

## WHY WE GATHER Finding Purpose

“Vocation as our Life Theme”  
(Ephesians 2:10; 4:1)

Dan Collison  
June 4, 2017

### Introduction

1. Today is the first Sunday in June and alongside graduations and graduation parties, the spring and summer wedding season is in full swing. I had a meeting with a First Covenant community member on Friday who said that he attended two weddings of friends in the month of May alone. I have been Lead Pastor at First Covenant for eight years, and before that I was an associate pastor for eighteen years in small, medium and mega churches with a focus on arts and worship. So, I have either organized music or officiated for easily a hundred weddings over twenty-six years, not to mention the weddings that merely attended as a guest.

In planning, or helping to plan every wedding I am always on the lookout for key integrating themes of the wedding couple to best encourage them at this specific and important moment in their lives. Their unique themes typically bubble across the entire planning process from pre-marital counseling conversations, to choices of scriptures and readings, to *who* they chose to do the readings and why they wanted them to do it, to the stories that get told at the rehearsal dinner, to the music that is selected for everything spanning from pre-wedding events and parties to the ceremony and the post ceremony reception.

Some integrating themes that I recall are “beginning, again,” “creating together,” “life as adventure,” “Improvising as we go,” and so on. Collectively, I experience the beautiful meaning of the entire wedding encounter as something akin to a movie that was assembled to integrate story and soundtrack. The story being the actual lived lives of the couple getting married, and the soundtrack being the hundreds of intentionally planned things that point to and reflect that which has, is, and will be the integrating themes of their lives that give them a sense of life long meaning and purpose.

2. We are in an elongated teaching series called “Why We Gather” that has six unique segments of exploration around compelling reasons for Christian community. Today is the final teaching in the eight-week segment titled “Finding Purpose: Clarifying, articulating, and acting on one’s personal mission in life.” In this segment we have covered topics ranging from “Scripture and the Power of Personal Story,” “Holy Listening” and “Discernment” to “Being Single,” “The Prayer of Examine” and “Shared Purpose.” Last week pastor Todd masterfully helped us learn and experience what “guiding children, and children guiding us” in purpose finding is all about.

Today’s topic is “Vocation as our Life Theme” and, like wedding experiences that have integrating themes that emerge from the convergence of story and soundtrack, our lives and our vocations are in essence our story with soundtrack. It is probable that we know our story in that it is what it is. It is our life lived. But, do we know what our sound track is? Are we intentionally crafting our soundtrack?

Have we taken the time to step back and out of our day to day lives to listen to that which moves us, compels us? Do we have an expansive self-reflective view on our lives--kind of like what I am privileged to experience with couples getting married where I have a balcony view of the places where their personalities, relationships, tastes and beliefs converge? Do we have this kind of view on our individual lives such that we can nurture that which God's unique imprint on our souls?

3. Whether we do or do not have a clear sense of personal soundtrack, "vocation as our life theme" is a very helpful construct to all of us, in that that helps us find purpose in life by clarifying integrating themes in the category of life that where we spend most of waking hours: our work. It was poet David Whyte who once said, "work is a pilgrimage of identity."<sup>1</sup> So, to be clear, in using the word "work" I actually mean something much larger than the conventional meaning of the word. Let me explain.
4. The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Early Church in the city of Ephesus that included theological reflections and words of encouragement. In chapter two he wrote something very provocative about the layers of work life:

<sup>10</sup>For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10. NIV

In this brief statement Paul said that we have been created by God to be creators like God. And, because of Jesus we are re-created to do good. And, provocatively Paul said that our Creator created us to be creators who do good works that are *pre-designed* for us such that when we do them, we are not only *doing* what we were uniquely created to do, we are *being* who we were created to be.

5. Last summer the teaching team taught an eleven-week series titled "Work Life." If today's sermon is of high interest to you, I strongly suggest you take the time to either listen to the sermon series or download the manuscripts from the church website. The series was based upon extensive research on the topic of jobs, careers and vocation. In my personal preparation for that series I was utterly fascinated by the multitudinous ways people find purpose and meaning in their work. It became very clear to me that work, paid or unpaid, can be a dynamic and sometimes mystical pursuit of meaning. Not everyone sees or experiences it that way and not everyone reaches for a shared "work-life-purpose" paradigm in those terms. Regardless, religious books and non-religious books, religious and non-religious people tell over and again that the work they found, or they *eventually* found, or that eventfully *found them* was like finding a piece of themselves. What a glorious mystery!

And, reflecting on today's Scripture, it is as if the Apostle Paul tapped into a universal law of the human experience that says, "we are created for specific and practical purposes and it is our joy to either find those purposes or give ourselves permission to be found by our purposes within the timeframe of our lifetimes." So, work, paid or unpaid, is a God infused journey of discovery and identity.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidwhyte.com/crossing-the-unknown-sea/> (accessed 6-3-17)

## A. Work is a God Infused Journey of Discovery

1. In saying that “we are God’s handiwork” Paul was no doubt grounding our created-ness in the ancient theological assumption that we are given consciousness and embodiment in the image and likeness of God. And, in being created like the Creator--our minds, bodies and spirits have a basic impulse to work. Humans are hard wired to “do,” “build,” “create,” and “fix” things. We love organizing, re-organizing and even disrupting things such that new things need to be created or re-created again. As toddlers and adolescents we do it with such simple things as blocks, legos, and etch-a-sketch. As adults we do it with such complex things as religious institutions, companies and governments.
2. There are challenges and tensions that come with our general impulse to work, though. At its most basic level, work is something we do because, beyond *wanting* to do it, sometimes we *have* to do it. If we want to enjoy clean homes, we have to clean them whether we enjoy it or not. If we want to have money to buy food or necessities, most people have to go to work to earn money and they may or may not enjoy the job they have to hold to earn the money to buy the food. So, on a very primal level, work can be simply doing a job or jobs that may function as a part of our purpose, but really we feel like beasts of burden!
3. Beast of burden feeling or not, there is something very authentic and simply human in doing work just because it has to be done. There is purpose in that alone. And, sometimes it is when we are just “doing the job,” that surprising and altogether mystical ideas can be triggered that take us in new directions. It was an American journalist who once said:

“Work is about the search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for *astonishment* rather than torpor (or weariness); in short, for a sort of *life* rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.”<sup>2</sup>

4. Noramay Cadena is a woman who began such a search when she was thirteen and her mother took her to the bungee cord factory where she worked. In a “just doing the job” type environment she awakened to a deeper sense of career and vocation. She recalled that:

A bell rang in the morning, and that meant it was time to start. All these people sat on both sides of a really long table. Along the table were big piles of plastic hooks. I spent eight hours a day putting hooks into bungee cords, making piles, tying the piles, and delivering them to a different station.

What I remember most is my mom being proud that her daughter was there, but at the same time not wanting other people to talk about me, which is why she kept saying, “Sit up straight! Work faster! Don’t talk! You’re not doing it right!” I remember the bells that rang for breaks. I remember the lines to heat up your lunch. I remember thinking, *I don’t like this place, and I don’t want to work here. I don’t even like it that my mom works here.* That first summer working

---

<sup>2</sup> Isay, Dave. *Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work* (A StoryCorps Book) (p. 3). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

in the factory was enough to show me what my life would be like if I didn't do anything different.<sup>3</sup>

Later, in high school, a recruiter stopped Cadena at school telling her that because she was really good at math and science, she should consider engineering. She did that and, though being a single mother in college, she pursued engineering all the way through an MBA and masters in engineering systems at the esteemed Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At every turn of her path and when entering into the workforce she remembered that factory experience and the day to day life that her mother and father spend doing factory work and developed a deep commitment to maintaining a *career* that improved the working conditions in factories for all who work in such a setting out of either desire or necessity.

5. Career. I choose that word very carefully because it is something different than “a job.” It would be an over-reach to make too hard edged a distinction, but whereas as a job is more often defined as a single thing that can be repeated with little variation, a career is often referred to a widening course of progress through life.<sup>4</sup> Career speaks to advancement and often times is accompanied by specific rewards and the sense that one is in a self-driven vehicle that is “going places.”

It should be noted that career pathways and trajectories continue to evolve with each successive generation. The Millennial generation has overtaken the Baby Boomers to become America's largest generation.<sup>5</sup> Multiple business journals report that Millennials will make up 75% of the workforce by 2025, only eight years from now.<sup>6</sup> And, they report that 91% of Millennials will stay in a job for *less than three years* and have 15-20 jobs over the course of their working lives.<sup>7</sup> One might think that they are career avoidant, but that is not the case because changing jobs is different than changing careers--Its more like re-arranging the furniture in the same house if one continues to work in the same sector of work, but for different companies.

6. Thinking about the trajectory of careers, then, what are some of the principles that a Christ follower is to be aware of when pursuing a career? After all, in today's Scripture the Apostle Paul said that Christ followers were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” There is a mountain of meaning in those eight words. To be created in Christ Jesus is to be spiritually awakened, filled with hope and having a clear minded sense of being forgiven, grace-filled people. And, those who awaken to Christ and give their lives to the way of Christ are people who give themselves to the journey of transformation of becoming like Christ over a lifetime.

So, the good works in Christ that Paul was talking about are works that reach for specific Christ-like ethics such as compassion, mercy, justice, and reconciliation no matter our jobs or careers. We are also compelled to have diverse friendships across the spectrum and carry special concern and solidarity with the poor and marginalized around us, regardless of our career pathway. It is for these reasons that Christ followers are wise to resist the temptation to let our career pursuits turn

---

<sup>3</sup> Isay, Dave. Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work (A StoryCorps Book) (pp. 77-78). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Career> (accessed 6-4-16)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/> (accessed 6-12-16)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hartfordbusiness.com/article/20140818/PRINTEDITION/140819969/millennials-to-take-over-by-2025> (accessed 6-12-16)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/08/14/job-hopping-is-the-new-normal-for-millennials-three-ways-to-prevent-a-human-resource-nightmare/#4a0cf08d5508> (accessed 6-4-16)

into “careerism,” or the way of behaving that involves trying to do whatever one can to make more money or get promoted at their job, often at the cost of one’s integrity and ethics.”<sup>8</sup>

7. Last year I attended a lecture series on Christians in the marketplace titled “Vocation of the Business Leader.” It was excellent, with one of the main points of emphasis being that Christ followers are strongly encouraged to live an integrated life where careers serve our ethical social principles and not the other way around. The series of lectures left us with three key questions to ponder:

As a Christ follower in the marketplace:

1. Am I promoting human dignity and the common good in my sphere of influence?
  2. Am I supporting the culture of life; justice; international regulations; transparency; civic; environmental, and labor standards; and the fight against corruption?
  3. Am I promoting the integral development of the person in *my* workplace?
8. I really appreciated that I was at a discussion table where women and men sincerely wrestled with these large questions. And, we did so in light of the fact that my table partners worked in the marketing department at Target, as a line checker for a Canadian Railroad Company, and in retail sales. At first we felt a huge distance to the questions asking, “how can I possibly relate to justice with international regulations?!”

It took us a while to make connections to the three lofty faith and work integration questions, but we got there! And, we got there mostly because we became aware that while we may not be very influential with such things as labor standards and environmental justice, we all work with people who might think about such things. We realized that it is when we have conversations, lunch breaks, and water cooler talks with other people that our principles and values are given space to both inform and be informed. And, in some cases, we never know who in our peer group may go on to bring about important societal changes as they move on their own journey of vocation in the wider world.

The most interesting part of the faith and vocation lectures was the table conversations about the definition of what we call “vocation.” Because, beyond the simple idea of jobs and the more complicated idea of careers, *vocation* is what really gets to the heart of helping us see work as a pilgrimage of identity.

9. The word “Vocation” is Latin and means “a call, summons.”<sup>9</sup> Christian author Parker Palmer wrote this about vocation:

“Today I understand vocation...not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/careerism> (accessed 6-5-16)

<sup>9</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocation> (Accessed 6-4-16)

‘Out there’ calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be a person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.”<sup>10</sup>

These words resonate with the Apostle Paul’s belief that the Creator of our souls prepares purposeful work for us in advance of us even knowing what it is. Although, it is very likely that our pre-conceived unique purpose or vocation that reflects our original selfhood is not like a time punch card, and it is not the same thing as a career arc or path. Rather, it is a set of ideas and themes, like an integrated soundtrack, that lures us throughout our lifetime both in sync and sometimes regardless of the other layers of our work life.

## B. Vocation is the Soundtrack of our Lives

1. Discerning our unique vocational calling or life themes is a quest humans have undertaken since our origins, including many throughout biblical history. For instance, Moses is a towering figure of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In reading the sweep of his life’s story he held many jobs from young Egyptian leader, to sheep herder in exile, to organizational reformer. One could argue that Moses was career confused. Many in the Jewish and Christian traditions see his vocation as that of a human rights liberator. The book of Exodus tells us that Moses was eighty years old by the time he finally discerned this vocation and was in front of the Pharaoh seeking the freedom of his people. This is interesting, in a way, because we are told that he lived to be one hundred and twenty years old. So, it took Moses two thirds of his life to fully awaken to his vocational call.

As an infant, Moses was a nobody in the context of his society. In fact, less than a nobody. His family was impoverished, enslaved and at the point we first learn of Moses in Scripture, his life was in danger of being snuffed out by the genocidal decree of the Pharaoh to reduce the slave population by killing all Hebrew male babies. Moses’ sister hid him as a baby in a basket in the Nile where he was picked up by no one less than the Pharaoh’s daughter.

The rest of the story is that Moses grew up in the Pharaoh’s family as an adopted son, became a leader in Egyptian society, and then a conflicted member of the Pharaoh’s family seeing the suffering and enslavement of the people of his birth. At first, he may have thought his vocation was something akin to “being chosen to lead toward a more just society through power of rule” but that idea collapsed, as it often has throughout history, in a system that was explicitly biased toward human oppression.

2. It was only after leaving power that Moses was ready to hear the deeper summons of God to his most authentic vocation. And, in a confrontation with God in the famous burning bush encounter, an account I encourage you to read found in Exodus chapter’s 3 and 4, we see several lessons about vocation:
  - First, as I said earlier, God followers are consistently drawn into the Creator’s narrative of freedom for human souls and the renewal of all things. Vocational themes of compassion, mercy, justice, liberation, faith, hope, and love--really anything that is near the center point

---

<sup>10</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, © 2000 Jon Wiley & Sons. Pages 10.

of where God meets human need (with Jesus as the pure archetype) is the primary foundation with which every Christ follower's vocation is built.<sup>11</sup>

- A second lesson of vocation in Moses' burning bush encounter is that *all* of Moses' life was relevant to that moment and to his future. With God, nothing in our life is wasted or irrelevant. Even the bad stuff can be transformed into greater vision, increased capacities and wisdom.
- Next, in Moses' resistance to his vocation, (he claimed poor speaking skills and was deeply afraid of failure) we see the struggle we all face in having the courage to become who we were created to be. As an aside, it is a mystery to me as to why God created the human experience such that we need phenomenal courage and endurance to simply become ourselves. Perhaps, it is because it is in the *struggle* that we feel most alive. And, it is also most likely in the act of *learning* how to become our true selves that we are most fully human. This gives me so much hope on the days where I just feel inadequate to what I am discerning are my vocational themes. And, I trust it gives you hope as well.

## Conclusion

1. In the closing segment of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus he wrote this: "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (Ephesians 4:1. NIV)

Paul was a prisoner because he sensed his vocation was to be "a reconciler for Christ across cultures, citizenships, and lifestyles," and some from his religion of origin and some from his budding Christian religion fought that generous proposition ruthlessly-- to the point that Paul was safer incarcerated, than being at large. Paul's life vocation got, and kept him in trouble for the last several years of his life, which makes it so surprising that he would "urge" Christ followers to live a life worthy of the vocation the Creator puts within us. How can he urge us to emphasize that which gets us into trouble and sometimes even danger?

He did so because living according to the ways of our Creator and our unique themes is overwhelmingly more liberating and empowering than any trials and persecution that may come as a result of us being faithful to the voice 'in here' calling us to be the people we were born to be and to fulfill the original selfhood given us at birth by God.

2. So, taking Paul's words to heart--where do you find yourself today?
  - Are you just plowing through life without any notice of themes, or simply trying to will things into being?
  - Are you at a point where you have some inclination as to what the themes of your vocation might be, but are resistant because it means changing how you lead your life, or that, like Paul, it may lead to trouble with others?

---

<sup>11</sup> American writer and theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC.)

- Or, are you joyfully embodying your vocation and populating your soundtrack?

Wherever we find ourselves, it is important to recognize the subtleties and connections between jobs, careers and vocations, and discern our personal vocations by being attentive to the voice of God in the now and in the spaces where personal joy meets human need.

3. If all this feels a little illusive or maybe strangely even isolating--in closing take heart and listen to the mentoring words of one of my favorite artists, Rainer Maria Rilke, to a younger artist:<sup>12</sup>

“Don't be confused by the nature of solitude, when something inside you wants to break free of your loneliness. This very wish, when you use it as a tool for understanding, can illumine your solitude and expand it to include all that is. Bound by conventions, people tend to reach for what is easy. It is clear, however, that here we must be unafraid of what is difficult. For all living things in nature must unfold in their particular way and become themselves at any cost and despite all opposition.”

Rome, May 14, 1904  
Letters to a Young Poet

## Prayer

God of all creation and of our individual souls---help us to lead all of our lives, but especially our pursuit of vocation with an enduring sense of hope, patience, trust and expectation. Help us to listen to the voice of vocation that you have placed within us as we know it will fill our days with purpose. And, lead us into life themes that bring renewal to us and to our world.

In Jesus name. Amen.

## Benediction

As the new week begins, may we see our work, paid or unpaid, as a God infused journey of discovery and identity. And, may we recognize the subtleties between jobs, careers and vocations, and discern our personal vocation by being attentive to the voice of God in the spaces where personal joy meets human need.

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://yearwithrilke.blogspot.com/2011/08/unafraid-of-what-is-difficult.html> (accessed 6-3-17)