

Gulley

When I was growing up, our family traveled to Vincennes to visit our extended family every few months. **My Grandpa Quinett, who'd never had sons, was overwhelmed by four boys bearing down on him and would escape to his woodworking shop behind his house.** I was his only grandchild who showed an interest in woodworking, so he would permit me to join him. **In his earlier years, he'd made some beautiful pieces of furniture—cabinets and tables and a stunning room addition which he'd joined seamlessly to their 1832 home.** But in his advancing years, he'd grown more timid and limited himself to birdhouses and benches and the occasional porch swing for a neighbor or family member.

When he and Grandma moved to Danville to be closer to family, he was feeling the press of time and wanted to pass on his knowledge, so I became the recipient of his know-how and the eventual heir of his tools. **While he was a skilled woodworker, his teaching methodology was lacking.** He frustrated easily, and was apt to grab the tool out of my hand and do the work himself after only a few moments. “For the love of Mike,” he'd say, “what do you think you're doing? That's not how you hold a saw.”

We'd built a woodworking shop in my father's barn. I would sneak over there, lest he get wind of my presence and come show me where to place every nail and make every cut. But he had an uncanny knack for sensing when I was in town. **When I built our kitchen table in 1988, he was in his late eighties and fading fast, but smelled the sawdust from across town, rose from his death bed to come stand over my shoulder and tell me what I was doing wrong.** "Oh, for the love of Mike, what are you doing? That's not how you cut a mortise! What in the world are you thinking?"

It would have annoyed me, except I'd been taught that God was that way too, and I just assumed it was the way of old men.

Of course, I knew God wasn't a man, even though we used words like *Father* and *King* and *Lord* and *He*. But the similarities between God and my grandfather were startling and the comparison hard to avoid—overly-involved, old men with lots of rules. **I'd been taught that God, like my grandfather, obsessed over the minutiae of my life, preoccupied with its most trivial aspects, requiring a say in the smallest matters.** So I dared not make one move without consulting God on the matter, praying regularly that I not disappoint this God for

fear the tools would be grabbed from my hands and I would be nudged aside, my work and life taken from me.

I learned this God wasn't just obsessed with me, He felt that way about everyone, and had a specific plan for us when it came to our jobs, whom we married, where we lived, how many children we had, and when, how, and with whom we should worship. **If someone was Jewish, God cared whether or not their food was kosher.** If someone was Muslim, God cared what direction they faced when they prayed. I remember going to church with my Baptist grandmother, and being told to dress up because God cared what I wore, though I now suspect my grandmother cared a lot more than God.

But having it drummed into me that God cared about all these things, I feared making the wrong choice, that I would go one direction when God wanted me to go another, that I would miss God's will, and pay drastically for it. **Indeed, God's preoccupation with the slimmest details of our lives was a core tenet of the Catholicism of my youth.** And I was raised in a moderately religious home. Others worshipped an even more persnickety God. Our next door neighbor's were Apostolic Pentecostals and believed God was concerned about the length of their hair, whether or not their knees showed, whether they wore jewelry, perfume, or cologne. **If we had had Amish neighbors, their God would have forbidden them from zippers, electricity, colorful clothing, or**

indoor toilets. I hadn't known God had taken such a firm stand on the plumbing issue, but there you go.

Looking back, it seems humorous, but it wasn't funny at the time. **It was serious business, and we were very anxious about staying within the narrow parameters of God's will.** That will was described as a narrow path, a narrow gate, through which only a few would pass, that to misinterpret God's will would spell our ruination. **So we were advised to pray without ceasing, scrupulously follow our Bible, and obey our religious leaders, lest we make a spiritual misstep and suffer God's rejection.**

Though I am speaking in past terms, this theology is still very much alive and continues to hold great power over many people. **Of course, we all want to live lives pleasing to God, but haven't we also been too willing to let someone else define what that life should look like.** And that someone else has often been more interested in their power and control, than in our growth and well-being. So finally our lives have less and less to do with pleasing God, and more and more to do with pleasing others. **If you ever want to wear yourself out and make yourself miserable, make it your goal to try and please everyone.** I'm not urging you to be selfish, just reminding you of the importance of appropriate self-love. You have to take care of yourself first. **It's like when you're riding on an airplane, the plane loses**

pressure, and the oxygen masks drop down. You have to put yours on first, then you look around and help someone else.

When discerning what we need to do, we listen to ourselves, while remaining sensitive to God’s priorities of love and compassion so we don’t become self-absorbed. What does that look like? Well, I’ve been thinking about God’s will and vocation, what with our seniors graduating and moving onto college or out into the work world. But not just them. **The average person now has four vocational changes over the course of their work lives.** The days of working at the same task all our lives are long over. More older people are re-inventing themselves and their careers. **Sometimes they ask me, “How can I know what God wants me to do?”** I’m still not used to that question. My first impulse is to say, “How the heck do I know? Ask God.” Often behind their question lurks a fear they might choose outside of God’s will.

In his book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner, writes about vocation and doing God’s will. He said, “The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement *a*, but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you’ve missed requirement *b*. On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement *b*, but if most of the time you’re bored and

depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed *a*, but probably aren't helping your patients much either."

Then he said this wise, beautiful truth — "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

So there I was, in 1988, the world needed a kitchen table, and I enjoyed working with wood. **Need and hunger meeting.** And my grandfather—God rest his soul—came along and involved himself the only way he knew how, by taking the hammer from my hand and taking over the job. **And just like that, something that was fun turned into a frustrating effort to please someone who wasn't easily pleased.**

Too often that mirrors our relationship with God. **We believe God wants a say about everything, that God's way, like my grandfather's, is narrow and well-defined, that there is little room for creativity and freedom and thinking for one's self.** There is only drudgery, a joyless sense of order, and strict adherence to the rules. But, Friends, God isn't that way. God gives us the tools to build our lives—grace, kindness, the capacity for intelligence, an appropriate concern for ourselves and others, and a dollop of creative juices—then turns us loose to make of our lives what we will and what we wish.

The first story in the Bible tells us God made the world and that it was good. But the rest of the book is about us making our world, our Eden, and that is good, too. **We find Eden when our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.** When those two come together, and we're there, there's no finer place to be.

The Christianity of my childhood was about pleasing a God who could seldom be pleased, of threading my way through the maze of God's will, always one misstep away from damnation, always at risk of making the wrong move, as if God's will were a highwire.

But I see a new understanding of spiritual discernment emerging, one long overdue. It simply asks, "What is your deep joy?" and "What is the world's deep need?" **And then living where the two overlap.**