

## CAREER? OR VOCATION?

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The Second Sunday of Epiphany (Year A) – January 15, 2023

Picture this: 1970-something. I have just been appointed as coordinator of volunteers at my children's elementary school in Danbury. I had checked with all the teachers to ascertain their requests for classroom help and my next task was to make an announcement at the September PTA meeting—a simple 30-second announcement to a friendly audience—but I was terrified. I was so afraid of speaking publicly that my heart was pounding: thump, thump, thump. I was sure everyone could hear it. I made my announcement, didn't faint, and was so relieved that I didn't ever have to speak publicly again!

Fast forward about 15 years and I'm on the preaching schedule at St. James', Danbury, and my recurrent nightmare is that I find myself in the pulpit with a sea of expectant faces in front of me... and I have *nothing* prepared! The heart thing again.

Forward again to 1991, a Sunday afternoon in April, St. Barnabas Church, Greenwich. A dear friend, a rabbi, reads from Isaiah in both Hebrew and English, "Who shall I send and who will go for us? And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"

And I swear that in that crowded church, in the midst of my ordination service, we all heard God laugh. Who was this woman of "unclean lips" who was still anxious about public speaking—who was she to be called to preach the Word of God?

Oy.

God is singularly unpredictable when it comes to calling people to follow. In today's gospel, Peter and Andrew follow Jesus, next week you'll hear that James and John did the same, walking away from their careers as fishermen to follow him. and in the bit we heard this morning from the prophet we know as Second Isaiah, writing from exile, he states that no matter where his life has led so far, he knew that before he was born, the Lord marked him, called him to follow and to be a light to the nations.

In 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Thesis on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, the word "call," from the Latin, *vocare*, applied only to priests and nuns. Ordination gave clergy a red phone, a direct line to heaven, and everyone knew they were God's chosen, with a special relationship with God that presumed their vocation was superior to all others. A millennia and a half after the Resurrection, priests and bishops had taken over all the holy functions of the Church, leaving the laity with not much more to do in Church than kneel and watch the events at the altar. It infuriated Luther, who, although he was a priest himself, did not believe himself superior to anyone else. Never one to mince words, Luther attacked this clerical arrogance in his sermons and in the 95 Theses he stated plainly that *every* Christian had a vocation and an office, and not one is more dear to the heart of God than any other.

"Only look at your tools," he wrote, "your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them. You will not be able to look anywhere where it does not strike your eyes. None of the things with which you deal daily are too trifling to tell you this incessantly, if you are but willing to hear it ... 'My dear, use

me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his'." (from *Luther on Vocation*, Gustaf Wingren)

Thus, in our day, the physician may serve God in her practice of medicine; the gardener in his planting, the computer programmer at his keyboard and screen, the storekeeper by honest commerce. A mother, a grandfather, a husband or wife, serves God by loving attentiveness to children and spouses. It is all *vocation*. It *begins* in baptism, where it is nurtured in the Church as we learn who we are and *whose* we are. Vocation begins in the ears of the heart that listens to God, but is exercised primarily in the world, in community, where we are called to do God's work.

I mentioned before that Peter and Andrew, James and John left their *careers* as fishermen when they were *called* by Jesus. If you dig back to the roots of the words "career" and "vocation," you'll find interesting contrasts. The word "career" has its root in Latin. *Carrus* means "wheeled vehicle" and from it we get the word "car" and even the word "career." When the word entered the French language, it became *carrière*, or "racetrack." Think about it: "career" has its root in "racetrack"—a place where you go around in circles, at dangerous speeds, competing with others going around in circles each vehicle driven by a lone driver. For the winner, there is status and financial gain at the end, but most drivers in a race do not win. They simply continue driving alone, around in circles, eventually losing the race.

Now compare *carrière* with *vocare*, the Latin root of vocation. It means to call, to name or to summon. In baptism, God beckons us to *vocation*. God *calls* us to use our gifts and the skills we develop for God's purpose, as disciples of Jesus Christ. When we do so, even our *careers* become *vocation*; when we do not do so, then our careers may be no more than a *carrière*: a racetrack.

The substantial difference between "career" and "vocation" is that in vocation, we are responding not so much to what feeds into our desire for money or power, but to what God calls us to do. If we are especially blessed, as I have been, our "vocation" is also our "career." But if anyone had told that woman standing to make an announcement in the King Street School cafeteria that she would one day be a preacher, she surely would have fainted dead away right there.

How do we know when we're called? Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and writer, tells the story of her own search for vocation. At midnight one night she asked God to tell her as plainly as possible what she was supposed to do.

"Anything that pleases you," was the answer that came into her sleepy head.

"What?" she said, waking up. "What kind of an answer is that?"

"Do anything that pleases you," the voice in her head said again, "but belong to me." (*The Preaching Life*, 23)

That is the simple truth of vocation for all of us. When God calls us, it is not necessarily to do something more than what we're already doing, but to do it *differently*. Vocation means doing all that we do for the glory of God and to further God's purpose for the world. Following Christ, and in the name of Christ, we are invited to do whatever pleases us as long as we "belong" to God as we do it. And the very good news of following our vocation is that we are happiest when we respond to it.

God's call does not come once in a lifetime. It comes first at baptism, and then every time we listen throughout our lives. Nor does vocation come only to individuals. Over a hundred years ago, some people walked away from St. Paul's Church in downtown Ossining to form their own congregation. Now you have been called to mend that breach and make the fabric whole again. Regardless of the finances that may have precipitated the merger, a lot of prayer went into it, as you well know, and you can trust that this is now your vocation: to be the Episcopal light to the nations in the town of Ossining. As other churches nearby are struggling or closing, *you* are a beacon of hope.

Just remember that in your personal and professional lives, and in the mission of this parish, do all that you do for the glory of God, and to fulfill God's purpose. That is your vocation, that is why God called you and named you. AMEN.

Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42.