

One morning in early October 1980 I decided what my life was all about. I had just left Professor Jon Bridgeman's Ancient History class in Kane Hall at the UW and was crossing Red Square when it came to me. I was going to be a historian. It fit me. I'd do whatever it took. I would dedicate my life to writing and teaching history. And I meant it. That goal directed my life for the next decade. It dictated where I would live, what work I would do, what I would spend most of my hours on. It became my identity. In my mind I was already an historian.

I have preached about some of this before. My decision was risky because positions in university history departments are scarce. It would mean twelve years of college, writing a doctoral dissertation hundreds of pages long. But I did it all because I'd made being a historian was my purpose in life.

"There is need of only one thing." Those words of Jesus to Martha are not meant to dismiss the value of work or the offering hospitality, as some suppose. They are not primarily even meant to prioritize

prayer over work. They are, first of all, a reminder that we are each created for one purpose.

That idea --being created for a purpose -- doesn't make sense to a secular person (such as my 1980 self), who denies the existence of a Creator or any external, objective purpose to human lives. But both the Classical and Christian worldview assume such a goal for life. Both Aristotle and Aquinas taught that just as an acorn had a *telos*, or end – to become an oak tree, so all human beings had the same state of completion toward which they're meant to grow and eventually rest in.

Here we come back to Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. What Jesus means to teach Martha is that the purpose of every human life, the target at which it should be aimed, the oak tree to our acorn, is to be united to Jesus' own divine life. This communion that Mary was modelling is the point of every human life. All the other good things, we're engaged in --the work of getting a meal ready, the other jobs we do, the raising of children, the marrying and burying, the art, the

recreation, all those good things, are but aids and means to that one end. These secondary goals are ultimately only meant to help us find that all-fulfilling resting place in God in eternity – “the one thing necessary.” We’re meant to be single-hearted.

“What is my goal in life?” We may not think about this question much, but we should. The answer to it drives how we live. Besides not even knowing that God has His own plan for our lives, there are two other ways we can error in answering this question. Some of us live with divided hearts. We don’t have a purpose. We live our lives dispersed in many directions.

But we can also fail by being single-hearted – but towards a goal too small for us. That day in Red Square and during the years afterwards – I was setting my course towards my self-determined goal in life. In doing so I was giving my life the meaning I wanted it to have. Other people have chosen as their life’s goal marriage, or raising a child, or other professional work, or an art, etc.

But as good as the vocation of scholarship is, it's too small a goal for one's life. God has something bigger in mind. I'm not demeaning any of these secondary goals of life. But I did come to experience the difference between living towards a goal I set for myself, and one that came from beyond me, and satisfied an even deeper part of me.

During the same years I was in graduate school, I also started my return to the Catholic faith. I've told you that story many times. At first, I didn't see any conflict in the way I viewed these two journeys – towards a becoming a historian and becoming a faithful Catholic. They were both good. But eventually I discerned that God was calling me to go to the seminary and study for the priesthood. I still loved studying history. The idea of being a historian was – and still is – attractive. But I couldn't do both. How to decide? Who sets one's purpose in life?

It was in the call to priesthood that I realized there was a call that came from outside myself – that was part of a purpose and plan that existed independently of me. This vocational discernment made

concrete for me what I had believed rather abstractly by faith: that God was real, and He had a plan for me that I wasn't in control of, and that my plan was connected to the plans He had for others. And there was a meaning behind all of it I didn't control or create – but was bigger than anything I could come up with, a sharing of life with God.

What do you believe your ultimate purpose in life is? Does the way you live your life actually flow from that belief? Ultimately, there is need of only one thing in life. We were made to be single-hearted in loving the One true God. Most people aren't called to be priests, but we're all meant to put His call first. That communion can grow in and through a million different ways of life. But those actions and secondary goals are only healthy and true when they are conformed with, and directed ultimately to, the one thing necessary.