

Nothing More Important: Your Calling
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Deuteronomy 10:12-19
Philippians 2:12-18
Matthew 10:32-39

A bishop once visited an insurance executive at his place of work, to learn more about it. As an example, the executive told him how he had handled the case of a high school dropout, helping her continue in school and eventually achieve a good position. The bishop commented, "That is Christian calling." Surprised, the executive replied, "I thought calling was about being a church council member or Sunday School teacher or a pastor." With some emotion he said, "Bishop, nobody ever told me that what I do here is my calling." The bishop replied, "Your calling is all about how God uses you in your daily work – *that's* where the Spirit's gifts empower you."

Today we are talking about *your calling*. As many of you know, this is the last piece of a three-part sermon series called "Nothing More Important." There are three important elements to your faith: *Jesus, as central to your faith; Scripture, as foundational to your faith; and your calling, as response to your faith.* My hope, as I complete my ministry as pastor in your midst, is that you will always remember these three things: Jesus, Scripture and your calling. Nothing is more important. Now, stepping down in my role as pastor, I hope to expand my *own* calling, working among you in different ways.

Today, as we explore *your* calling, we'll begin by setting a foundation and then move on to how you live that out. What does it mean to have a vocation, a calling? And then, how do you live it? How do you take a stand for what you believe in – for the weakest among you, and for Jesus? Again I encourage you to take out pen and paper and jot down bullet points. Build a case you can share with someone else.

We begin with the foundation, set by Martin Luther. Luther gave us, as a church, a real gift when he developed his theology on calling, or *vocation* (from the Latin, "vocare," to call). In Luther's day, people understood *vocation* narrowly -- only priests or nuns had a vocation. (In Catholic circles, you can still hear the word used in that way.) But Luther, who left the priesthood, got married and started a family, began to understand "vocation" in a whole new way. He saw it in his marriage as caring for his wife, serving God together. He saw it in his family as providing a home where faith was discussed and practiced freely, a small community of faith. He saw God's calling in every aspect of life – serving him to the best of one's ability, always honoring God and giving thanks to him. Every Christian has a vocation.

Today, we still use the word *vocation* narrowly, but in a different way. We tend to confuse it with *career*, as in: "I feel called to be a teacher, or a lawyer, or a construction worker." But your calling is not the same as your job, although they interact. It's how you approach all of your life. I'd like to take a few minutes to help you understand what Luther taught about vocation, because it is a unique gift Lutherans bring to the larger church. It helps you to understand your place in this world, your responsibilities and challenges. It also helps you to understand the role of "Law" (as distinct from "Gospel") in your life. Let's give it a shot.

Luther taught that your calling has to do with your "station," i.e., whatever situation you have in life. And it changes over time. You have a station as a child, as a student, as an adult. Your station determines your responsibilities, certain boundaries and also your opportunities. When we went to Africa, for example, it was our children who were often the first to contact our neighbors, because their homes were wide open to them. We have an Eagle Scout in our congregation who is doing food drives for FISH. He is using his station as a scout, to live out his calling as a Christian. Everyone has a station.

Luther said that your calling is to do God's will in your station. It begins with your natural responsibilities of that station: doing your homework well as a student; respecting your parents and those in authority; respecting and loving your spouse; working at your job in honorable and competent ways; being a good neighbor. Your calling is about putting into practice your Christian values: going the extra mile, practicing kindness and hospitality. One of our members told me recently about having been kept on hold on the phone while trying to make a doctor's appointment. When the frustrated receptionist finally got back to him, he made his appointment and then he reached out to her. "It sounds like you're a little stressed this morning. You must be under a lot of pressure." After a moment's hesitation he added, "God bless you!" He says she was silent for a moment; he wondered if he had crossed a line. And then she said, "That's the nicest thing anyone has said to me all morning. Thank you." A good example of your calling.

Let's turn now to Law and Gospel in regards to Vocation (cool). Luther said that the Law has two functions. In the area of Salvation, the Law acts like a mirror, showing you your sin. Similarly, it acts like a judge, because you are not up to God's standard. And that drives you to the cross, where you experience God's grace. In the area of Salvation, the Law opens the door to the Gospel. But in the area of Vocation, the Gospel opens the door to the Law. Because the Law now functions in a different way: it shows you how to live, how to fulfill God's will, how to do what he asks of you. The psalmist says, "I love your law!" This is Vocation, what you are now *freed* to do, what you now *love* to do. In the area of Salvation the Law seems fearful; but in Vocation the Law becomes a delight. Here is where what you *do* makes a difference. Here is where your works *count*, as you reach out to others with God's love.

There's much more that can be said, but we'll stop there. That's the foundation – Vocation, 101. It is, using Paul's words from our second lesson, "God [working] in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." It's your response to what God has first done for you.

How then do you live that out? It means you *take a stand*. And first, your calling is to take a stand for the weakest among you. In our first lesson, Moses sets out the vocation of all God's people. It's a command that is repeated often throughout the Bible. Here is your calling: to care for the orphan, the widow and the foreigner in your midst.

Now, these could literally be the orphan, the widow and the foreigner. They must and should be cared for, and the Church needs to stand up for them. Metaphorically speaking, these are the ones with the least power, the ones with no voice. Who is the orphan in your midst? The person

who has nobody -- no family in the area, to whom they can turn. No one with whom to spend the holidays. They stand alone with no one to care for them. Do you know anyone like that? How about the widow -- in biblical times, she was one with no rights -- no property, no income, no voice. Today it might be the homeless, the incarcerated, the poor. Those who are temporarily without home and livelihood. Who do you know like that? And then the foreigner -- the stranger, the newcomer, perhaps someone who doesn't know the language, who doesn't know the system. Refugees. I remember back in the 80s, when the churches were asked to help settle Vietnamese refugees: help them find homes, learn the language, figure out the bus system. Today, maybe it's that kid at school, sitting by himself. Maybe it's the newcomer at work, who hasn't learned the ropes yet. Do you know someone like that? You need to *take a stand* for the orphan, the widow and the foreigner, the weakest in our society. It's your calling.

The thing is that God says this over and over: "You were once foreigners and slaves in Egypt and I saved you and freed you. Now, *you* must take care the oppressed and the foreigners among you." My friends, this calling goes deep. We cannot afford to ignore it, especially today where oppression and the resultant flow of refugees have become worldwide issues. God calls you and me to care for the stranger among us because as he says, we ourselves were once strangers. The Apostle Peter, notes, "Once you were no people, but now you are my people; once you had no mercy; now you have received mercy." You've been saved; now you are asked to serve. Salvation leads to Vocation. It's a strong biblical theme.

So take a stand for the orphan, the widow and the foreigner. But most importantly, your calling is to take a stand for your faith, for Jesus. We have heard, over the past few weeks, of those who have taken very courageous stands for their faith during critical times. Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor who stood up to the Nazis. He made a difference. We still learn from him today. Qureshi, who converted from Islam to Christianity, bringing pain and disgrace into his family. It *cost* him to hurt the people he loved the most. But Qureshi is making a difference today. There are many more. Queen Esther, who risked her life for her people, the Jews. She was challenged: "And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" Esther made a difference. Daniel, the prophet, took a stand for his faith -- by simply continuing his practice of prayer to the one true God. And then he named the Name: "*My God* can save me, even from the mouths of the lions." Daniel made a difference. You too, have been put into a certain place at a certain time to bear witness to your beliefs. You can make a difference. My friends, take a stand for your faith!

It's not always easy. You may feel like you are out there, on a limb, all by yourself. But God has called us, as Christians, to take the unpopular stand, to go against the flow and to make waves. Think of it this way: If you are not willing to take a stand, who will? If not you, who? God gives you his promise: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:6) Jesus says in our Gospel lesson today, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven." You have heard the phrase, "I'm here for a reason." Yes. That reason is your calling. And your calling is to stand up for your faith.

We can say so much more. But let's stop there to consider the next step. *What can I actually do? How do I fulfill this rather awesome and sometimes overwhelming calling?* Well, the people I just mentioned started with small steps, doing what was in front of them to do. Daniel prayed, as he always had. Queen Esther asked her husband to listen to her request. What can you do? Here are some suggestions:

1. Listen to the other person. It's not about you! As they speak, don't be thinking about what you are going to say; just listen. The Holy Spirit will give you the words. Your job is to listen to the concerns and questions that person has. Address those concerns.
2. Take a moment to reflect when a question is raised. Be honest. For example, *Why do you go to church?* Stop and reflect: *Why do I go?* Maybe it's this: "I want to know the truth. So I go to church." Or this: "I believe in God. I want to know more about him." (Worship, prayer) Again, be honest. People respect honesty. Take a moment to reflect; they want to know what you really think.
3. Don't try to say everything. But say something. Maybe you're at the lunch table at work, and someone mentions Christians or the church. You can say quietly, "I'm a Christian. I believe." (Smile) Leave it there and see what happens. Don't try to say everything but *say something*. Then leave space for people to respond.
4. Build relationships. Witness is not an agenda. It is not about notches on your belt. Witness is most effective when it's built on a relationship of friendship and trust. Reach out to the other person as a friend.

My friends, your salvation gives you the courage. Your vocation gives you the opportunity. We live in both worlds – in God's eternal Kingdom and on this beautiful earth. And we are to live in both worlds fully, joyfully, completely. In our vocations, those worlds meet. Bonhoeffer said that this life is simply the Prologue to the Book – the prologue to the next life that still awaits us and has so much to offer. The Prologue is important – it's why Jesus hasn't returned yet. He is giving opportunity for everyone to receive him as Lord and Savior, to become his follower. Our vocation is all about the Prologue. But the Book, my friends, the Book! Those chapters are still in eternity, waiting to be written.

As I now move from the pulpit to the pew, this is my hope for you and for all of us. There's nothing more important: Jesus as central to your faith. Scripture as foundation to your faith. Your calling as response to your faith. I hope you never forget it. My prayer is that you live out your calling and take a stand. For the weakest. For Jesus.