

Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Scott Mayer
Renewal of Vows
March 3, 2016

Maybe you've heard the story about a Greyhound who retired from dog-racing during his prime. If you've ever been to a dog-track or seen a clip of a dog race on TV, you know that it's true that Greyhounds race against each other – but in reality they are chasing something. At the end of a long pole there is a replica of a rabbit, and that rabbit is traveling around the track just ahead of the dogs. The dogs are trying to catch the rabbit.

As the story goes, one spectacularly successful Greyhound – a champion with a perfect record – retires from racing during his prime. Of course, all of the racing fans and reporters want to know: “You’ve still got a lot left in you, and you’re still young. Why retire now?” And the Greyhound replies: “I quit when I discovered that what I was chasing was not a real rabbit.” The Greyhound chose to quit chasing something that was not real.

I heard the evangelical preacher, Tony Campolo, tell his version of that story at a recent fundraiser for Habitat for Humanity. He also told us about his preacher back home in Pennsylvania. It's customary in Campolo's home congregation to celebrate “student recognition Sunday.” One morning from the pulpit the preacher says to the students (and everyone else): “One day you're going to die. And when people gather around your grave, are they going to be remarking on the titles on your tombstone? Or are they going to be standing around your grave giving testimonies?” He asks those teenagers: “Is your life about collecting titles or testimonies?” He says: “Pharaoh had the title. He was King of Egypt. But Moses had the testimonies. Herod was a king. He had the title. His tombstone had the title. John the Baptist, whom Herod executed, had the testimony.”

He says, “I wish for you titles on your tombstone. But when it's all over and everyone is standing around your grave reflecting on your life, I hope they are giving testimonies.”

Both of these stories ask us to consider what we chase, or what we seek in life. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he writes of things seen and unseen, things temporary and things eternal. I would suggest that titles are things temporary, and testimonies are things eternal.

The New York Times columnist, David Brooks, has written a new book entitled, *The Road to Character*. I commend it to you. He opens the book with this paragraph: “Recently I've been thinking about the difference between ‘resume’ virtues and the

‘eulogy’ virtues. The resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume, the skills you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest, or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.”

It’s not that resume virtues are bad, or that titles are bad. It’s that testimonies – the eulogy virtues – are deeper. There is an eternal quality to the eulogy virtues. And the world needs the eulogy virtues.

David Brooks writes a chapter in his book entitled “The Summoned Self.”

Summoned. He makes a distinction between resume virtues which lead to careers, and being called to a vocation – being summoned. Careers are good, and they make a contribution to society. But a vocation is different. A calling – being summoned – is different.

Brooks tells the story of Frances Perkins, the first woman appointed to the United States Cabinet, serving as Secretary of Labor from 1933 to 1945. Incidentally, she was one of 15 women being considered to replace Andrew Jackson on the 20 dollar bill, but did not make the cut to be placed in the final four.

But Frances Perkins was not one trying to collect titles or build resumes; she didn’t strive to be remembered on a twenty dollar bill. She didn’t achieve the position of Secretary of Labor under Franklin D Roosevelt, because she was building a career or seeking titles. She was summoned.

One day in 1911 at the age of 31, she was visiting a friend in Lower Manhattan near Washington Square. As Brooks tells the story, “A butler rushed in and announced that there was a fire near the square. The ladies ran out. Perkins lifted up her skirts and sprinted toward it. They had stumbled upon the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, one of the most famous fires in American history. Perkins could see the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the building ablaze. She joined the throng of horrified onlookers on the sidewalk below.

Brooks is rather graphic in his description of the event, but I’ll spare us from that this morning. Perkins witnessed the death of 146 garment workers, who died largely because there was only one fire escape and only one exit – one exit in order to reduce the possibility of theft.

The fire left a deep mark on Frances Perkins, and set her on a new course to do anything to prevent another catastrophe like the one at the Triangle Factory. Up to that point she had lobbied for workers rights and on behalf of the poor, but now, what had been a career turned into a vocation – a vocation, where one does not so

much ask, “What do I want from life?” Rather, one asks, “What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?” [Brooks 21]

Brooks says: “It is important to point out how much a sense of vocation is at odds with the prevailing contemporary logic. A vocation is not about fulfilling your desires or wants A vocation is not about the pursuit of happiness, if by ‘happiness’ you mean being in a good mood, having pleasant experiences, or avoiding struggle and pain. Such a person [meaning one summoned] becomes an instrument for the performance of the job that has been put before her.”

What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do? This calls to mind – to my mind, anyway – something Jesus said to his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he died at the Last Supper.

Jesus said: “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” In other words, this is a calling – a vocation – and you have been summoned. We, and all baptized people, have been summoned.

I can imagine the disciples following Jesus throughout his public ministry, and yes, he called them to follow him. He chose them early in the story, according to the Gospels. But remember the story. As they followed him, they argued about who was the greatest, and who would sit at the right hand. “And by the way,” they said to Jesus, “there are others doing good works, but not in your name.” “And Jesus, those pesky, needy people always want your attention, and they are interrupting our communion together.”

We can imagine that even as they followed Jesus into Jerusalem with the palm branches waving and the crowds shouting approval, the disciples were still in “resume mode.” Following Jesus – up to now – was a successful career choice.

And tonight, at the Last Supper in the Upper Room, Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I wonder if now, finally, we are shifting into “eulogy” virtues.

It won’t be a burning building with dying people that the disciples will witness. That won’t be their life-changing moment that triggers the shift from “resume virtues” to “eulogy virtues.” It won’t be a burning building they witness; it will be a crucifixion that they stand by and watch. They will betray. They will deny. They will hide.

And Jesus will say from the Cross: “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” And when he appears to them later – showing them his hands and his side – they will experience the unconditional love, the undeserved forgiveness, and the unmerited grace of God.

And then they will know their vocation – their calling. They are summoned – summoned to things eternal – summoned for a purpose: to proclaim and embody the same love they experienced in Jesus; summoned (not unlike Frances Perkins) to proclaim God’s dream of a just world; summoned (like all baptized persons) to proclaim and embody the love, grace, and forgiveness of God to all people in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.