

“Second Best”  
I Corinthians 3:9-15, John 6:26-40  
September 1, 2019

During the contest for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination, Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts visited a coal mine in West Virginia. At the time, West Virginia was one of the most Democratic voting states in the country, consistently delivering margins upwards of 70% for anyone running with a “D” next to his name. And, the backbone of the party in those days were the unions, and in West Virginia, that meant the coal miners’ unions, representing some of the hardest working, yet most poorly paid, laborers of our country. So JFK was especially keen to win West Virginia, and win big.

On that visit, one of the miners asked him, “Is it true that you’re the son of one of the wealthiest men in America?” JFK admitted that this was true. It was a well-known fact. He couldn’t hide it, and had no wish to.

“Is it true that you’ve never wanted for anything, and had everything money could buy?” the workingman went on. “I guess so,” came the candidate’s reply.

“Is it true that you’ve never done a day’s work with your hands all your life?” Kennedy nodded in the affirmative.

“Well, let me tell you this,” said the laborer. “You haven’t missed a thing.”

I’m sure that there are times when an awful lot of us agree with that coal miner. True, it is satisfying to complete a job well done. But somehow getting to the point when the work is actually over and done with is the hard part. Sometimes it’s a little like beating your head against the wall - it feels good only when you stop.

But work we must, at least for those of us born a little lower than the Kennedys. The question is, what kind of work are we going to do, what kind of work are we fitted for, and will we be able to get the job done well, or will we settle for second best?

Being second best in what you do, and how you do it, is the classic Christian definition of what “sin” is. And in measuring what is second best, we are not being

compared to others and what they do. As any runner knows, it is a mistake to look over your shoulder to see how the next runner is doing, because that distracts you from what the real job is - running YOUR best. For the Christian, being second best is not doing as well as what God means you to do. It is tantamount to coming in third place in a two-person race.

Yet second best is what too many people settle for not just on the job, but in their daily lives. On the surface, it does not seem all that bad. Walter Lippman described it this way: “It is possible to drift along not too discontentedly, somewhat nervously, somewhat anxiously, somewhat confusedly, hoping for the best, and believing in nothing very much.... But it is not possible to be wholly at peace. For serenity of soul requires some better organization of life than someone can attain by pursuing casual ambitions, satisfying hungers, and for the rest accepting Destiny as an idiot’s tale in which one sensation succeeds another to no known end. And it is not possible for someone like that to be wholly alive.”

That sounds an awful lot like what the Apostle Paul calls “missing the mark” - another definition of “sin”, as it turns out.

Now obviously if we are not fitted for the job we find ourselves in, we cannot give it our best. The question is, What is the work we are to be about? Do we think ourselves not fitted for a task just because it is difficult? Well, Jesus found the Cross at Calvary no easy thing, and yet He was suited to face its horrors better than anyone else.

Do we think ourselves not fitted for a task just because it doesn’t tickle our fancy or excite us? I wonder if the Apostle Paul worried or complained that he did not fully enjoy being imprisoned repeatedly for disturbing the peace of the empire by proclaiming the Good News that God Almighty dwells among us, full of grace and truth.

Do we think ourselves not fitted for work just because we’d rather be fishing, or sailing, or windsurfing, or square dancing as bumper stickers proclaim? I wonder...

And yet we find ourselves doing all sorts of things that have no redeeming social value, that have nothing to offer this world in terms of improving the quality of spirit and soul, that bears little meaning in the great cosmic scheme of things, and then wonder why we find, all too often, that daily existence can be unsatisfying, and then we begin to wonder what it's really all about, this life, this world, this universe, this everything.

So what IS the work we are to be about? Part of the problem of human living is that God has something in mind for each one of us - what we can do with our lives, what we are to accomplish, how we can serve. The question is, what have WE made of God's purposes for us? A lot of people like to ignore that question. But I suspect that life, in the long run, would be a little easier, on balance, if we took into account what God had in mind for us.

A philosopher once put it this way: "If I were a nightingale, I would sing to God like a nightingale. But I am a rational being, and it is my part to praise and bless Him. And this I will do; nor will I desert my post, so long as I am allowed to hold it."

That is what made Jesus who he was - an unswerving dedication to praise and to bless His God in all that He did. It is for that reason that some call Him perfect - perfect in that He fought the good fight, ran His best, and even when He encountered failure (at least failure in terms which the world would understand, at Calvary), He kept resolutely onward, not shrinking or being deflected from His goal. As a modern politician put it, in the life of Jesus there were no U-Turns, no retreats, no rationalizations, no doubling back.

It is that perseverance which demonstrates to us the love of His Father. God called Christ to do one thing, and one thing only: to reflect divine love in all He ever said, thought, or did. If Jesus had, at the last moment, flinched and said No to the Cross, our picture of God would have ended up being very different as a result. For if Jesus had rejected the last bit of the job assigned to Him, humankind would have gotten the message that God loves us only so far, and no further; that God might love us enough to

do some nice things for us, but not enough to go all the way, to commit Himself so that His entire essence was on the line.

In other words, our Creator is willing to go the distance for us, come what may. And if we pledge our allegiance to Him, we are also called upon to do the same as our brother, Jesus of Nazareth, did - to go the distance, to complete the job, to successfully cross the finish line. For followers of Christ, second best is not, and cannot be, enough. Christianity at its best needs to be fully reflected in the lives of those who claim to be under its influence. And it only can be truly reflected when we are willing to make the extra effort, as did the Man of Galilee so many years ago, of giving our best, our all, in His service.

Let us pray: