

Today in the life of the Church we commemorate Ignatius, bishop of Antioch and martyr. Ignatius served as the third bishop of Antioch, and reputedly was a student of John the Apostle.

According to the Reverend Canon David Veal: “When the Roman Emperor ... ordered that Ignatius ... be brought to Rome for public execution as an ‘atheist and subversive,’ he made a serious blunder. The journey which Ignatius was compelled to take was long and calls were made at numerous ports. Few men were unimpressed by the sight of the saintly old bishop being hauled in chains to his death. Crowds of Christians and Christian sympathizers gathered at his ports of call to cheer him on. Others joined him and helped record and distribute his letters which soon became famous. In these letters Ignatius rejoiced at his opportunity to witness for Christ through martyrdom. ... Ignatius’ letters to the Christians ... are among our most valuable documents of the early church. He was brutally put to death before a mob in the Colosseum at Rome, but the testimony of his life and letters lived on to inspire his fellows in Christ.”

It is believed that Ignatius was martyred in the year 115, which is 1900 years ago. And the “brutal death” in the Colosseum to which Canon Veal refers was that of being fed to wild beasts. Ignatius must have seen it coming – as we say – as the following famous quotation comes from his letter to the Romans:

“I am writing to all the Churches and I enjoin all, that I am dying willingly for God’s sake, if only you do not prevent it. I beg you, do not do me an untimely kindness. Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which are my way of reaching God.

I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ."

Now that's quite a testimony. The Church now has 1900 years distance on his death, so I suspect Ignatius is most remembered today (especially among theologians and historians) for his letters and his theological influence in shaping the new Church. And that's important. But at the time of his death, I suspect his faith, and courage, and sense of purpose as he met his particular method of martyrdom was the most impressive testimony of his life.

Testimony. Canon Veal refers to the testimony of his life and letters. Tony Campolo told a story about "testimony" at a recent fundraiser for Habitat for Humanity in Abilene. If you are not familiar with Tony Campolo, he is a preacher, speaker, author, pastor, sociologist, and social activist. He is one of the few white members of a predominantly African-American congregation in Pennsylvania.

Campolo tells us that it's customary in his home congregation to celebrate "student recognition Sunday." One morning from the pulpit Campolo's preacher says to the students (and everyone else): "one day you're going to die. And when people gather around your grave [he asks] 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: "Pharoah 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.”

The New York Times columnist, David Brooks, says this a slightly different way. He 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. And the world needs the eulogy virtues.

Yesterday we recognized three people who have retired or will retire from active service in the Diocese of Northwest Texas: Edson Way, Jo Roberts Craig, and Carolyn Hearn. All three accomplished much. All three can claim extraordinary resumes. But what we remember is their generosity, and hospitality, and joy, and love, and wisdom, and compassion – that they rejoice when we rejoice, and suffer when we suffer. That’s testimony.

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 (10 now?), 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 20 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 employee 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 us? What are our circumstances calling us to do?

When Jesus gathers his disciples for the Last Supper, he finds it important to say to them, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” One doesn’t waste words or actions with one night to live. So, Jesus and the disciples share supper, and Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, and Jesus begins to reveal what is most important to him: love. “Love one another, as I have loved you.” “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

And then Jesus reminds them: “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” In other words, this is a calling – a vocation – and you have been summoned. “I chose you,” he says. “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

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 now, at the Last Supper in the Upper Room, Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” Now we are shifting into “eulogy virtues” – fruit that will last.

It won’t be a burning building 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 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 (not unlike Ignatius) to embody faith, courage, and a sense of purpose; 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.