

“Vocation”
June 3, 2018
I Samuel 3:1-10
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

How did you decide to do what you do? How did you find your vocation? How did you decide what work you wanted to do? Maybe you do what one of your parents did. My dad was a scientist, a physicist actually. But his father was a farmer and then worked in the Oldsmobile factory in Lansing. So when dad got out of high school, that's where he went to work. He lasted about a year and a half until he couldn't stand it any more and so he went to college and majored in math and then in physics. So when I was in high school I took a lot of science classes, so did my brothers, because I think in the back of our minds was the idea that we would be some sort of scientists like my dad. When my brother started college he began as a physics major, but it didn't take him very long before he switched to computer science. When I was in high school I had taken physics and I understood some of it, but I liked biology more so when I got to college I switched to that, and that lasted a whole year before I couldn't stand it any more. By that time I was volunteering at a local church with their Junior High youth group, working with a bunch of kids every week. And I couldn't believe people actually got paid to do what I was doing: talking to kids, studying, praying, teaching them God's word. I guess that's how I discovered that my “vocation,” what I was called to do was to preach and to teach.

How did you figure it out? Did you study something in school and all of a sudden think, “I could do this for the rest of my life?” Did you work some random summer job and discover that the job wasn't random after all, but that this fed your soul and you wanted to do this long term? Did you try out a bunch of different things, jobs, internships, interviews with people who did this, before you knew what you wanted to go after? Did you do something else first, discover it wasn't for you, tried another thing, and maybe another, before you landed on that thing that you felt called to do?

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin term “vocare,” which means “to call.” It has come to mean the occupation that we do most of our lives, tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, or whatever. But I think it

means more than that. I've been thinking this week a lot about our friend, Murray. He's only been gone, or at least passed from our sight, since Thursday night, but I miss him already. I miss him sitting up here next to me on Sunday mornings. I miss him coming into the church on Mondays for a meeting of the Pastoral Care Team or the staff with his cheery greeting and the wisdom he would share. I miss his insight at Bible Study on Thursday mornings. I used to think that it was a shame that Murray only came to the church after his retirement from Pfizer, that he had so many gifts to share with the church, it was a shame that he missed his calling for so many years. But then, I began to think that maybe our calling changes. Maybe at one stage of our lives it is to do one thing, but at another stage of our life it may be to do something else. At one place in his life, Murray was called to be a scientist, at another to manage other scientists and their efforts, at another time to be president of the school board, at a later time to help lead the boy scouts, then to go back and be a student, to later be called to chaplaincy and pastoral care, and to be the assistant to a pastor who needed his help. Maybe his vocation changed depending on where he was in his life. Maybe our vocations change. Maybe God calls us to different things at different times in our lives.

Or maybe not. I've begun to think that we misunderstand vocation. I don't think vocation is just discovering what job we are supposed to do. Vocation is discovering who we are. It's not deciding what we are to do, it is discerning who God wants us to be. I don't think Murray's vocation changed. I think he was always called to lead, to teach, to share his wisdom, to guide, to encourage. The Quaker theologian Parker Palmer addresses this in his book "Let Your Life Speak": [My newborn granddaughter] did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. . . . Thomas Merton calls it true self. Quakers call it the inner light, or "that of God" in every person. The humanist tradition calls it identity and integrity. No matter what you call it, it is a pearl of great price. . .

The deepest vocational question is not “What ought I to do with my life?” It is the more elemental and demanding “Who am I? What is my nature?” . . . [I believe we’ve got to get our own *who* right before we can begin to address the question of *what* am I to do.]

Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we *ought* to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world.¹

What is your vocation? It’s not your current job. It’s who you are, it is who you are becoming. Not what is God calling you to do, but who is God calling you to be? That’s what we are to discern. How we, as children of God, can as Henri Nouwen says, listen and respond “to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God’s desire.”²

I believe God calls me to be a preacher and teacher. Wherever I am. Pastor or not. What about you? You are all children of God, but who else are you? We are all called to love one another, but how does that work out? Whatever job you happen to get paid for, what is there about you that is your calling to the world? Teach, guide, learn, pray, support, encourage, discern, give insight, provide vision—are those part of who you are? Bill Plotkin says, “Discovering your unique gift to bring to your community is your greatest opportunity and challenge. The offering of that gift—your true self—is the most you can do to love and serve the world. And it is all the world needs.”³

Vocation, as we have said, comes from the Latin word meaning calling. But before that it comes from the word meaning voice. Vocation does not come from a voice “out there” calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be, to

¹ Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak*

² Nouwen, Henri

³ Plotkin, Bill. *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*. P. 13

fulfill the original selfhood given to me at birth by God.⁴ And perhaps that's our job as the church. To help each other hear the voice within us, to nurture that gift of self, and to give each other a place to practice our vocation. Murray was a wise man, a man of great insight. But most of all he was a man of faith, a faithful disciple and a faithful friend. That was his vocation—who he was called to be. Who are you called to be?

⁴ Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. P. 9-10