

It is a momentous day. The pews are full of relatives, friends and colleagues. A large gilt chair sits in the sanctuary. The path to this day has been long and very deliberate - a persistent, loving calling of the Spirit to heart and to soul. The overcoming of doubts and fear. And perhaps, even the resistance of loved ones. You have completed the arduous acceptance process that tested the validity of the calling. The years of training - the slow burning away of the dross of self, the study of the Divine, and learning the rigor of obedience - has become the day when you will finally rejoice as you go up to the altar of the Most High God.

The ceremony overflows with symbolism. The utter and public debasement of lying on the floor while heaven is petitioned for your transition from the ordinary and for the worthiness to arise to the sacred. You are anointed with the oil of ancient kings and high priests. You are dressed in the robes of sacrifice and the yoke of the Lord is placed on your shoulders. You kneel before a descendant of the Twelve, put your hand in his and pledge your fidel oath of loyalty and the eternal binding to the virtues of obedience and purity. By the grace of the Divine, you have been transformed. A priest forever, according to the order of that first high priest who offered bread and wine on Patriarch Abraham's behalf.

Yes, from that day forward you have been set apart. You tend your flock well. Your life is to serve them. You are "Father," the small chip from the Rock in their midst. The yoke of the stole is light in times of rejoicing and heavy in times of soul-distress. Every day, you prepare and offer the sacrificial feast of the Lamb. There are those in your flock who reprove you and those who praise you, and even those who try to tempt you. But you are their piece of the Rock.

As the years pass, you see the dichotomy between people and polity. The canon may start chaffing at times. Those whom you serve may be crushed by the letter of the law. You recall the woman caught in adultery - under the law she was to forfeit her life, but Jesus gifted it back with compassion. But He was the Christ, you a paler follower, bound in obedience to serve.

You are living a life of aloneness. Your ties to your flock can be severed at any time so you may serve a new flock. Because of the lack of workers in the fields, you wear many other wearying hats: administrator, fund raiser, boss, maintenance man. At the end of the day, it is just you and the Divine - the situation of Adam in the Garden. Even the Creator was concerned and named the first thing that was not good in the pristine world - it was not good for Adam to be alone, even in Paradise.

It is not uncommon for these thoughts to unsettle one called to serve. In certain situations, these thoughts turn into very grave doubts. Are you a priest or an automaton? You pray - or try. You seek guidance - or not. Seeking guidance is not looked upon favorably when the "problem" is doubt. You question the original call by the Beloved. How easy would it be to discover that the call was false! Then there would be a "legitimate" reason to follow another path. But you find the call still alive in your very spirit, so ingrained you cannot root it out. You enter your private crucifixion - to

stay and become an impostor or to leave and follow the Beloved's call in a new way.

Remember that day of ordination? To whom did you pledge obedience and purity? Ultimately, the pledge was made to the One who issued the call to your heart. The greater call is to serve, not mere obedience and purity. After many years in loving service, the Caller may be leading you to a fork in the path.

It is a very painful place - that fork in the path. To take it may disappoint family who treasure your priesthood. The new path requires the true poverty of leaving all financial security behind - a decision that a certain rich man could not make. Taking the path is taking up the cross. And through the cross, a transformational resurrection. A new springtime of ministry. A new beginning. A new season of service to the People of God. Rejoice and be glad.

A Transition Path

You are the apple of God's eye. You have a Shepherd who does not fear the lion or wolf. Your God slumbers not nor sleeps. You serve a Mighty Beloved who knows when even a sparrow becomes weary and falls.

Now the shadows surround you. There is a crack in your heart - a crack that cannot be seen on the surface, because you dare not let it show. The season is winter. All seems dead. The blizzard swirls in your heart. It stings. Each act is wearying. Lean into the Lord. Prepare for the time of the snowdrops and crocuses.

"Discernment" is such an uncomfortable word. It means crossing over a frozen river. There is the unknowing. No step forward can be taken without thinking. There is the fear. The ice may give way.

Discernment is also a sacred partnership with the Spirit. It is a time of being supported and listening. When the questions arise or a sense of doubt about your calling or even a prolonged period of dissatisfaction comes, it is the time to focus on the heart and not to rationalize the signs of "something is not quite right here." You may first want to rule out any physical causes for the tiredness you may be experiencing, while actively starting a meditative prayer life. Pick out the place for your "sacred space." Ideally it should be removed from the noise of daily life. Set aside a definite time each day for meditation and treat it as an appointment that cannot be broken. A fruitful place to begin is to meditate upon the story of the rich young man. As you read it aloud, insert your name when the young man is addressed or addresses Christ. Then meditate upon your reactions. What in your current situation is hindering your service and discipleship? Each time you meditate, you will see different aspects of your life of service. Start your meditation dialog with the Spirit, remembering to allow time for that "still small voice within" to reach out to you.

Who knows. During this initial period of discernment, you may discover that only small

adjustments may be needed. There may be a need for a Sabbatical or a real vacation. There may be other roles to which you are being called to filled in your current situation - a nook needing your uniqueness. Or you are experiencing a complex challenge to your True Self and the Divine's calling on your life.

This will be a lonely time. You dare not speak to those in authority over you just yet. Depending on your family, it may be too soon to bring them into the discussion. Seek out someone who has traveled this path before you. Seek out a trusted colleague, outside your faith community. Someone who will hold your discussions confidential. At this point, confidentiality is of utmost importance, for you may discern to remain in place and continue where you are.

As you progress in discernment, you may be realizing that your ministry has changed dramatically. The Beloved is setting before you a table laden with possibilities and inviting you to sample - to exchange your current ministry to another. A change that calls you to leave where you are and follow where the calling will lead.

This is the phase of transitioning. Celebrate your decision to follow where you are being led. Start to build a support system of people who can keep confidences. Transitioning is a time to learn to ride the waves of chaos. Plan out how you are going to take care of yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Along with the passivity of discernment, it is time to assess your skills and credentials. You are doing many services within a church structure that require licensing outside of the denomination's canopy. In addition, your experience will be discounted by an employer because you worked in a "non-profit" environment. You will be facing the same negative expectations that someone coming from a civil service job faces. The perception is that not much was expected of you. You are faced with the dilemma of demonstrating high managerial skills in a situation where the business world does not think good managerial skills can be developed.

Start collecting your pre-requisites. This may mean getting additional college credits or even a degree. Go through the channels where you are and ask that you further your education or start to fulfill the requirements for certification. Even if you decide not to leave, this work will of benefit to the denomination. If the denomination will not fund your needs, use your own resources and make the time to pursue your goals. Look into grants and scholarships. Consider loans as the very last resort. You do not want to start your next step in ministry in debt.

It is also time to become acquainted with costs of living, especially housing. Start a savings account. If you have taken the pledge of poverty, have a trusted person start the account as a joint account where the two of you need to sign for any withdrawals. As a precaution, have a paragraph signed by the both of you to acknowledge that the funds in the account belong to you upon your request.

Start reading that section of the Sunday paper that is usually not read - the want ads. Check the computer job sites. You are looking for the requirements of positions. Ignore ads placed by employment agencies or are placed anonymously.

The time will come when you make your intentions officially known. And you may not be completely ready with your preparations. Trust. Trust in the Spirit and try to ignore those who can only dwell on your shortcomings. You have been following the Spirit since your preparation for ministry. Your path to this point has not been a "grave mistake." You have touched the lives of many. It is a fruitful ministry, not a waste or fraudulent. You are not an "evil" person to be condemned to a place of chastisement. You are a minister of the Lord - following where the Shepherd and Spirit are leading. You are not forsaking your solemn promises. You are carrying them out in a different context to better serve the People of God.

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