

One of my friends in New England has edited a stirring biography of a missionary doctor who spent an amazing lifetime of adventure and service in China. My friend records the sacred covenant uniting that young man with His church and His God, the covenant which the Holy Spirit used to impel that man to proclaim the gospel in word and deed, first thru Medical School and then thru every hardship and discouragement even half a world away; the covenant which caused that church to continue to support him prayerfully and financially as he established at least two hospitals in China and became the first to translate “Gray’s Anatomy” into the Chinese language.

One Sunday morning just after the Civil War (1867?) young D W Osgood stood before that Gathering of the saints, farmers, shopkeepers and other folk who made up the Congregational Church in Nelson, New Hampshire—and promised before God and His church this sacred vow: Amen.” (from *Facing Dragons*, co-written by Donald T Osgood and my friend Donald W. Osgood; the book utilizes very careful research and primary source documents.)

That man’s sacred covenant: a poignant reminder that our careers and our primary responsibilities and relationships matter a great deal to God and to one another in Christ’s Church. A reminder that for disciples of Jesus, our time together on Sunday morning is just the beginning of our relationship with each other. A reminder that how we spend Monday thru Friday, how we spend the productive years of our lives, becomes our singular opportunity to love and serve our God and our neighbor.

This notion of loving and serving our God thru our life-work is what we mean when we name the spiritual discipline of “vocatio.” Striving to discover and then accept and live out our “God-assignment” in life—or a sequence of “God-assignments”—is what we refer to as our “vocatio.” (Sorry about this use of lingo—usually in this church we try to use plain English to explain even deep things. But in this case a new concept seems to warrant a new word to describe it. “Vocatio,” as you hear, relates etymologically to “voice” or “vocal” or, in translation, to God’s “calling” for our individual lives.)

When I talk about “vocatio” I’m talking about how each one of us is created uniquely by God, and each one of us is created for a holy purpose. Each of us has distinctive skills and experiences and capabilities and traits of temperament and character. God has created each of us for lives of fulfillment. God knows us intimately; God knows what will and will not fulfill each of us. God also knows we will always feel restless, as if we’re going uphill to work each day until we understand what God has created us to do—and then get to doing it.

One day a woman visited her doctor because she was in intense pain. “Where does it hurt?” asked the doctor. “All over,” the woman screamed out. The doctor told the patient to touch her shoulder. She cried out in pain. “Touch your knee, how’s that?” she said. She cried out in pain again. “Let’s have you touch your temple.” She did that, and that too led to a yelp of pain. She finally said, “Doctor, every where I touch, I hurt.” The doctor continued the examination and diagnosed, “What you have, dear, is a bad case of a dislocated finger.”

Many maladies spring up in people who do not have the conviction that their work is a response to God's call upon their lives. People lose motivation or cut corners at work. They lose energy and vitality at home. They may experience addictions or divorce or depression. If I see my life as an empty canvas for me, the sole artist, to paint with leisure and income and weekend entertainment as I choose, unrelated to God or to my desire to live and work to please God, then my work and my life can easily start to feel like monotony, like drudgery—and then even as sharp pain. This is true regardless of the income, regardless of my title. God has higher plans for each of us than to be trapped by our trappings.

It is also true, when we embrace the truth that God has created us on purpose for a purpose, then every day may become holy. Even mundane work may become occasion for celebration and thanksgiving to God.

Earlier this week I enjoyed an overnight Retreat with some of our teens in Oceanside. Mary Anderson and I were setting up our barbecue on the beach when we noticed a cheerful and very dignified man who was cleaning the bathrooms, tidying up all the wakeboards and swimfins and other toys owned by the residents. We had plenty of hamburgers to spare, so we asked if he would like to join all of us for supper. He said he would be glad to, once he finished his work.

Right attitude is more important than prestige in the eyes of others.

He was evidently done about the same time the burgers were. He told us his name was Gregorio; as we all made a circle to hold hands and pray before eating he spontaneously, joyfully began to pray out loud in Spanish; as we prayed in English he also followed along enthusiastically. He looked maybe 50; when the kids asked him his age (one of them remembered from Spanish 1, “Cuantos anos tiene Usted?”) he told us he's 65. We were shocked! He spoke so proudly of his two grown daughters and his 8-year old girl still at home. He said he worked five days each week at large nearby hotel, and then additionally where we were. He couldn't have been making very good money at his hourly wage and surely has many reasons to be angry or resentful about his life—but within even a few minutes we could tell beyond doubt: here was a man whose life shines thru with the love of God. It can't be the work he was doing—to almost anyone else his work might have appeared as demeaning. But Gregorio understood that his work was a way for him to give glory to God, and as he poured forth his thanksgiving to Jesus he taught all of us an important lesson.

(Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying all work is inherently enjoyable or uplifting; on the contrary. The psychologist Karl Menninger observed, “Those who rhapsodize about the joy of labor are likely to be persons who are not obliged to do much of it.” My point isn't that Gregorio thinks it's fun to clean bathrooms: it's that our work need not define us—instead, God asks us to pursue our work with such a spirit that He may re-define our work, and re-define us as we persist in it.)

One of the freeing insights of Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin was to regain the New Testament conviction that all work may be holy work when it is done to the glory of God. There is inherent dignity in all work honestly done. God does not celebrate only those becoming missionaries to far-off lands, not only those called to be priests or presidents. Yes, He calls some to be physicians or hospital administrators or teachers or speech therapists, obviously serving others. But someone also needs to be the cashier in the cafeteria, and drive the patients to the hospital, and

scrub the hospital floors. Only our culture looks down on people who do such jobs: God does not. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shed God's light on our various callings: "If you are called [by God] to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures; sweep streets like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera....Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who swept so very well.'" [an Oct 26, 1967 version of a common theme in King's preaching]

We may be accustomed to think of God calling us to dramatic life-change. Often the models in Scripture follow this pattern. Abraham; Sarah; Moses; Gideon; David; Jeremiah; Samuel—all called by God long before Jesus lived to call the twelve and then Saul and so many others in the pages of the New Testament. It seems so crisp and clear when God calls to Moses: how could he miss the flames of the burning bush? Gideon is threshing wheat in the winepress and an angel of the LORD appears right there to him. Even as a young boy Samuel hears the voice of the Lord so clearly he thrice mistakes it for the elderly priest Eli in the temple. God makes unmistakably clear what He expects of these servants; their God-assignments are unequivocal.

There are many examples all around of those whom God does call into dramatic life-change. Into new careers; out to new parts of the country. (We think fondly of Joanne Reynolds, and Jeannette Ripp, and Heather and Mike Moreno, and Steve and Barbara Anderson, and most recently Maria and Ben Langhorst whom God has called forth from our family.)

[[Nor do the Scriptures confuse how we earn a paycheck with how we faithfully live out our "vocatio." No matter your career path: when you act as Jesus acted, you are being faithful. When you help a child; when you treat someone with dignity who cannot repay you in any other way; when you make something beautiful, when you clean and organize; when you show hospitality to the saints and offer your gifts and serve the coffee and bring the refreshments for the patio after Worship and treat your employees justly and offer your customers fair value for their payment; when you speak respectfully to the baggage attendant who represents the airline who has just flown your suitcases to the wrong airport; when you offer another a glass of water in the name of Jesus—are these all not different ways of responding to the calling of God in your life, of allowing the Spirit to live something of the will of God in and thru you?]]

Because our culture is so driven to go, go, go; do, do, do, it's natural for us disciples of Jesus to ask, when trying to be obedient, "OK; Is there something I'm missing? What is it You want me to be doing with my life?" (After all, what do most of us know about ourselves or the world when we graduate from college, when we need to choose a graduate school or a career at 21?)

Because God knows us intimately and loves us perfectly, God has every interest in our finding and accepting our God-given life-assignments. But God's first priority is something different from our zealous curiosity to discover what work we were created to be doing.

This may explain why the Bible is so exasperatingly unhelpful to a teen-ager or a young adult (or even an older adult) wanting to know what would be a good college to go to or then an appropriate career choice for them—or, for that matter, "What is the will of God for my life?" In a hundred different ways the Bible keeps telling us God's deepest desire for each of us is our loving relationship with Him. God calls each of us first to

Himself...("My sheep hear My voice; I know them and they follow Me. I give them eternal life; no one will ever snatch them out of my hand.") [John 10:27-29]

People around us may ask us, "What do you do for a living? What did you major in? Are you married? Any children? Where do you live?"

[For what it's worth, the various kinds of work I have done have met with varying extremes of response from people not acquainted with God's understanding of work. When I was twelve I learned to string tennis rackets—first my own, then the rackets used during P.E. for the entire school district. During one college summer I worked about six weeks on the "graveyard shift" in a Libby's Fruit Canning Factory: fruit cocktail was my specialty. I graduated from a "name" college, then made a living as a professional athlete. Those seemed to earn positive points from people. Next I worked in a corporate white-collar setting. But I noticed it was a conversation stopper when I began Seminary: I seemed to lose points from most people when I mentioned that I was studying to become a pastor. Working at the front desk of a racketball club, checking people in and handing them clean towels, ranked seemed to rank down there perilously close to Gregorio's work in the eyes of some.]

God seems to want to be sure we are abiding in Christ first; our work, our jobs, our marriage status, where we live and what we drive—apparently these specifics are a lot less important to God. If he has us, He seems less concerned about these details than we probably are. Abide in Him...

Perhaps God knows better than we that when we are secure in relationship to Him; when we know truly who we are and Whose we are; when we are praying and reading the Scriptures, when we are nurtured and mentored and held accountable and counseled in Christian community...then we are in a better position to discern what God may have for us to do. We in the West tend to focus on "doing;" God seems to focus on "being." The danger of asking "doing" questions first is that we may bypass what is entirely and eternally most important: our living connection with the living God. Approaching Him to try to receive His services and blessings, or even to inquire as to "next steps" is not the same. God wants your heart; God wants your life. Until then, even the working in the career for which you were expressly created will not bring us joy or fulfillment.

"Which commandment is the first of all?" "Hear O Israel, the LORD our God: the LORD is one; You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength." Or as we heard in Ephesians, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us...For we are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." [Eph 2:4,9]

But the second commandment Jesus cites is usually how we live out the first. Once we love God, we live out that love in this world, in workplace and restaurant and family and neighborhood. Jesus's question to each of us and all of us becomes, "Are you loving God, and are you loving others as you love yourself?" Contemporary preacher Frederick Buechner has noted, "The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Our fulfillment comes when we join the hours and the skills and the abilities in our lives with the heart of God who loves others.

I am convinced that most people are eager to help others. Once we have experienced the love of God it is inevitable that we want to love others with that love.

But the fact remains that the hunger of the world, the needs of the world, the suffering of the world, is insatiable—while our time and energy are so limited. We know we do not earn God’s love by loving others; the most certain way we will ever experience joy in loving and serving others comes as we continue to live in loving relationship with God—just as DW Osgood experienced over a century ago; as Gregorio, and so many of you, are experiencing today. (I will be preaching on how we love others in response to God’s love when I come to the spiritual discipline of loving others in Christ’s name in September—for now we can agree that God always calls us into paths of service, freely offered.)

But for many of us at any age—the clarion call of God does not sound so distinct. We agonize, we struggle, we strive to hear clearly and to obey God’s leading in our life. Are we to go forth and risk all? Are we to switch careers and start all over again, or are we to stay put? What if we’d like to go forth—but our ongoing family responsibilities here and now seem to make such a move impossible? What if we’re at the stage in life where there’s a lot more mileage in the rear view mirror than there seems to be remaining in front of us? What if you have prayed and prayed to be clear about the will of God for your life, eager to obey, and God seems more far away and silent than when you started?

Parker Palmer offers delightful and credible counsel in his book *Let Your Life Speak*. He was living in a Quaker community, desperately frustrated that his vocational plans had not been made clear. He had his Ph.D. and great experience and references—but he wanted to follow God’s plan for his life rather than simply get a job. He felt frustrated when those whom he asked for counsel simply shared their traditional belief: “Have faith, and *way will open*.”

He continues, “I have faith...what I don’t have is time to wait for “way” to open. I’m approaching middle age at warp speed...the only way that’s opened so far is the wrong way.” After several more months, he sought out an older woman known for her candor and wisdom. “Ruth,” I said, “people keep telling me that ‘way will open.’ Well, I sit in the silence, I pray, I listen...I’ve been trying to find my vocation for a long time, and I still don’t have the foggiest idea of what I’m meant to do...Way may open for other people, but it’s sure not opening for me.”

Ruth responded in a forthright way. “I’m a birthright Friend, and in sixty-plus years of living way has never opened in front of me.” She paused, and Palmer notes he began sinking into despair. Was this woman finally admitting the Quaker concept of God’s guidance was all a hoax?

She spoke again, but this time with a smile. “But a lot of way has closed behind me, and that’s had the same guiding effect.” They laughed together, as he acknowledged her simple truth: there is as much guidance in what does not and cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does happen—maybe more.” [p 38-39]

He later observes the same paradox in a different image: “each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is stop pounding on the door that just closed, turn around—and welcome the largeness of life that now lies open to our souls...As I sat there fretting about the doors that had slammed in my face, I was sitting in the very place where my world would soon open wide.” [p 54]

As we abide in Christ, as we trust that God has a specific purpose for our lives—from now on, no matter how young or old we may be—we are able more and more to

stop worrying about all those doors which have closed, those doors we thought we needed or at least wanted to go thru—and trust the Spirit to lead us into the world wide open before us.

We've all heard of Welch's grape juice. I have read this account: shortly after Louis Pasteur perfected his process for pasteurizing milk, a dentist in New Jersey, Dr. Thomas Bramwell Welch, began experimenting with fruit juices (He was a Methodist, whose goal was to create non-alcoholic wine for Holy Communion.) In 1869 Welch became the first person in history to discover how to create grape juice which did not ferment into wine. His son was Dr. Charles E. Welch. Young Charles had his heart set on going to serve as a missionary to Africa. As he and his wife reported in New York for embarkation, he learned his wife's health would not permit them to go. They were heartbroken. He had been so sure God's calling had been for him to be a missionary. That door was closed, slammed shut. Then and there, however, Charles decided he would trust God to guide him in a new way. He could not be a missionary overseas—but he could build his grape juice business to generate dollars to send other missionaries overseas.

It was his inspired idea (either his or the Spirit's) to sample Welch's grape juice at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. It became a big hit on a national scale, and of course the company began to prosper. Charles the son remained clear that his "vocatio" was to expand the business to support Christian missionaries; he ended up generating and giving away today's equivalent of tens of millions of dollars toward expanding the Kingdom of God thru others all over the world.

"This day do I with the utmost solemnity surrender myself to God and His work. I consecrate to Him all that I am and all that I have...the faculties of my mind, the members of my body, my worldly possessions, and my time and influence over others, all to be used for His glory and employed in obedience to His command, in service to others as long as He continues me in life. My constant prayer is that I shall live like my Master in every way I can." Amen

Mark 12:28-24

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that He answered them well, he asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask Him any question.