

Monday, September 9, 2024

Dear friends and colleagues,

The church is facing a crisis of vocational theology.

Evidence abounds on the surface. The job market for church professionals is as precarious as ever as it tracks the economic realities of denominational decline. Seasoned pastors worry that the gifts and capacities they bring to ministry no longer have utility for churches facing seismic change. Congregations struggle with major hurdles as they seek to find talented, eager, equipped clergy ready to love them and lead them; meanwhile, seminarians graduate all dressed and ready for ministries that may no longer exist; or, they find themselves talking with search committees clearly hungry for someone with the power of miracles in their fingers. Across the board, the church is facing a crisis of practical vocational execution – we simply struggle to pair willing leaders with hungry churches for the sake of sustainable ministries.

In addition, the church serves a world facing its own set of vocational crises. Shifts away from the industrial economics of the past – and towards the uncertain technological landscape of the future – have left generations of people without a stable sense of vocational identity, or with such identity stripped away. But even for those just now coming into adulthood, the world stands generally unready to nurture honest discernment: the college students who come through the door at University Presbyterian Church in Austin regularly describe the systemic economic and cultural pressures that will severely inhibit their capacity to find professional satisfaction – or they express their hope that God will call them somewhere that also comes with a six-figure income.

Both for the church's internal discernment and its outward proclamation, we need a better theology of vocation.

What we have closest at hand, at the moment, is the maxim offered by Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner in his 1973 book *Wishful Thinking*, in which he suggested that *“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”* There's something beautifully poetic about Buechner's maxim – undoubtedly why it has been repeated year after year, sermon after sermon, confirmation class after confirmation class. And yet the poetic brevity of the line also belies the real challenge and complexity of imagining God's calling on our lives in a world full of change, inequity, and sin. What would Buechner say to the immigrant child whose deep gladness is insulated from the world's hunger by multiple layers of structural oppression? What to the justice-seeking young lawyer having to choose between defending privileged corporate institutions and a lifetime of crippling student loan repayments? What to any child of God so many years into their own vocational journey who may nonetheless hear the voices inside asking if they have somehow missed the mark?

And what would Buechner say, of course, about the world's persistent hunger for gladless jobs? Somebody, of course, has to clean toilets (feel free to insert whatever task you find most objectionable here). Are we really to imagine that God has created people with a glad heart for cleaning toilets precisely equivalent in number to the toilets for which the world demands cleanliness? Are we really meant to convince ourselves that everyone who cleans toilets does so out of a sense of deep gladness; or, alternately, they, if they lack such gladness, it is only because they have somehow not looked hard enough within themselves for it? If we find ourselves overcome with job openings for toilet cleaners, does that suggest some untold number of children of God who have not yet discovered their great vocational hunger? Are we really in such a precise economy of creation and providence?

Instead, I suggest that we need a theology of vocation somewhat more honest, if, in all likelihood, somewhat less poetic. It will require more than a brief letter. But at a starting point, I suggest that such a theology will, at a very minimum, have the following criteria:

1. Such a theology will interrupt market-based assumptions about value and social status. God does not use capitalist logic to define value; scripture abounds with evidence to the contrary. Moreover, capitalism allows the world to express its deep hunger for vocations that are not in its best interest; we do not, for example – and as a matter of personal opinion – need additional manufacturers of consumer-grade assault rifles, regardless of whatever the laws of supply and demand dictate. A robust theology of vocation must therefore object to the broken value-making of the world by interjecting its reminder of the inherent value of every child of God as made evident in the waters of baptism and the abundance of the table.
2. Relatedly, such a theology will never insist on the inherent holiness of the status quo -- as if God would call underprivileged or disaffected individuals to stay in their place. Instead, such a theology will center the well-being and best interests of the whole body. Paul's familiar vocational metaphors place this into stark relief: even though God has appointed individuals to various church offices (c.f. 1 Corinthians 12:27ff), such calling is not for the purpose of maintaining hierarchy or stasis. Rather, the diversity of God's callings is meant here simply as an illustration of mutual interdependence; any robust vocational theology must therefore wrestle with the health of the whole body, and will call our attention in particular to the healing and flourishing of its "less respected" members (12:23).
3. Further, such a theology – in consideration of the good of the whole – will enable the doing of gladless work. A vocational theology that does not enable the cleaning of toilets can never honestly testify to the story of God who was born to the world as it is, nor indeed to the myriad scriptural stories of those following God's call despite the emotional, economic, and spiritual sacrifices required. Any honest theology of vocation must necessarily make room for regularly doing things we don't want to do. In recognition of the previous argument, nobody should be forcefully conscripted into work that doesn't in some form resonate with their deep gladness; however, neither should anybody be excused altogether from cleaning toilets just because their deep gladness beckons elsewhere. Vocation cannot only be hopes and dreams.

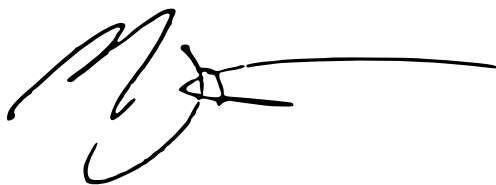
4. Finally, such a theology will bear witness to God's ongoing creation, such that the work of vocational discernment never ends, because God is never done making any of us. Such a theology not only welcomes but requires the existential work of yearning and wrestling – and even the practical challenge of changing careers or facing professional setbacks – because it is only in the acknowledgment of our yearning and constant becoming that we glimpse the truth of God's ongoing work. If God is never done creating us, then we can never be done finding ourselves. The goal of a vocational theology in this sense is not to lead the next generation of Christians on a journey of professional discovery that ends in a point, but rather to accompany with holy wonder all who wander.

In the end, any theology of vocation implies a theology of providence. The degree to which we believe God to be in control of the world, and responsible for the world as it is, inevitably dictates how we understand God to be at work calling us in our own lives. My suspicion is that the cheeky simplicity of Buechner's maxim belies a sort of totally-determined providence that my Presbyterian colleagues and I have not completely washed from our Calvinist heritage – a precise supply of deep gladness, a precise accounting of worldly hunger, a precise economy of gift and need, such that the rough and ugly and unfulfilled places are simply a tragic story of sheep who have somehow lost their way. In this vision, God has called the world with exacting specificity, has equipped the world with precise equilibrium, and is simply waiting around for us to follow instructions. It is no surprise that those who find themselves wandering may therefore also feel themselves lost.

My hope is that a better theology of vocation will, among other things, inevitably shift its foundation to a somewhat less tidy theology of providence: a theology in which God has not first ordered the world into being but rather first called Godself into relationship with the world, a theology in which God has first and foundationally elected to be for us and with us, as witnessed primarily through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is a theology about God persisting with us regardless of how we arrange ourselves, a story about God's calling well before it becomes a story about ours. Such a theology may seem a bit less satisfying for those of us who prefer the answers that an exacting providence might provide. But its beauty is that it never has to tell the disadvantaged or the disaffected that they are exactly where God needs them to be.

Instead, we get to preach that God will stay with them, no matter where they go.

Thanks be to God,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MG', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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