocations are inherently relational. Father Val and I approached this a little bit differently, but I really emphasized this relational aspect: vocations are relational rather than transactional. It is a real giving of self, instead of giving of roles and things like that. So vocations are inherently relational over transactional. That's true in terms of marriage. That's true in terms of parenthood. And that's actually true in terms of the Church. Your vocation is directed to the Church, and in a specific way to your parish community.

It is based in communion: communion of husband and wife, communion of family, communion of the universal Church, and communion here on Sunday at 9:15 a.m., or whatever time it is. It is this series of stable relationships in which we're called to be a blessing to others.

## **Commitment Limits Freedom—and Deepens It**

This week we focus on a particular aspect that is so important about vocation: commitment and stability.

My thesis for today is the following, and you're going to have to get your ear around it for a second: marriage limits your freedom, but marriage also deepens your freedom. I'll say that again: marriage limits your freedom, but marriage also deepens your freedom.

In the same way, children limit your freedom. Parents, can you agree? But the way vocation is constructed is that having children actually deepens your freedom as well.

I'll get at it from my side of vocation—from the priestly vocation—because that's the one I can really speak to from my own experience. Then, by analogy, you'll see how it applies to marriage.

My primary commitments in terms of my vocation to priesthood are celibacy and obedience. Both of those, in a sense, limit my freedom. But both of them absolutely deepen my freedom. By choosing to be celibate, I've made the decision to forgo a wife. So I'm not acting as a single person endlessly trying to figure out whom I'm called to marry. It, in a sense, limits my freedom, but gives me freedom to love within the vocation I'm in.

Obedience, in terms of a parish priest, means I go where the bishop sends me. And that is a hard thing: to have to get up and move when you're told to move. But it actually gives me a tremendous amount of freedom because, just like I'm not looking for a partner for life, I'm also not worried about what my next gig is, because I don't have a say in it. I'm not endlessly worrying about whether I'm in the right spot. I'm in the right spot because the bishop sent me. And I'm not worried about my next gig because I don't have a say about when I move.

That also, from the priest's side to his parishioners' side, gives a level of stability to you. I've been assigned for six or twelve years generally—could be longer; I'll be happy to stay longer. But it gives a sense of stability. And because I am celibate, I don't have a competing vocation with my flock. I have one vocation, not two. Deacon Carl has three or more: as a parent, as a deacon, and as a spouse. That doesn't mean that I'm better than him. It's the way that we're constructed.

Moving on to marriage, then: marriage is the same thing. Your commitment, yes, limits your freedom. The other person's freedom does a lot of determining what you do on the weekend, for one thing. But that freedom of commitment means you're not thinking about other lovers. You're not thinking about starting a second or third family and having children. The commitment you've made in marriage is that you've promised you're not going to leave. You're not going to abandon the other.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not overly idealistic. I know that marriages end. I know that some marriages should end. And there's a lot of brokenness within families and marriages. But I'm explaining the basic contour of how the Lord designed these vocations, which in ordinary circumstances leads to our flourishing.

Having children actually greatly strengthens the indissolubility of marriage. That means a marriage that is contracted validly cannot be dissolved, because a child is a gift of self enfleshed. Husband and wife give themselves to each other in intimacy, and a child being born in flesh is that gift of self. A child becomes, in a sense, a "we": twenty-three chromosomes of mom, twenty-three of dad. As we are made in God's image and likeness, a child in a real sense is made in the image and likeness of their biological parents.

So the child becomes a "we" and strengthens that. It makes it easier to stick to it when things are difficult in marriage, because there's a shared commitment in children. And then that opens up the possibility of growth in love, because I think we can agree that, in most circumstances, parental love is the most naturally disinterested. Parental love is all gift. Parental love is naturally the most disinterested form of love, which can teach us how to love better.

### **Stability as the Ground for Maturity and Purity**

Now I'm to the final point. The stability that vocation gives is meant to be not an end in itself. Stability is not the end in itself. Stability is the ground for growth.

That security of marriage, of relationship, of commitment, of not worrying about me leaving, of not worrying about the other taking off, provides a solid love bond. And in that solid love bond, something can happen. This is true for children in marriage, and it's true for spouses: security is the ground for maturity.

What does that look like? When you're secure, you have the ability to grow in virtue. Think about something like a needs hierarchy. You have to have security if you're going to grow and thrive. In marriage, what that looks like is that husband and wife—in both the good and the challenging parts of the relationship, and especially the challenging parts of parenthood—are called to grow in virtue. Virtue is the maturity I'm talking about. When we're secure, then we're able to grow in maturity.

If you're insecure, you can't grow in maturity. You're stunted. Now, the good news is that God can always go back and heal things that are insecure in us, mostly rooted in childhood. And then maturity can really thrive.

So, security leads to maturity, and maturity leads to purity. Purity is that disinterested love I'm talking about. Purity has a lot of aspects beyond chastity, though that's an important

part of it. Purity is simply about having disinterested love: being able to give in an uncomplicated way. And that's what holiness is.

We heard in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God," because a level of holiness is there. So that's the basic trajectory that our vocations are meant to foster in us as we give ourselves and try to grow in holiness, purity, and disinterested love.

Dear friends in Christ, I know that marriage is messy. I know that there are divorces. I know that some marriages should end because of brokenness within them. But God has constructed these vocations because He knows what He's doing. He desires us to grow in holiness, and for our vocations to be really the ground in which we strive to grow in maturity and purity.

So homework for this week: if you are married, your homework is to look at the Beatitudes—kind of up through peacemakers—and identify which of the Beatitudes up through peacemakers is something you're called to lean into a bit in your marriage. All of them would be applicable to almost every marriage. But which of the Beatitudes am I called to live into better with my spouse?

If you're not married, the homework is similar. My invitation is to look at the Beatitudes we heard in our Gospel today and to identify the one, in terms of your relationship with the Lord, that the Lord is asking you to really lean into on a stronger basis in your day-to-day life.

Dear friends in Christ, let us thank God for so instructing us that we may grow. May He heal in us those places of insecurity. And may we be committed, and in those commitments grow in maturity, so that we may also grow in purity to love as Jesus loves us. Praise be Jesus Christ.