

Good Morning! The theme of vocation echoes in today's Gospel.... where we hear Jesus tell Simon Peter: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And as we heard... "when they brought their boats to the shore, they (Peter, James & John) left everything and followed him" ... Peter, James, and John... 3 common, ordinary men.... Who simply hear the call of God and courageously respond to a task that is so completely extraordinary! No longer fishing for fish... but becoming Fishers for MEN!

I have to be honest with you.... There was a time in my life (years ago) that upon hearing this particular Gospel...I would breathe a HUGE sigh of relief... thinking... *"phew" ... better them than me.... I could never do that"....* Well.... here I am here today.... To tell you.... That it is NOT better them than me... because it IS me... and it is also YOU!

God doesn't just call Peter, James, and John... He doesn't just call me... he calls every human person from the womb... into relationship... he gives everyone of us a vocation... a calling... a pathway to fulfill His plan for a particular purpose.... and our job is to hear His call, respond courageously and give testimony through word and action... all so Jesus Christ might be made known.... This is the universal call to holiness... this is how we become saints. Which you've heard me speak of time and time again.

Ever since I arrived here at Sacred Heart all the way back in July... I've had parishioners ask me as to when I am going to share my vocation story with the parish....and my usual response is... "when our readings call for it"... And so... seeing how today's Gospel is steeped deeply the theme of Peter's own vocation.... the time has arrived for me to share my own story with you all.... And to be clear... you have heard "bits and pieces" of my life as they have naturally surfaced in various topics/homilies.... but today- I want to share with you (as concise & as complete as possible...) my own vocation story.

To make sure that we are on the same page... The word "vocation" comes from the Latin word "*vocare*"... which literally means "to call". And this "call" or vocation is from God.... It's God's particular calling in our life as to how we are to live as Christians (married, holy orders, consecrated life). In 1st Peter (3:15) we read: "always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." And so what I'm sharing with you (my vocation story)... is also my own personal testimony....how Jesus Christ has touched... and transformed my life.

The very fact that I'm standing up here (totally unworthily) as your parish priest.... Is a concrete reality that JESUS Christ has touched & changed my life in a major way. ...And why? Because for the first 25 years of my life... I had absolutely no intention....no desire of becoming a priest... and actually for a while... I thought that becoming a priest was probably of the "lamest"/ most "uncool" thing that someone could do... and so it should be no surprise that the priesthood was the furthest thing from my mind... because growing up, my main goal, my main desire in life was just to be really rich... because I thought that if you were rich, then you were automatically happy.

To give you a little background.... my mom and dad raised me and my 3 brothers near Ellensburg, WA... and we were your typical "Average Catholics"...in terms that we would go to mass most Sunday's (if it was convenient), and say our prayers (quickly if possible) before meals and bedtime... and that was about it. Of note.... Our family DID NOT frequent the Sacrament of Reconciliation; for us, our first confession was our last confession.

Looking back, my faith as a youth was pretty mechanical... much like a robot....I was just going through the motions... all head.... No heart..... I was basically "asleep" in my faith – sure, we could look pious... and follow the most obvious visible teachings of the church (such as knowing better to NOT leave Mass right after communion/or before the priest leaves church- which- By the way- some of you could work on).... But our family would abandon the more challenging, less visible teachings... like going to confession...

I rationalized my family's lack of participation in confession with the acknowledgement that I was a pretty good kid.... I was never arrested, I didn't do drugs and I didn't kill anyone... and that isn't this who confession is for.... for those "really bad" people.... But let's be honest... (and I'm sure my brothers if they were here...would be happy to verify) that I certainly was (and still am) a sinner... and though I didn't see it or recognize it at the time, it was those "little sins" that build up over time that would slowly entrap me without me even realizing it.

In pursuit of my idea of happiness... I graduated college with a Business degree and moved to Seattle to make it big! I started a career in corporate world... and I thought I had it all "figured" out.... At the time I thought that true happiness was having the "perfect" life.... Lots of money, a beautiful wife, family, and a house with a picket fence. 😊

But this thinking was all about to change.... when by the grace of God, I friend invited me to a church (and this church was Holy Family in Kirkland) and they ended up “volunteering” me to assist with the youth group. Now for the record, I was happy to go to mass... BUT I had absolutely NO intention of “volunteering” for anything... but when Youth minister contacted me later that week... for some reason... I just wasn’t able to say “NO” but just a very, very meek “yes”.

What I found In the following years of volunteering with the youth- all while still working in the corporate world... was that I had many more opportunities to say ‘yes’ concretely.... going on the retreats, service projects, & missions trips... and each ‘yes’ was bringing me closer to Christ!

All of these “little yes’s” were somehow preparing me to face my fear confession. And Through the grace of God, I was somehow able to say an even bigger “YES” when I returned to the sacrament of Reconciliation and had my first true confession! This experience was life changing.... Because it enabled me to see myself as God sees me... a beloved son of God, someone who, despite my shortcomings and failings, is tremendously valued and loved – (just like all of you). Reconciliation softened my heart... and I experienced for myself God’s love and mercy, that up until that time I had only read about... and the trajectory of my life changed immediately, with a deep hunger for God.

It was about a year later when in prayer that I heard a call to “Do More”. My thinking at the time was.... “how could I possibility do more? I was already super involved as a volunteer for the youth group.... what MORE could God be calling me to?The Priesthood????..... Deep down I sensed that it was a definite possibility... but I didn’t want to admit at the time, because I also thought that I would be an awesome “dad”.

Unsure of the calling.... I knew that I needed to take the next step to “do more”, and thus a bigger “YES” was needed.... I discerned to leave my career and join a missionary team of young adults.... Known as NET ministries... spending a year traveling throughout the United States conducting youth retreats in Catholic schools and parishes.

When the missionary year was complete.... I found myself saying “yes” again. This time to working in full time parish youth ministry....both at St Michael Parish in Olympia and then back at Holy Family in Kirkland..... and it was during those years.... That I was introduced to the women of my dreams. We dated all along with the intention that I would one day take a knee and she would say “YES”. But to my surprise and disappointment... one month before a surprise engagement at the Vatican... I learned that marriage with her was not to be... God seemed to have a different plan for me.

In this suffering and heartache.... I had a very “frank” conversation with God.... Where I simply told God, “I don’t know what you want.... But you have my attention”. This most desperate moment with God, laid a new foundation for me. Giving the Lord my undivided attention.... Setting aside 20, 30 or even 60 minutes a day in prayer, simply allowing myself to be found... so that HIS will could be done in me.

Over time and prayer... the Lord healed my broken heart.... And what I discovered when I truly opened myself up and gave God my attention and permission....allowing myself to be found... was His deepest, most earnest Love for me, along with His perfect plan for memy vocation...my invitation to say “YES” In becoming His priest....and my pathway as to how I am called to be a saint.

I spent 6 LONG years at Mt. Angel Seminary in Oregon... praying frequently the psalm: “*Here I am Lord.. I come to do your will*” and discerning this priestly call.... Before being ordained 2.5 years ago.... This my testimony.... But it is not complete... because the Lord continues to work on my heart... continues to challenge me to grow, continues to pick me up when I fall, and continues to call me to himself.

I told you that my childhood dream and desire was to be really rich.... because I thought that rich people were automatically happy..... Well I’m here to tell you today.... that it is true.... people who are TRULY rich....ARE happy.... Because never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined that my life.... as a Priest of Jesus Christ... would beso incredibly RICH!!!!

Saying “yes” is not just for priests and religious... we all have the ability and responsibly to say “YES” to the movement of God in our lives.... It is said that hindsight is 20/20....and Looking back now.... I can see that each and every one of my little “Yes’s”, was really important... because each “yes” led to a bigger and more courageous “Yes” Even in the midst of suffering, pain and confusion... we can still say yes.

Today's Gospel shows us how Peter did not just automatically drop everything & follow Jesus.... It happened over a series of events... slowly building trust. Peter is first asked to "put out a short distance from the shore" so Jesus could teach the crowds.... It sounds easy enough... so Peter says YES! Then Jesus asks Peter to put out into the deep and lower the nets for a catch... Peter says... "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets" Peter's YES is even bigger than the 1st as goes beyond his own experience, requiring more trust!

Peter's final yes in today's Gospel comes after the "astonishment at the catch... which had seized Peter" ... as Peter says: "depart from me Lord...for I am a sinful man." Peter recognizes who Jesus really was, and his own personal unworthiness... But Jesus assures him.... Do not be afraid! and gives him his vocation "no longer catching fish... but catching men" And Peter responds with his most courageous "YES" as he "left everything and followed him".

Jesus says, "Do not be afraid" ... we can't let the fear of "not feeling good-enough, or "holy enough" paralyze us and keep us from saying "yes"... because ultimately we ALL are unworthy... .. but this is where God intervenes in our lives... when we humble ourselves and allow the Lord into our lives... then God can do great things. Our fragility doesn't disqualify Peter or you or me from our mission, because with Christ by our side there is nothing that he cannot do. How effective we will be, depends on our ("YES")... our "yes" to union with Christ.

What we can learn from all of this, is that we have the ability to say "yes"... just as we have the ability to say "no". But If we can say "yes" to little things, then over time, we will be able to say yes to bigger and bigger things. By your very presence here today you have all said "YES" And we are presented with countless opportunities to say YES each and everyday.

As we prepare ourselves for this holy communion... let us humbly recall and give thanks to God for the times that we have said "yes"- (think about what has led you to this very day) And at the same time...let us challenge ourselves to respond with even greater trust and greater courage for the all "yes's" that are still to come...

Knowing (with full confidence) that when we say "YES"... it is the Lord's work..... that is done.