

“Lutheran Words: Vocation”

After being married a little over a year, a young woman found out she was pregnant with her first child. It was a surprise and certainly didn't fall within her “5 year plan.” You see, she had graduated from college, got married, and began her career all within a couple of years. She and her husband were just starting out and while they both wanted kids, they just didn't want them so soon. She was excited but she was also a little scared and like many first time mothers, had a lot of unanswered questions. What things did they need to buy in order to care for the baby? How was this going to affect their new marriage? Would they still go out to eat or hang out with friends? And, what about her job? Of course, she would take maternity leave, but would happen when that was over? Who was going to take care of the baby while she was working? Well, fast forward nine months and the young couple welcomed a beautiful baby girl. And fast forward a few weeks after that and the young woman realized a calling in her life that she had never considered. She was not going back to her job outside of the home because she truly felt that taking care of her baby was what God, at the moment, was calling her to do. Being a mother and loving and serving her child was her vocation.

Now, this is not the kind of thing we generally associate the word vocation with is it? Today, the word has become synonymous with one's profession or their job. What do you do for a living, we might ask? What is your vocation? Well, guess what? We can all thank Dr. Martin Luther because apparently, he was the first to use the word “vocation” to refer to not only secular positions and occupations but to those most important offices we hold but don't get paid for such as that of being a spouse, parent, and citizen. Before Luther fine tuned this word, it was reserved for the those callings to the sacred ministry or other religious orders. The vocation of a priest, nun, or monk was rightly understood in the 1500's as a calling from God but a mother or a maid; a carpenter or nurse, not so much. But this doctrine of vocation, which is our Lutheran Word this week as we continue our sermon series, teaches that the purpose of one's calling, whatever it might be, is serving others. Because through us, God is graciously at work, caring for the human race through the work of other humans. Think about this. When we are at work in God's creation; when we are serving others through the things we do day in and day out - as mundane as those things may seem to us - God is at work.

Martin Luther loved to talk and write about this doctrine. In one particular sermon he preached in 1529, he wrote these words regarding vocation. “Our foolishness consists in laying too much stress upon the show of works and when these works do not glitter as something extraordinary, we regard them as of no value. We are poor fools when we do not see that God has attached and bound his Word to such common works as domestic or civil affairs, so as to include them in his command, which he wishes us to accept as if he himself had appeared from heaven. What would you do if Christ himself with all the angels were visibly to descend, and command you in your home to sweep your house and wash the pans and the kettles? How happy would you feel, and not know how to act for joy, not for the work’s sake, but that you knew that thereby you were serving him, who is greater than heaven and earth...”¹ Now, be honest. When was the last time you cleaned the house or did the dishes and thought. Wow, “God just worked through me to serve my family with a clean home and clean dishes?”

But that’s the way God works in his world. He is hidden but he works through us in our service to other people. And the catch is that he can do that in whatever place he has put us. From the place of a mother or husband; nurse or carpenter; CEO or pastor, God uses people as his hands to give his blessings.

The Bible is full of real people who God worked through to bless others. A great example is Stephen from our reading in Acts today.

In our reading, the twelve apostles were busy preaching the word of God in the early church. They were busy praying and doing many other things as well, I’m sure. But they couldn’t do it all. There were other needs, like the feeding the poor, that they couldn’t regularly get to. So like all good pastors, they delegated this responsibly to some good laymen. These “wise” men “of good repute” as the text tells us were called not to preach the word of God but to help administer the daily distribution of aid. And one of these men was Stephen. He was a man “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” according to the text. We know from the next chapter in Acts, he was gifted speaker and until his last breathe never backed down from his commitment to Christ. No doubt he probably could have held out for a better position in the church than bread server but he graciously served in the position he was called. This man, who was chosen to help out the early church because of his good reputation and wisdom, was a powerful witness to Christ, and as the last verse of our reading says so powerfully, “Was full of grace and power was doing great wonders and signs among the people (vs. 8).”

¹ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther Vol. 5* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 214.

What about you? Wherever God has called you in your life, do you see it as an opportunity for the Lord to serve others through you? Or like so many of us, do you whine and complain about wanting something more that would be a better fit for your gifts - maybe something that would give you more satisfaction or at least a feeling of more fulfillment. All of us at times struggle with where we are in life but the distinct Lutheran doctrine of vocation helps us see where we are presently, no matter if it is where we think we should be, with some clarity. Because what's so important about vocation is that believe it or not, our callings are not something we choose ourselves but something given by God. Of course, we think we are in control don't we but remember our young mother? She didn't choose to become pregnant at that particular moment in her life but it wasn't up to her. God called her to a particular place. He gave her that tremendous gift of life. Through her, he continues to provide for that child and the entire family in the things she does for the home each and every day. It's not glamorous; it's not what she went to college for but it is one of her primary vocations and like Stephen, she serves her Lord with grace and power. She serves this way because she takes Christ's command to love our neighbors at face value, which is what this whole vocation thing is ultimately all about!

"Love your neighbor," the man testing Jesus, answered in our Gospel reading from Luke. "Love your neighbor," Christ tells us four times in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, "Love your neighbor," Paul quotes Jesus in Romans and Galatians as does James in his Epistle. "Love your neighbor," says the Lord in Leviticus. So, that's what she does and that's what all of us who confess Christ as Savior must do. This has nothing to do with earning God's love; that's all on him. Through Christ, his love for us was won on the cross as payment for our sins and proved for us when the crucified Savior rose on the third day alive. But it does have everything to do with serving the people we interact with everyday in the places God calls us to be.

So, in light of all this, I think it's safe to say that even if we aren't particularly satisfied where we are in the present, it's where God has allowed us to be. Maybe you have different dreams and desires - that's ok - but for the moment you are where you are today. And no matter where that is as long what you are doing is moral, and ethical, God can and will work through you to serve and ultimately love your neighbors. And what's so cool about this whole thing is that whether you are working in a restaurant, cleaning teeth, selling pharmaceuticals or building supplies, working in a factory, driving a truck, answering phones, volunteering at the hospital, enjoying your retirement, being a stay at home Dad or a working mom, or even being unemployed or underemployed, God does

his thing through you! Yes, while you wait, other opportunities will present themselves but what's so important for us to remember is that this whole thing is not about the future; it is about the here and now.

Of course, viewing our callings in life this way does take tremendous Christian maturity, I admit. Not all of us are there just yet are we? But I encourage us all to ponder and pray about the tremendous importance and significance that the numerous and various vocations we all have play in this life. God is busy doing his thing in the midst of our work whether we realize it or not. Through all those things that seem so boring and routine, He is serving our families, our coworkers, our community, and our church through the tasks that we do. May God grant that we understand this more and more each day. **Amen.**