

As a young girl, Dolly Parton would have big dreams and draw an audience.

She would stand on the porch of her Locust Ridge house in the Great Smoky Mountains of east Tennessee, put a tobacco stick in the cracks of the porch and place a tin can on the stick for a microphone.

Then she would sing to the chickens and the pigs and the dogs and the kids and picture a bigger world. "I imagined it, I dreamed it, I worked for it," she said "and God was good enough to let me have it."

Her parents were married as teenagers, and by the time they were in their mid 30s they had 12 children - six girls and six boys. Looking back on her childhood, Parton says "We were just mountain people who grew up in the church. We grew up knowing Jesus loved us and through God all things are possible, so I've carried that all the way through my life and gathered a lot of strength from that as well. I just always felt like I knew who I was and I just try to stay anchored within myself and my beliefs."

It's amazing how far she's come since those early audiences of the chickens and the pigs. She has 9 grammies, she became an actress and an author with two Oscar nominations along with three Emmys and a Tony. She also runs an entertainment empire, the Dollywood Company, that employs thousands.

Growing up in the mountains, they didn't even have roads where people could come in and out and relied on a missionary doctor whom they paid with canned goods or some ham or corn grown on the farm.

Her mom's side of the family were musical, playing instruments, and her uncle, Bill Owens, would take her around to different places to sing and taught her all the chords on the guitar as he saw she was serious about singing. Listening to the Grand Ole Opry on an old battery radio that they used to pour water on the ground wire in order to bring it in, Parton knew she wanted to be out there in a bigger world she says; she loved her home and the Smokies, but had big dreams.

She began performing as a child, and she'd sing on local radio and TV programs in East Tennessee. As a young teenager she'd be on local radio, and after she graduated high school in 1964 she moved to Nashville. When she spoke at her graduation and told the assembled students of her dreams, she said there was a lot of laughter; but she said that was her vision - to go to Nashville and become a country star - and that only years later did she realize it was a big dream for someone so young, and that they were not laughing at her, just reacting to this big dream that seemed so impossible for a bunch of Smoky Mountain kids.

Parton though says "you can't dream at someone else's expense," and that a person has to get out there, make those dreams come true. You've got to be the one to sacrifice what you need, to lean on who all will help you. You've got to get out there and

put legs on them, wings on them, feet on them, hands on them, fingers. You've got to get out there and work it.”

And work it she did.

She'd appear on a country music show, but her early albums didn't hurt too high until she eventually had a hit; her biggest early one being Jolene in 1973 followed by more big country hits in the 1970s. From there came pop hits, acting in film and theater, and Dollywood.

But all of this has required much work; and her life has also had many challenges. But sustaining her through this has been her faith and her husband, Carl Dean, to whom she has been married since 1966. Their first date was to McDonalds. They eloped as her record label preferred her to stay unwed; they went to a little church in Ringgold Georgia. For their 50th they renewed their vows. They've been through much, including supporting one another through the pain of not being able to have children.

As a child, she said she'd turn to God, and go to an abandoned chapel near her home and sing hymns to God; talking to Him on a one-on-one basis. She attributes this faith in God to helping her through a dark period, when she even contemplated taking her life; in a daze her dog, Popeye, came into the room and she says he was a messenger from God, jolting her back into reality. She does not think she would have harmed herself, but it was a real wake up call.

Not only did she have a renewed appreciation for life, but she would use that appreciation to, as she says, make this world a better place. In her words, “I always wanted to do something to touch people.” Her music and acting have, but she's also been incredibly active in giving; in fact she donated \$1 million for the research that helped create the Moderna vaccine for Covid-19. It took some digging from social media sleuths to learn this, because Parton is reclusive about her philanthropy. But this work includes promoting childhood literacy to supporting those affected by natural disasters and providing numerous college scholarships through her Dollywood Foundation. She has an Imagination Library initiative that sends a free book each month to children under 5 whose parents request them; that amounts to 2 million free books per month. She was inspired to do this as her dad could not read or write and was very smart, but was frustrated through his illiteracy. Awarded the Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy not too long ago, Parton says she gives from the heart and if she sees a need and can fill it, she will.

Parton is still doing all of these things, and she says she will never retire, but just wants to keep making a difference in the world.

Like Saint Paul, Parton runs the race, and along the ways she's known how to run it well, but also knows that she isn't at the finish line yet.

So, how about us?

Most of us at some point when we are kids are asked what we'd like to be when we grow up. But what we also realize is the answer to that question is just like Parton's answer on dreams: you've got to get out there and work to obtain them. But hopefully what we also come to realize the real dream isn't to have the perfect job, but to be a truly happy person - one, like Parton, who knows her final destination isn't the Country Music Hall of Fame but heaven. It's why Paul isn't depressed about the time of his departure; rather this is what he's prepared for his whole life, and it's a new phase that is about to begin. Now he's ready for the real journey, like Bilbo Baggins getting into the boat and going off to the East.

In our second reading from 2 Timothy, Paul is writing towards the end of his life; it probably is one of the last pieces of writing we had from Paul. The libation was an after dinner drink Romans would pour on the ground as a token to the gods, and he knows he'll soon be leaving. And he writes a younger Timothy with some advice.

He speaks of finishing the race; certainly Paul was aware of sporting events and races. And if you've run in a race, you know it's not easy. I know, you don't look at me and say that man can run in a marathon. But I did run in a few 10Ks once upon a time. And you sign up, they give you a nice number, a t-shirt, and you're excited and you start and it seems great. But then you go a bit, and you realize hey this is going to take a while. Along the way there are people cheering, little mile markers to give you inspiration, but you have to keep going. And so is it with life; life is a marathon. Sometimes at one point we are excited and thinking this is great; other times we are thinking boy this is so hard; sometimes we just want to give up. But all of us can finish the race if we keep at it and take Paul's advice.

The starting point is remembering what true happiness is. Our final destination is heaven. But how often we get side tracked. How often we think something will make us happy when it won't; sometimes these things are sinful, other times they just don't fill us up in the right way. A bad relationship we know isn't right; a preoccupation with money or power and authority; getting more stuff. What struck me with Dolly Parton is she had those big dreams on the farm, but she never became preoccupied with greed, or overcome with the rock and roll lifestyle; rather she has kept trying to grow as a person. So often at various points we think the ultimate happiness is this or that, but we have to remember it's heaven.

Second, we discern. What does God want you to do? He has a plan for you, and new chapters are always being written. Make time for reflection and meditation. Perhaps it's a new career; making a commitment in a relationship; looking at trying a new project or volunteering. We need to make time to listen to God so as to discern where He wants us to go.

Third, when the starter says "on your mark, get set, and go," we go. And this is the hard part. Not the initial start, but the continuing to go. Parton like all people found it took time to rise in Nashville but also to grow as a person. Whenever we set out on what God has called us to do, we'll find it's challenging. A relationship takes work. Being a parent

takes work. Following your vocation takes work. As much as I loved the experience of seminary, it was 6 years after finishing college, and there were times when I thought why is this taking so long, I'll never be up there on ordination day 2007 is so far away and there's all this academic work, this work in a teaching parish, this trying to figure out communication and interpersonal dynamics. But I knew I would not be truly happy if I left seminary. So when the going gets tough, remind yourself God called me to this - and I can do it.

Fourth, remember that as we go along, we want to become better and better. A runner finishes one race, but they work on getting their time lower for the next; they go back to training. Even the winner of one race is back training for the next. And so it must be with us. The Gospel in it's translation is almost humorous when we hear of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Who would say a prayer like that? In reality the Pharisee is not that bad of a person; we should rejoice when we see progress in the spiritual life, and he has indeed made some good choices. The tax collector though asks for mercy and recognizes he has work to do. Jesus' audience would have been pretty shocked, but it's a reminder to us salvation is not assured. This should not fill us with fear, but rather a desire to get better and better. My music tastes are somewhat broad, but while I like Parton I also like the Bee Gees. A good friend told me he saw a documentary on the band, and it talked about how they had success in the 60s, but then faded, and they had to reinvent themselves and change it up; so they did, going into disco and falsetto. Then disco faded and they had to reinvent themselves again, which they did, getting more into writing songs. Parton did this too throughout her career, changing music styles a bit, getting into theater, into acting, into business. So how about us? It's so important to look at how we are leading our lives; to look at how we are doing as a parent or as a member of a family; how much effort we are putting into our faith and our relationship with God, and remembering that while we should say yes, this is good when we look at the good moments, we don't gloss over the things that need to change for the better, or the things we can do to go from being good to great.

Fifth, we help one another to run the race. Parton teams with so many people, but she also has done so much good through her works of charity. In our lives, we build one another up; and sometimes this is really hard. It takes effort to work with a child as they are learning things. It takes fortitude to not be afraid talking to a coworker about what we believe in faith and morals and why we go to Mass, or why we believe life is sacred from the womb to the tomb. The world will tell us time and time again shut up, leave me alone. We've even gotten a handful of nasty grams about the Memorial of the Innocents that we have in front of our church for respect life month. But remember, we can't keep our gifts hidden. Our life isn't about us - it's about being a people of hope and making this world a better place. That means encouragement, but it also means being generous with our time and talent; and it means being an evangelist and speaking in word and deed about what we believe in.

And last, remember what Parton said: she's nowhere near the finish line and is going to keep going and going. Sometimes life circumstances change and we do different things,

and it's fine to retire and have time for relaxation which is important. But as long as we breathe, God is wanting us to do different things - so let's listen to Him.

No matter what you are called to in life, all of us want to go to heaven. What an amazing place it will be. But to get there and become a saint requires a lot more than working 9 to 5. It requires a constant effort. Thankfully we do not run the race alone. God is with us, as are so many people God has put into our lives. Don't worry about the seemingly faster runners at times in front of you. Don't throw in the towel when you hit the wall and think I can't overcome this sin or struggle or I can't talk about my beliefs because the world or people I know don't like what I have to say and conflict is hard. And don't think you've crossed the finish line. That day will come, for the Lord will always stand by you and give you strength. So let use every day to run to Him, and help one another run the race to it's completion.