

Work Life

“What’s My Vocation” (Isaiah 40:25-31)

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Opening

1. Today is the second stopping point in a new teaching series we have titled, “Work Life.” Everyone works in paid and unpaid capacities. And, most people spend a major portion of their lives working various jobs for various organizations and fulfilling specific roles in the marketplace and at home. The purpose of this teaching series is to ask important questions about the intersections of human purpose and the labor of work with the goal of interpreting the layers of work, as poet David Whyte once said, “as a pilgrimage of identity.”
2. Last week’s teaching discusses some of the subtle but important differences between what we call “jobs” “careers,” and “vocations” noting that jobs tend to be single and repetitive, careers are every widening pathways of desired advancement, and vocations are the larger and highest level themes that guide the greatest sense of finding purpose in our work whether paid or unpaid. This week we are looking more closely at vocation and the ways we find or are found by our life’s vocation. And, we will also look at how sometimes we shy away from our vocations because we are afraid of the unknown or what it might mean for the larger trajectory of our lives.
3. Before the children are dismissed for Children’s Church, one of First Covenant’s Visual Artists in Residence, Heather Albinson, is going to read a Children’s Book titled, “The Three Questions.” This story is an adaptation of famous author Leo Tolstoy’s children’s book. These questions lead us to a great secret about work...and, are timeless considerations in our jobs, career choices, and vocational discernments.

The Three Questions **written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth**

There once was a boy named Nikolai who sometimes felt uncertain about the right way to act. “I want to be a good person,” he told his friends. “But I don’t always know the best way to do that.”

Nikolai’s friends understood and wanted to help him.

“If only I could find the answers to three questions,” Nikolai continued, “then I would always know what to do.” When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? And what is the right thing to do?

Nikolai’s friends considered the three questions. Then Sonya, the heron, spoke: “To know the best time to do things, one must plan in advance,” she said. Gogol, the monkey, who had been rooting through some leaves to find something good to eat, said, “You will know when to do things if you watch and pay close attention.” Then Pushkin, the dog, who was just dozing off, rolled over and said,

“You can’t pay attention to everything yourself. You need a pack to keep watch and help you decide when to do things.

For example, Gogol, a coconut is about to fall on your head!”

Nikolai thought for a moment. Then he asked his second question: “who is the most important one?” “Those who are closest to heaven,” said Sonya, circling up into the sky. “Those who know how to help the sick,” said Gogol, stroking his bruised noggin. “Those who make the rules,” growled Pushkin.

Nikolai thought some more. Then he asked the third question: “What is the right thing to do?” “Flying,” said Sonya. “Having fun all the time,” laughed Gogol. “Fighting,” barked Pushkin right away.

Then Nikolai thought for a long while. He loved his friends. He knew they were all trying their best to help him answer his questions. But their answers did not seem quite right. Then, an idea came to him. I know, he thought. I will ask Leo, the turtle. He has lived a very long time. Surely he will know the answers I am looking for.

So Nikolai hiked high up into the mountains where the old turtle lived alone. When Nikolai arrived, he found Leo digging in the garden. The turtle was old, and digging was hard for him.

“I have three questions and I came to ask your help,” Nikolai said. “When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?” Leo listened carefully, but he only smiled. Then he went on with his digging. “You must be tired,” Nikolai said at last. “Let me help you.” The old turtle gave him his shovel and thanked him. And because it was easier for a young boy to dig than it was for an old turtle, Nikolai kept digging until the rows were finished.

But just as he finished, the wind blew wildly and rani burst from darkened clouds. As they moved toward the cottage for shelter, Nikolai suddenly heard a cry for help. Running down the path, he found a panda whose leg had been injured by a fallen tree. Carefully, Nikolai carried her into Leo’s house and made a splint for her leg with a stick of bamboo.

The storm raged on, banging at the doors and windows. Leo smiled when he saw what Nikolai had done.

The next morning the sun was warm, the birds sang, and all was well with the world. The panda’s leg was healing nicely, and she thanked Nikolai for saving her. At that moment, Sonya, Gogol, and Pushkin arrived to make sure everyone was all right. Nikolai felt great peace within himself. He had wonderful friends. And he had saved the panda. But he also felt disappointed. He still had not found the answers to his three questions. So he asked Leo one more time.

The old turtle looked at the boy. “But your questions have been answered!” he said. “They have?” asked the boy. “Yesterday, if you had not stayed to help me dig my garden, you wouldn’t have heard the panda’s cries for help in the storm. Therefore, the most important time was the time you spent digging in the garden.”

The most important one at the moment was me, and the most important thing to do was to help me with my garden. “Later, when you found the injured panda, the most important time was the time you

spent mending her leg. The most important one was the panda. And the most important thing to do was to take care of her and make her safe.

“Remember then, that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one whom is standing at your side.” For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world.

Introduction

1. It was in college and at music school that I first began to awaken to the connections *and disconnections* between what I enjoyed doing, what I had natural talent to do, and what the marketplace would value enough to pay me to do whether I had talent or enjoyed doing it or not! I had chosen to double major in percussion music performance (my career choice that I enjoyed and had some talent for) and general music education (my backup plan in case the performance track didn't pan out). I don't know why my 18-year-old brain didn't put it all together, but what I didn't count on as an implication of having a backup plan was that I would have to actually learn how to play all of the instruments that I was supposed to be able to teach young children. As in-- you had to be good enough in *everything* in order to lead a band or orchestra program.

For *three years* I tried, I really tried to learn how to play all of the string instruments, all of the wind instruments, all of the brass instruments, and don't even get me started about the recorder and the harp. It was recorder and the harp that broke me. Typically, the music conservatory forced...I mean *provided* the opportunity for graduate students to teach the underclass students and endure our squeaking, squawking, and excuses about how we didn't have time to practice.

The harp was different. World famous harpist Eileen Malone had studied at the Paris Conservatoire as a prodigy and had been the harp professor since 1930 and she insisted that she teach everyone who touched a harp at the Eastman School of Music. She would stare us music education major students down while we were trying to place our fingers on the correct strings of what looked like to me a sea of look-alike strings, and say “you didn't practice, did you?”

2. It was probably because she was so venerated that I would just cower and say, “no ma'am”, even if I did practice a little because just letting her down was a bummer. I remember thinking to myself how strange it was that I had taken music lessons for ten years at that point and was competing at a high level in my field of percussion performance, and felt like I didn't have brain when it came to the harp.

Oh yeah, and I felt pretty useless trying to teach 3rd graders how to play the recorder as well. That was a truly unfortunate experience for the children. I could play the recorder fine, it was the teaching part that didn't go so well. I resorted to bribing them with king size snickers bars so they would play their best when my supervisor came to observe me in the student teacher role. Bribery worked with the kids. Less so with my peer student teachers who asked on the walk back to school “who gave their kids snickers? My kids asked why they didn't get snickers.”

3. The reality of my “back up” plan was that it just didn't fit me, no matter how hard I tried to will it to be. I was slowly awakening to who I was and who I wasn't. And, I had yet to learn about the subtle differences between work for pay, careers that advance and vocations that speak to the deepest

part of who we are. I hadn't yet heard what Christian author Parker Palmer wrote in a delightful little book titled *Let Your Life Speak*:

“Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about--quite apart from what I would *like* it to be about--or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions. Vocation does not mean a goal I pursue. It means a calling that I hear...”

4. This sounds ideal. But, how do we actually listen to our lives trusting that God has set up the human experience such that God speaks through who we are and to who we are becoming through the lens of vocation?

Today's Scripture text was a text first given to a people who were completely disoriented and lacked a sense of identity. They were living in exile and without much hope. And, this is what a man named Isaiah said to them:

Isaiah 40:25-31

²⁵ “To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.

²⁷ Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?

²⁸ Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:25-31. NIV

There is so much here. For today, we can focus on two things:

First, the fact that our Creator has designed the universe with uniqueness and particularity in mind, and that our small lives are uniquely woven into the whole of things and have value. And it is our joy to awaken to who we are in our personalities, our intuitive giftedness, and what our contribution is to the whole.

And...

Second, as Christ followers, our vocational themes are ultimately a convergence of who we are, who God is calling us to become, (remember that the very word “Vocation” is Latin and means “a call, summons”¹) for the purpose of participating in God’s work of bringing renewal to all things.

Uniqueness and convergence for the purpose of renewing all things. These are the two themes that will help us discern our vocations.

First, our uniqueness.

A. Who We Are Informs Our Vocational Themes

1. In today’s text it is obvious, especially in verse 27, that Isaiah’s listener felt as if God had no knowledge of them in general or their suffering in particular. “My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God” they said. And, in reply Isaiah wrote, “Look to the heavens...nothing is missing...not the least of which yourselves...and God is everlasting, never grows tired, and gives strength and power to the weary.”

What Isaiah did was seek to ground his community in the understanding that everything is created with specificity and has value—including us! And, Isaiah was trying to make the point that God sees our uniqueness, is *with* us, and is *for* us even when the whole world doesn’t seem to make sense.

This is true in all of life and also with the human journey of discerning vocation. If you struggle to believe this, the Bible offers some great biographical examples of how the most amazing things can be done by the least likely people when they are awakened to their God-given vocation.

2. 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 but without a doubt his vocation was that of liberator. The book of Exodus tells us that Moses was 80 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 120. So, it took two thirds of Moses’ life to fully awaken to his vocational call.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocation> (Accessed 6-4-16)

In the beginning Moses was a nobody. 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 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 that Pharaoh's daughter.

You may already know the story of Moses growing into the Pharaoh's family as an adopted son, becoming a leader and then a conflicted leader seeing the suffering and enslavement of his people. At first he may have thought his vocation was something akin to "being chosen to lead in power" but that idea collapsed quickly in a system that was explicitly biased toward human oppression.

3. It was only after leaving power behind and leading a stripped down way of life that he 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 this week found in Exodus chapter's 3 and 4, we see all kinds of lessons about vocation:
 - First, that God followers will be drawn into the God narrative of the renewal of all things. Vocational themes of compassion, mercy, justice, liberation, faith, hope, love, courage, really anything that is near the center point of where God meets human need (with Jesus and the pure archetype) is going to be, one way or another, in everyone's playbook. As an aside I like what 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."² This really is a baseline component of our faith that creates a certain commonality of vocation theme between all of us.
 - A second lesson of vocation in Moses' burning bush encounter is that all of Moses's 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 focus and capacities.
 - Next, in Moses resistance to his vocation, (claiming poor speaking skills and fear of failure) we see the struggle we all face in having the courage become who we were created to be. 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 to become, that we feel most alive and *learn* how to become our true selves.
 - A concluding lesson of vocation we see in Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush is that God accepted Moses' weaknesses and went ahead with him anyway. 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.
4. Hope is the key word that Isaiah used in the concluding verses of chapter 40 of the book named after him:

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*.

and young men stumble and fall;
³¹ but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:25-31. NIV

Various translations of Scripture have chosen to interpret the multi-faceted Hebrew word “qavah” in verse 31 as a number of things: “hope,” “wait,” “trust,” “Expecting”.³

This constellation of connected words are important because as Christ followers, our vocational themes are ultimately a convergence of who we are, who God is calling us to become, and for the purpose of participating in God’s work of bringing renewal to all things. This process of connecting to our God given vocation happens neither quickly nor easily. But, it does happen, and it happens in the flow of everyday life, not just I front of burning bushes.

(looking around) It happens in your work of being a librarian, a nurse, a doctor, a teacher, a pastor, a volunteer, a designer, a parent, a facility manager, a musician, a visual artist, a custodian, and engineer, a student, an athlete....

B. Our Vocations are a Combination of Who We Are and Who God is Calling Us To Be For the Purpose of Renewal

1. The beauty of “The Three Questions,” the story read earlier, is that while finding our vocational themes may require process and searching it happens most often in the *now* and with the people standing right in front of us. And in even work a day jobs like what happened to Barbara Moore who became one of the first woman bricklayers in her city because she didn’t have any money for college and desk jobs put her to sleep.



In an interview with her daughter Olivia, Barbara described the life of a bricklayer, working outside for ten hours a day in hot and cold conditions, and at one point pregnant with Olivia, as what she simply enjoyed doing. And, she did it so she could get more competitive pay to improve their lives. She won the respect of the male union workers only over time and because one prominent male bricklayer took the time to mentor her in the trade.

³ NIV, KJV, NLT, YLT. See also, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/6960.htm>.

Throughout the years of her work Barbara was able to pay for her daughter Olivia to go to college and inspired her such that Olivia always reminder herself, “Well, my mom only weighs 115 pounds and she lays bricks for ten hours a day, so why couldn’t I lift this crate or drive a truck?”⁴ Courage, strength, and hope. These are the things of vocation that transcend work itself.

2. Kerry David and Ken Hopper found themes of vocation doing work on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California.



They are iron workers who maintain the structure of the bridge who say “we do everything “high, heavy, and hard”; we do the stuff that nobody else wants to do. But, it’s awesome—we get paid to climb around on the world’s biggest jungle gym.”

Their work is tedious and careful. They are tethered at all times and can’t drop anything. It’s cold, windy, and dangerous. The most difficult part of their job, and this is difficult for them to talk about, is the fact that people that come to the bridge to end their lives. Ken said in an interview for Story Corps:

“You get to where you can recognize indicators: if they’ve been in one spot for a long time, if they’re out there and it’s really cold and they don’t have a coat. Or they’re by themselves, not really doing the tourist thing and looking at the view. Even crying— that’s really a good indicator. I’ve gotten to the point where I’ll walk up to them, and after a while I’ll just flat out say, ‘Are you thinking about jumping off this bridge today?’ And a lot of times that actually gets a reaction where they’re shocked that I’m asking, and I’ve had them truly answer, ‘Yeah.’ And then we have to do what we can to get them off the bridge.”⁵

Kerry tells of a time where he went out after a girl that looked like she was about the same age as his daughter. She had taken her keys, her shoes, and her socks and had thrown them in the water. She was lying there on the cord, and “Ken climbed over to her, and I was right there. And as soon as he got close enough to grab her, I jumped over the rail and I grabbed her, too.”

The say that while these rescues never offer closure to people’s situations, they estimate that they have rescued 90% of the people they have gone out after. All while being iron workers. They had their jobs and career, but there was something deeper that drew them time and again to the dangerous edges where few people would go.

⁴ Isay, Dave. Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work (A StoryCorps Book) (p. 75). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Isay, Dave. Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work (A StoryCorps Book) (p. 123). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

3. Another modern story that has some Moses-like qualities is the story of Billy Mills. Billy was raised in poverty on the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota (Sioux) Reservation in South Dakota. He tells that his youth was surrounded by alcoholism and depression. Billy's parents separated when he was young and his mother died when he was nine and his father only four years later. Before his father passed away and shortly after his mother's death his father sat with him and told him that he could rise from having broken wings, "and one day you will fly like an eagle".

He went out for many sports and said he was too slow for basketball and would get confused, football hurt too much, and boxing was just a bad idea. But, when he ran he felt spirituality in the rhythm of his feet hitting the ground and the way he could breathe while he moved. That didn't mean he was fast. He described his first official track meet in the following way:

"The first official track meet I was in, the little Indian boys lined up. We went into this white community and all of the young white athletes had on track shoes and track uniforms. I had on basketball shoes, Levis, and a t-shirt. At the School of Mines in Rapid City, South Dakota, I got dead last in the 400 meters, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the movement, the activity."⁶

4. In high school he had an encouraging and capable coach who nurtured Billy's love for the sport. And, by the third race of his sophomore year he ran undefeated through the rest of high school. He was awarded a scholarship to the University of Kansas and was selected for the Olympic games, but in another turn of struggle, he found himself lost in the racial strife of the 1960's. As a First Nations person he neither fit the white nor black athlete profile and was typically dismissed, even by photographers who asked him to get out of the photo when standing alongside his All-American teammates.
5. In the 1964 Olympics he was completely unheralded. Yet, he describes his final lap of the 10,000 meter race moment by moment, breath by breath, concluding with a mystical experience. At about 120 meters before the finish line and after running fast for more than 28 minutes, he looked out of the corner of his eye at a runner that he was passing and he saw an eagle on his jersey that brought him back to the moment with his father as a child, "You do these things, Son, someday you can have wings of an eagle." Though exhausted he felt carried and said to himself, "I can win, I've got to do it now."



After crossing the finish line he went to find the runner who had the eagle on his back, but when he looked...there was no eagle.

⁶ <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/lily-percy-olympians-are-chosen-by-the-gods-billy-mills/8686> (accessed 6-19-16)

6. Billy Mills had a phenomenal running career. He is still the only person from the Western hemisphere to win the Olympic Gold in the 10,000 meter event. But, in the rebuilding of his spirit without parents and in the face of a racially charged society where he often felt lost, Mills more fully awakened to a vocation of healing broken wings and elevating the narrative of Native American communities in the consciousness of American society. He co-founded "Running Strong for American Indian Youth" to help with both basic needs and helping emerging generations to reaching for higher aspirations in the wake several hundred years of oppression.

Conclusion

I could go on for hours telling the stories of people who awakened to their vocations because they listened to what God had put inside them. And, they did so with "qavah: hope, waiting, trusting and expecting."

Where are you at in your journey of finding or being found by your vocation?

- Are you just kind of plowing through life 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?
- Are you joyfully embodying your vocation?

Wherever we are at, 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. That is where we will soar like eagles and live with energy beyond comprehension.

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. And, lead us into life themes that bring renewal to us and to our world. In Jesus name. Amen.

Benediction

As the new week now begins may we be daily reminded of our uniqueness and remain attentive to the voice of God in the spaces where our personal joy meets human need.