

God's will, Henri Nouwen believed, is the way God loves us. For a long time he felt that his own desire, which was to study psychology and later become a teacher in psychology, was also his vocation.

As a university professor he believed he was doing God's will and living according to God's love for him. But at one point it suddenly felt there was a conflict between his career and his vocation. Suddenly he was lost and didn't know where to go.

Nouwen gave up the security of academia and went to live as a missionary in Latin America. After learning Spanish, he moved to a sprawling barrio on the outskirts of the Peruvian desert city of Lima.

He observed poverty at close quarters and learned the virtues of gratitude, joy, and playfulness in the midst of suffering and loss. While he was grateful for the experience, he soon realized he wasn't made for that work—or that God didn't call him there.

Nouwen's months in Peru prepared him for what eventually emerged as his true vocation—to be a pastor in a community of people with developmental disabilities. He said he felt called by that community in a way that he had not by the missionary or academic worlds, even though it was a way of living that seemed incompatible with his gifts and personality.

Our lives are shaped by desires. When what we think we want and what we think God wants conflicts, a process of discernment is advisable. If God's will is the way God loves us, God's will may conflict with our compulsions, with the impulses of our egos, with our ambitions for security, fame and fortune, but it will not conflict with what is in our best interest.

Before we are called to be a butcher, baker, lawyer or engineer, we are called to be disciples. The lives of disciples are shaped by the highest vocation of reason and the will, which is to seek to know the ultimate source of the mystery of being. Above all, the disciple desires to know whether consciousness of that mystery directs us toward a reality that is, in its turn, conscious of us. (This is the work of "beholding.")

The life of discipleship begins with learning to trust that before we desire anything, God desires us. Do we wake up every morning amazed that we are loved by God, aware that this is the ultimate in delight, dignity, and self-worth? Do we habitually see ourselves, other people, and creation in light of God's desire for all life to flourish?

Manifold are the ways in which people awake to God's love for them. Most come to it through family, friends, and worshiping communities. Some, like the Prodigal Son, come to it in the Slough of Despond; some, like Mary Oliver, come to it in the beauty of the wild; some, like Thomas Merton, come to it through "the providence of the right book at the right time."

We are never in a position to have an overview of what is happening in the dramas of grace in our own lives or the lives of others, but our main calling is clear: to let ourselves be desired and loved.

The second aspect of our call to be disciples is to learn to desire what God desires. In desiring what God desires we find the long term shape of our lives. The taste for God often grows by living, almost without realizing it, in ways that please God.

Habits of respect for other people, faithfully fulfilling our responsibilities, having compassion for the marginalized and the suffering, prayer, study, participation in a worshiping community—these and many other practices shape our lives for good.

What if I don't feel like doing these things? I'll wait for the spirit to move me and if the spirit doesn't move me, I won't move. A bit of ancient wisdom to the rescue: feelings follow practices. If you want to feel differently, act differently.

We need to allow our *desires to be educated* by the vocation of Jesus, who prioritized obedience to God's will over everything else. We need to allow our *desires to be educated* by the accumulated wisdom of those who sought first the kingdom of God and his justice, trusting that all that is needed will be supplied.

That we find the notion of allowing our desires to be educated jarring, off-putting even, reveals how far we have drifted from the shores of ancient wisdom.

As the psalmist (19) knew:

The law of the Lord is perfect,
it revives the soul.
The rule of the Lord is to be trusted,
it gives wisdom to the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
they gladden the heart.
The command of the Lord is clear,
it gives light to the eyes.
The decrees of the Lord are truth
and all of them just.
They are more to be desired than gold,
than the purest of gold
And sweeter are they than honey,
than honey from the comb.
So in them your servant finds instruction;
great reward is in their keeping.

God's will is the way God loves us. A rewarding life—measured by a soul revived, a heart full of joy, a mind enlightened—follows the education of our desires, the shaping of our lives, by the Love that created us, sustains us, and embraces us in death.