

Epiphany 3, January 22, 2017

Vocation

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Rev. Dorothy Cottingham

Christ the King Lutheran Church, Tigard, OR

Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
Gracia y paz de dios del Padre, Hijo, y Espíritu Santo
Grace to you and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Seminarians love to tell their “call story”.

The first exercise at the first seminary retreat I was required to attend was simple:

Break into groups of four and tell your call story.

Nancy’s story was epic! It included walking on hot coals and seeing visions of angels.

Matt’s told of leaving the faith tradition of his childhood after being abused by the leaders of that church.

Audrey described the blinding light that led her to Jesus and away from a life of debauchery and hedonism.

Then it was my turn to tell how Jesus had called me to walk away from 40 years of bookkeeping to become an ordained minister of word and sacrament. My story seemed boring compared to the others.

October 31st is the day most people recognize as Halloween. I was never enamored of the costumes, candy or walking around outside in the cold rain. I was content to be at church where, every year we watched the 1953 movie “Martin Luther”.

October 31st in my world is Protestant Reformation Day! The anniversary of the day, 500 years ago that Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses, or statements about faith and religion to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg, Germany.

Luther set out to reform the Roman Catholic Church and succeeded in creating a protest movement that, among other things led to a new way of viewing vocation, or call.

Prior to the Reformation people accepted the notion that certain callings were somehow more holy than others. Specifically, the man who was called to be a priest, bishop or monk was superior to and more loved by God than the man who was a farmer, cobbler or chimney sweep. And women? There was no call for women in the secular world. A blessed woman, a pure and upright woman was called to religious life in a convent where all of her needs would be provided by God through the generosity of farmers, cobblers and the like, distributed by the most holy priests, bishops and monks.

Luther took issue with the idea that work done inside the church was somehow superior to the work done by ordinary people, including princes and kings. In an open letter to the German Christian nobility, Luther wrote this:

“It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests and monks are to be called the “spiritual estate”; (while) princes, lords, artisans and farmers the “temporal estate”.

[All] Christians are truly of the “spiritual estate”, and there is among them no difference at all but that of office”. Luther thus began a movement toward a more biblical understanding of vocation. All people have the ability to function as equals under God!

He pushed this idea further in a Christmas homily on Luke 2.

In it he holds up the shepherds as an example of God’s divine call extended to ordinary people. The shepherds, having seen the infant Messiah don’t rush to become religious leaders. No, Luther says in that sermon, “[the shepherds] return to their place in the fields to serve God there”!

Luther’s message was this: whatever you do, whatever your vocation, your occupation, you are called by God to serve one another and bring order to the world. Work outside the church has infinite value in God’s economy.

In his tract “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther writes“...the works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks...all works are measured before God by faith alone”.

In effect, says noted Luther historian Gene Edward Veith “the whole economic system is the means by which God gives us our daily bread.”

Each part of the economic food chain is a vocation through which God works to distribute his gifts.

The youngest of my five brothers worked at Franz Bakery for 31 years. At various times he worked on the bread line, the bun machine and eventually he was known as “The Muffin Man”. When he retired at age 50 I congratulated him on a successful career as a baker. He brushed it off saying “that wasn’t a career, it was a calling to feed hungry people”. Mark was part of the economic food chain through which God distributes daily bread.

What other work or career could be examined in a similar way? What economic chain is your work a part of? I was 12 years old when my first niece was born. My job was babysitting her and then her and her sister. Every Friday I would take the city bus to my sister and brother-in-law’s home, staying with them until after church on Sunday.

I helped my sister clean house, do laundry and play with the girls. That didn't seem like much and it was fun to play with my baby nieces. I did not know until many years later how deeply my brother-in-law appreciated my presence. My sister had MS and was physically unable to do the heavy housework. Called to be a play-time babysitter for my nieces eased the life of my sister and her husband.

What is your call story? What have you been called to do or be in the name of Jesus?

Peter and Andrew, James and John were busy carrying out their call when Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and spotted them fishing. He called to them and said "follow me and I will show you how to fish for people".

Yes, at that moment they dropped everything, left their dad in charge of the boat and set out with Jesus. They returned to their work from time to time. But I suspect they had a different perspective of what that work meant.

Our work is to be the light shining in the darkness leading kings and presidents and neighbors to Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Called by name at the font of baptism we come to our work, whatever it is with joy and gratitude to God who invites us to the feast of bread and wine, Jesus body and blood.

We leave this place nourished for the work we have to do, the temporal work of student, caregiver, real estate, retirement, teacher, neighbor, friend. We leave this place nourished for the spiritual work we have to do sharing the good news of Jesus the Christ. Jesus invites to follow him! He will show us how to tell the good news to those who long to hear it.

The giving of time, talent and resources is our direct response to the generosity God has showered on us. Financial Giving Intent forms are available from the ushers, or at the font. Spend some time prayerfully considering God's abundant gifts in your life. Next week we will lay our giving intentions on the altar, dedicating those riches to God, the giver of all abundance.

My prayer is that God continues to bless the work you do in your offices, hair salons, classrooms, wherever you are called and that God continues to bless the gifts you bring to this place.

Thanks be to God!