

Unleashing Our Calling: Today's Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations

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We sit with our Bibles open to 1 Corinthians chapter 7. An unlikely collection has formed on the table: an OSHA manual, a coach's whistle, a mud-flap, a college textbook. We have each brought a symbol of whatever it is we do with most of our time. We meet to discern over each item, each activity, each place, each second, the call of Jesus.

"This, too, is mine."

"Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple," Jesus cried (Luke 14:33). 'Call nothing your own. Give me your sin, your shame, your fear, your sorrow, your death. Come on. Hand it over. Your life, your dear ones, your present moment, your every hope. Hold nothing back. Give me everything.'

In the peace of forgiveness and the stubborn joy of knowing him, in the righteousness that is from him not from us, and in this sanctuary as large as the world¹...we mean to.

Diane sighs as I select the mouse to her old computer to begin the conversation. She enters patient records into the computer system of the local hospital; she struggles with the idea that her anonymous record keeping is what God calls her to do. Her altar guild and her prayer chain, these have to do with faith. But I wonder out loud what might happen to the patients if she does not enter the data accurately. Everyone in the room knows. Someone groans. *"What happens to people, Diane, if you do not do this with meticulous care?"*² I echo Luther, *"How is it possible that you are not called?"*³

I have more I'd like to say to Julie, modestly clutching a diaper, than merely extolling the virtues of motherhood. *"Jesus is calling you in the cries of your baby. He receives your devotion and takes your care directly from your hand. With such sacrifices God is pleased, through your trust in him."* I examine a shoehorn and paraphrase Luther, "What God wants from a Christian shoemaker is well-made shoes, not shoes with little crosses on them."⁴ And again, with a plumber's wrench: "Do you hear it? It speaks to you every passing day, 'Friend, use me for someone's good.'"⁵ About the farmer's gloves or the grocer's inventory: "The donut on my table this morning, let's talk about how it got there."

I like to think that with each symbol I hold up, the members of the class are learning important things about what God is up to in the world, with the big facts of Luther's revolutionary doctrine of vocation slowly opening up to them. Yes, *God milks the cows* through the calling of milkmaids.⁶ The whole structure of God's world is so ordered that righteous and unrighteous alike receive his providence through our many and varied callings. Week by week, I labor at demonstrating how the foreign righteousness of Christ and our stunning new status as saints of the Most High God erase the false distinction between secular and sacred in the stuff of every day life – the very cooking pots are inscribed with קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה (Zechariah 14:20).⁷ I know where these people work, and I know what they do there, so that I can speak knowledgeably about the particular crosses pertaining to each vocation, and offer the guidance that comes from God's Word for the broad stations of life, lit up from within by forgiveness.

I've brought an item of my own. My weekly planner unglamorously symbolizes my calling as their pastor. I talk about the joy of resting my head on the pillow at night, knowing that in the simple duties that were so reliably at hand – they did not spring up on their own – I have done what my Lord has personally given

¹ Wherever I go in faith, I am God's own priest serving in his holy presence.

² Example suggested by Judith McWilliams Dickhart, *Church-going insider or gospel-carrying outsider: A different view of congregations* (ELCA publication, unknown binding, 2002), 66-67.

³ WA 10:308

⁴ Quoted by James D. Lynch, "Finding Vocation in the Corporation" (*Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 3:6 2003).

⁵ LW 21:237.

⁶ WA 44:6

⁷ "Holy to the Lord"

for me to do. My prayer is: “Bleed on me Jesus. Bleed all over me and my works of today.” That, and: “Thank you, Father. We spent this day together. It was a good day.”⁸ I talk about the resilience that comes from knowing that I live and breathe in that precise spot that the Lord has ordained for me, and about the honor of being the priest living always in the presence of God, so privileged to do what a priest does: to talk to people about Jesus whenever the occasion arrives, and who talks to Jesus about those people *all the time*.

“*But none of this, is yet the difference between my calling and yours,*” I want to shout at them. Then I share my understanding of public ministry as a thing distinct and set apart, and I am clear about why and how, not hesitating to say that it is very special, a gift really, and that I do not deserve it. “I find joy in my calling, more than I can say, and I want you to find the same happiness in yours.”⁹

Someone says smiling, “We already know that, Pastor.”

Now the truth. If only I were describing my time in pastoral ministry...but I made it all up. The diaper, the computer mouse, all of it. I once made a remark in a Bible Class about serving God in our professions, and a woman whispered, tears forming, “Excuse me. *What did you say?*” And I had about thirty seconds worth of simplistic things to tell her about the way a mature believer serves her Lord, apart from the congregation’s programs, and short of entering church work herself. This talented, professional woman dedicated countless hours to the work of my exploratory mission, bringing excellence to everything she touched. But, she probably thought she wasn’t giving God “all of her.” I wish I could have that conversation back.

In a worship service just a few weeks into my time at Martin Luther College, my four-year-old daughter looked up miserably and said, “I wish Daddy was still my pastor.” I struggled for composure. My wife didn’t make it. What had I done? Why was I sitting in the pew listening to someone else preach? That afternoon I’d been grading student speeches. Why in the world would God be interested in that? I’m not sure I was. The price we pay for misunderstanding a fundamental doctrine is the misunderstanding itself.

So I heartily thank you for the opportunity represented by this paper. It’s not as though I need to make up for so large a gap as I perceive in my past ministry – that’s not what I learn from Jesus. But the doctrine of vocation has truly invaded my imagination, and has become the cause of such clarity and joy. I see it now. If I live in a home that is lovely and warm, with children who hug me and a wife who doesn’t hold my sin against me, they are the “masks” behind which God hides, present but out of sight.¹⁰ *He is seeing to it that I am loved.* With thoughts like these, God is brought so close it’s startling. How did I miss him? The important fact in his kind providence is that I have the “neighbors” I have.¹¹ Blind chance did not put us together. Not luck. Not fate. And though I’m not their pastor in the way I once was, I am certainly their priest, which I express in the simplicity of reading the Bible to them at supper, then shooting hoops with them in the driveway until it gets too dark.

Recently, a Christian man I barely know pattered in my basement all night when my water-heater died, this after a day spent in construction. I insisted the work could wait. He insisted it couldn’t: “Your girls can’t be taking cold showers in the morning, can they?” And I wonder how he came by such wisdom and power. His piety, from first to last, is his righteousness by faith in Christ. His works and his stations are holy to God, *because he is*. (And God bless people who know how to do things!) In a classroom of college juniors, their heads bent to a Hebrew quiz, the thought now comes frequently as I walk the rows, “I’m in this room to love my neighbor.” God’s grace has freed me to *see* them, and to find pure gladness in them – a big thing for an introvert to say – and to do in the moment whatever I think they need, no matter how foolish or ordinary. In this my works are unprescribed. There is no one to imitate in the particulars, for no one has ever quite been here before. Where love is present with all its joy and spontaneity, it is free to find its own way. In this same spirit I stand before the hundreds of you, and I am pleased to present my best, such as it is, before an audience of One, the Lord Christ in whom we have nothing more to gain, nor anything left to prove.

⁸ This essayist owes a great deal, both in terms of content and vivid expressions, to former colleague Daniel Deutschlander.

⁹ I do not mean to confuse the issue of being “called.” Not all Christians have been called in the same manner as we who are in the public ministry have been. Yet all Christians are truly called by God, and many will be surprised to hear it.

¹⁰ “Through my vocation, I take my place between God and my neighbor and become a conduit through which divine blessings reach others. In Luther’s terminology, I become ‘the mask’ God wears or ‘the hands’ God uses as he does his work in the world.” Ken Cherney, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Luther’s Doctrine of Vocation” (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 98:4 Fall 2001), p. 282.

¹¹ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 72.

First, we'll view the *doctrine of vocation in light of the current scene*. Much has changed since the Reformation and much is now said about vocation to make the doctrine difficult to realize. Next, we'll explore how a pastor models a *theological sensitivity in his constant conversation with the flock*, keeping the spotlight on the grace of God, without which there is no vocation, only work. His special concern is those who find no meaning in what they are, nevertheless, obligated to do by their place in life. Lastly, we'll consider how the doctrine of vocation informs the many roles of the parish pastor as he guides the congregation in *the constant rhythm of the scattering, gathering, and scattering again Church*, as she commissions her priests into the frenzy of customer service and the grime of factories, into nurseries and grocery stores, office buildings and gradeschool classrooms.

I. The Current Scene

“This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.”¹²

So begins Studs Terkel's landmark book, “Working,” a compilation of oral histories from people not often heard from: waitresses, salesmen, plumbers, and the like. You cannot read for long without concluding that something has gone terribly wrong in the workplace. “The repetition of identical gesture, the work that's never finished,” is to a spot welder a war of attrition, a kind of death. “If one car's done, the next one isn't, and it's already there, unsoldered at the precise spot that's just been done, rough at the precise spot that's just been polished.”¹³ “Most of us...have jobs that are too small for our spirit,” explains an editor, “jobs not big enough for people.”¹⁴

The question for this essay is: how does the doctrine of vocation apply in a society vastly different than that of Luther, with its simple orders of peasant, soldier, and magistrate? It's one thing to grow the food, build the houses, and keep the peace. Then, in spite of boredom and repetition, I can at least see the sacred importance of my place in the world and in my own “circle of nearness.” But where does a person, lost in a complex economy and in a profit-motivated corporate system derive any clear sense of individual contribution, of serving God by serving neighbor? Leaders and managers are confronted by ethical decisions without the ability to know all the consequences to people in other parts of the complex system. Millions of people in bureaucratic and information vocations, whose daily work is spent in cubicles, are unable to follow their effort to any tangible result or finished product, but must keep on anyway, making their little splashes in an incomprehensible ocean. For all too many who do love their jobs, see their work as important, and enjoy its rewards, the thing grows and grows all out of proportion to their vital unpaid callings to family and community.

Yes, God milks the cows behind the mask of the milkmaid. Does he also interrupt my supper to sell me term life insurance? As much as four percent of the work force is now employed in call centers, reading canned scripts and being supervised with methods known as “management by stress.”¹⁵ There is less time on the job available for personal contact – doctors spend an average of eight minutes talking to each patient, less than half the time they spent a decade ago.¹⁶ High technology and new management styles put workers on “digital assembly lines”¹⁷ leaving less room for creativity, true craft or independent thought.¹⁸ No wonder so many

¹² Studs Terkel,, *Working* (New York: The New Press, 1974), xi.

¹³ Robert Middleton, “Revising the Concept of Vocation for the Industrial Age” (*Christian Century*, October 20, 1986), 943-945.

¹⁴ Terkel, xxiv.

¹⁵ Adam Cohen, “What Studs Terkel's ‘Working’ Says About Worker Malaise Today.” (*New York Times*, May 31, 2004).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ I carefully avoid making sweeping condemnations about the places our members invest their working lives, yet no one questions that the moral decline of our culture is rudely apparent at work.

people say that they work to make money and would quit tomorrow if they could.¹⁹ They spend their creativity on their week-end pursuits, time fiercely labeled “their own.” Meanwhile, occupation remains central to our sense of self in our Western culture, and the bonds of our modern slavery to status only tighten. Only in America do we ask strangers, “And what do you do?” Many people fear the loss of work, such as it is, more than terminal disease.

Again, it is not the case that every worker is so demoralized and depersonalized, looking forward to Monday with so heavy a sigh. It’s enough to know that many are. From Terkel: “[Work] is a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread...in short, for *some sort of life* [emphasis mine] rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.”²⁰ A person is not easily talked out of that hunger for transcendence, for some sparkle of meaning, some shimmer of the divine. With such huge chunks of life lived without reference to God, with so many relationships endured without the cost or safety of covenantal love, rampant secularization has taken us a long way away. Gone is the simple dignity of the slave serving his master as though serving his Lord and living off that other set of satisfactions available to contemplative faith. Without Jesus, vocation shrinks to a job. Here inside Christ, we have taken hold of the “life that truly is life,”(1 Timothy 6:19) and you might say, it is a *Sunday* sort of life.

The Compartmentalized Life

Working Christians know that the great *I Am* is intimately involved in the whole fabric of life, or else the whole thing would fall apart. However, there is scholarly consensus that within today’s believers resides a “deeply engrained tendency to confine God and faith to places and actions traditionally perceived as religious.”²¹ The universal priesthood of all believers, as it applies to every moment and to the most mundane features of life, remains a provocative truth that makes a qualitative difference for those who see it and are let in to Luther’s “world full of God.”

Unfortunately, the “Catholic distortion”²² continues to be felt, that error which divides Christian people into the ordinary and the extraordinary according to their acceptance of higher spiritual demands and their involvement in churchly things. The “Protestant error,”²³ for all its celebrated work ethic, too easily slides into a Gospel of success and a convenient religious sanction of plain worldliness. The narrow Lutheran way between uncritical acceptance of the world and an *un*-Christ-like withdrawal from it – to be *in* the world but not *of* the world – seems a difficult path to find.

Many television shows have work as the primary setting for portraying people’s most personal lives. They experience a *working* self as something very different from their *true* self, the two being carefully locked away from each other. Such compartmentalization can go deeper than merely reflecting how we happen to present ourselves. Communication scholarship is increasingly fascinated with the “roles” people play – how not only communication behaviors but even cognitive processes, values and beliefs seem to go through significant changes according to a person’s movement from role to role, now a disciplining parent, now a competing salesman, now a socializing friend. Human qualities like play and spiritual qualities such as kindness can be present in one role and absent in another. Keeping one’s spheres of activity separate and unrelated makes it possible to exchange the role of dormitory potty-mouth and pious Bible scholar as thoughtlessly as changing a shirt, unaware of the soul-numbing hypocrisy.²⁴ In a pluralistic workplace, we

¹⁹ Depending on whom you believe, anywhere from 29% to 95% of working Americans do not enjoy the work they do. Michael Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling! Luther speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003) 26.

²⁰ Terkel, *xi*.

²¹ Bennethum, 84.

²² Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003) 31.

²³ *Ibid*, 38.

²⁴ Thank God that the Holy Spirit preserves us in faith even when we are not conscious of faith, such as in baptized infancy, when sleeping, or (what is very possible) when watching reality TV. But let none underestimate the spiritual danger of the pervasive worldliness in the lives of Christian people and the level of their interest in such empty things; and do not miss the sorrow of Jesus upon being left out of our vocations. Witness his mournful prophesy about our times and of people “eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage.” (Matthew 24:38) He is not content to be one among many interests, or with such love as can only be called “lukewarm” in comparison to our passion for NASCAR or the NFL. Lord, have mercy.

quickly learn that we are supposed to keep our faith to ourselves.

The sad result of compartmentalization is believers giving little conscious thought to God's presence unless they are sitting in church or gazing at a sunset. We would fail to recognize how the gracious, relentless God is acting upon us in the moment, or to intentionally offer those moments to him, or to recognize his call for the good of all those people who somehow experience our actions as events in their lives.

Instead, let this moment, whether I am driving a forklift, editing an essay, or sipping coffee with my friends, be lived to you, for you, in you, Lord Jesus.

The Implicated Church

If our members ever live separate lives beyond the shadows of the sanctuary, the institutional church herself is implicated when a member says, "My church does not seem to know or care much about my work,"²⁵ that is, when the congregation seems to be "curved inward," interested in and supportive *exclusively* of the work her members do *at* and *for* her own preservation, maintenance and survival.

Is there a difference between the *formal* message of the church – "be a disciple of Jesus in the world" – and her *functional* one, as it is expressed by who actually gets prayed for, who gets trained and for doing what, who gets celebrated when what has been achieved?²⁶ Is the whole objective involving people in more and more in-house activities, wondering if something isn't seriously wrong with those who won't make the time? LCMS professor Steven Hein complains of a "churchyard piety" that burdens consciences and takes people from their real tasks – an activism in works that do not flow from vocation but that instead forsakes the "extraordinary ordinariness" of Lutheran piety.²⁷ My pulse reading of the WELS does *not* reveal frivolous programs or busyness for its own sake. However, we still might ask: are we prepared to recognize when the "good" – a full church parking lot on a Tuesday night – has become the enemy of the "best" – *every home a true church*, via catechism and hymnal, Bible stories and Luther's prayers.

When a pastor exclaimed to a district convention, "It's so wonderful to see the way lay people serve their Lord!" it was a heartfelt, encouraging, and entirely appropriate enthusiasm for the self-sacrificing work performed by lay people on behalf of their synod. I only wonder, what happens if that's *all* we say? What if a person never once hears a bakery employee so celebrated for, of all things, baking. Did they count, those decades my mother-in-law spent on her feet, time most certainly not spent on herself? Can we also muster for her some biblical delight in such things as only God could do, such as faith and such as love?²⁸ For all our good intentions, do we provide only one portrait of a "dedicated lay person?"

Now an important disclaimer: the meaningful service of lay people within the organized work of the church is a wonderful thing, a breath of fresh air. We won't get far without them. It would be a mistake to leave our congregations or church body out of our thoughts as we each think about how to serve our Savior, our Lord who walks among the "lampstands," who holds the churches' "stars" in the palms of his hands (Revelation 1:20). I would be ashamed to dampen anyone's enthusiasm for the real and urgent needs of the organized church.

But the universal priesthood of all believers means more, still, than this. And it is not tolerable that the things lay people do with the majority of their time and energy, that spent as the *scattered Church*, should be so

²⁵ Bennethum, 30.

²⁶ From a Lutheran layman: "My church was speaking as an extrovert, but behaving as an introvert. It was calling me to serve as a disciple of Christ in the world without giving me any help on how to do it. I got help in the form of affirmation, training, and even prayers for my service in the church as a Sunday School teacher, youth advisor, and church council member. For my Monday work as a Christian businessperson in a highly competitive environment, however, I received no affirmation, no training, no support, no prayers. Nothing. *There was absolutely no connection between Sunday and Monday* [emphasis mine]." William Diehl, *Ministry in Daily Life*. (New York City: The Alban Institute, 1996), 12.

²⁷ Stephen Hein, "The Outer Limits of Lutheran Piety" (*Logia*, Epiphany 1994), 10.

²⁸ My brother now does something called "internal sales" for Johnson Wax. I heard the story that at some sort of convention, when people from all around the country got to meet the face that went with the voice that had dealt with them on the phone *in the way he had*, they spontaneously rose to their feet in applause. Does he have them listen to hymns when he puts them at hold or otherwise paste on some religious veneer before his investment in his work can be called "Christian?" And what does his church think of her former Lutheran elementary principal? I hope she is pleased and proud.

marginalized in our thinking about the normal Christian life. It is not acceptable that people so dear to us and to God should serve with a vague sense of his disapproval for not living lives more overtly religious or that we should play a part in distracting them from those who need them most. Let's reconsider our disdain for the "eighty" (of the famous "eighty/twenty"²⁹). A single Mom, faithful in worship, admits with burdened conscience that, what with the kids and the two jobs, she is too busy to serve her Lord. *Does this even make sense?* Should she fight to make room for knocking on doors, forsaking the profound influence she must have on her own children, or will we counsel her, "Go home. Love your kids. We'll see you Sunday?" Even as you recruit a father of young children onto the church board, will you encourage him to think long and hard about the things he might be saying 'no' to if he says 'yes' to you?

Does failing to have a defined role in the congregation necessarily mean that one is not "assimilated?" Is it acceptable to milk the "twenty" of hour upon hour of church activity if it comes at the price of their failure to fully grasp their freedom, their true identity or the significance of their regular, daily callings. Bad enough that a man should ever hunger for just one evening to get to put his kids to bed with a Jesus story but his church has made other plans for his time; even worse that an elder should busy himself in committee while chaos reigns in his home. Enough said.

Modern Criticism

Our analysis of the "current scene" should mention the most common criticisms of the doctrine, first of all, the charge about the *status quo*. The doctrine of vocation is disapproved for being much too insistent about patiently enduring life's crosses, too bent on shoring up traditional family roles, when it would be better to work at social change by deconstructing and disrupting every oppressive system. The truth is that a Christian woman, let's say, who responds to the obscenity of spousal abuse in her past by founding a home for battered women, would find vigorous support in Luther's doctrine.³⁰ She is responding to the needs she sees and understands; better, *she is loving the people she knows how to love*. For that matter, any other condemnation of abusive husbands would pale before the one occasioned by the doctrine of vocation. The devil hides behind masks as well.

As to the frequent potshot that no one can seriously be expected to find honor in things so earthly and ordinary as collecting garbage or cleaning bathrooms,³¹ we remember that human eyes didn't see the truth about the incarnate Christ either, whose earthly humiliation we are called to share. Witness God in a carpentry shop, the risen Lord frying up some fish on the shore of Genneseret, and think new thoughts about what is mundane and what is holy. As to small things attended to by no glory, say, a cup of cold water cheerfully held out, the meaning of such things lies entirely in the reality of Jesus – 'It means something *to me*.' The notion seems entirely too romantic to many. For the one who lives in the thought, new vistas open up on the things we might do today, and we sense a startling depth to routine duties that once seemed hopelessly flat. If things formerly mundane are not fully transformed into heart-absorbing interests, they are, at very least "sweetened with the honey of God's good pleasure."³² Martin Luther King perhaps never sounded so Lutheran as when he intoned:

"If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."³³

So, the world has chimed in on the doctrine of vocation, usually to deny its substance; so history distorts it, falling off one side first then the other; so the institutional church whispers it unconvincingly in the face of its

²⁹ I refer to the general observation that twenty percent of church members do eighty percent of the work and vice versa.

³⁰ Marc Kolden, "Christian Vocation in Light of Feminist Critiques." (*Lutheran Quarterly* 10, 1996), 80.

³¹ From a Scottish pastor: "I clean the urinals because it keeps me from preaching irrelevant sermons on the dignity of labor."

³² Einar Billing, *Our Calling: A Statement of the Relationship of Christian Faith and Christian Living*, translated by Conrad Bergendof (Rock Island, Ill: Augustana Book Concern, 1947), 23.

³³ In a speech on June 20, 1965 in Kingston, Jamaica.

struggle to survive. Whatever the causes, the result is what Seminary President Paul Wendland has called “*the tragedy of sanctified Christians not seeing their lives as charged with the holy for Jesus’ sake.*”

The Good News is that the scattered Church takes her place day by day in the world’s businesses, schools and playgrounds, where the world desperately needs her to be. The Bad News is that once there, she is capable of forgetting who she is.

An Opportunity

Understand that an energetic conversation about Calling has long been taking place, it could seem, while the WELS was sleeping. In terms of the sheer volume of available resources, our body has had its own “thirty seconds of things to say.” Not surprisingly, the word “vocation” has been appropriated and emptied of all content by secular writers who articulate sentimental notions of calling with only the vaguest notions of a *Caller*. Religious thinkers in the ELCA, giving as they do such keen attention to sociology, have long found in the doctrine of vocation a favorite touch point for expressing their view of church and promoting social change.³⁴ Outside our own circles, Lutheran resources on vocation abound.³⁵ In literature from Evangelical authors, the hunger for personal fulfillment and a certain inner power to do big things crowds out the hunger for grace.³⁶ All too often, the call of God becomes a certain inner, subjective sense, a secretly proud ability to read the hidden will of God, rather than anything so concrete and external as my bride needing a hand with the groceries. Either absent, or overwhelmed in the sea of words is the simplicity of *recognizing need as the call of Jesus and love as its fulfilling.*

As parochial as it sounds, having sifted through the literature I have to say that when one hears and reads what our own theologians *have* had to say, it is like coming home. As God gives to us in this confessional Lutheran tent what he has long given though we do not deserve it, a spotlight unmoving, fixed on a cross, then there is joy. In Lutheran worship, we bask in the constant epiphany that comes with the bread and wine that is Christ serving us his with own body and blood, *Deus Revelatus* taking our breath away as we see into his very heart. Only the ministrations of Law and Gospel can cancel the fretful straining to improve our position before God and the deadly serious business of distinguishing ourselves above others. In the light of my forgiveness are lit up, at last, the people closest at hand. I now see the central place they occupy in God’s beautiful thoughts for my life as I grow up into Jesus. The old command is made new: “Love each other, *as I have loved you.*” (John 15:12) On this hinge swings open the door to joy in our callings, simply...

We are already forgiven, at peace and pure.

This is not our home. Our home is coming.

One last thing, before we leave the “current scene.” In all that is going on in the world today, count the fact God is still caring for us, when we see it and when we don’t. He still pokes the fibers of wool through the hide of the sheep, and sustains the countless hands through which it passes until it reaches its goal, your own shoulders or feet. He is most tenderly seeing to the things we really need – home and companions – and much we could do without – that green leaves should turn a brilliant red before they fall and fade. Even civic righteousness has become a larger gift than I had seen before, that a certain influence resides within vocation

³⁴ By no means are all ELCA resources flawed in this way. Several authors have excellent things to say, such as Marc Kolden, Douglas Shuurman and Michael Bennethum, cited in this essay.

³⁵ There are Lutheran institutes on vocation, chairs of vocation on seminary faculties, vocation think-tanks, web-sites and blogs, synodical resolutions, journal articles galore, and books *about* books on God’s daily calling. There is no end of Lutheran liturgical experimentation. You meet a surprising array – and ironic once you think about it – of new program initiatives aimed at helping people realize their vocations in daily life.

³⁶ To take the evaluation of Evangelical writing a little further: the matter of personal guilt and the sinner’s desperate need for mercy is too often passed over, and justification reduces to merely one of many doctrines. Higher works of piety retain their false urgency. As far as my sanctification, it would seem from these writings that the thing is both *by me* and *for me*; that my works are mine in a way far different than in Lutheran theology. The poor sinner, under the terrors of conscience, looks to the demands of his life for some sort of peace...*and sees a monster.* (Luther’s *monstrum incertitudinis*: to look anywhere but the cross of Jesus Christ when it comes to the matter of peace with God.) Einar Billing seems current, although he wrote some sixty years ago: “The Reformed teaching concerning the call is the most energetic challenge to work ever to have been directed against humanity....No Roman penitent was more ingenious in devising new methods of self-torture than these Reformed in their search of new burdens.” Billing, 14,16.

itself to compel the behavior of people whether they live in the Spirit or not. No father wants to think of himself as a man who doesn't care for his children, and so his station prods him, externally at least, to overcome his innate selfishness...as the dear God silently arranges for the family and such stability as the world has, for the sake of the very Good News he has for it.

All this he does whether we know it or not.

How much better to know it! How much better to be mindful, and invite others, too, into this fascination with the wonderful workings of the *God Who Is There*, and into that way of life that is passed as an unbroken conversation with him.

This is the opportunity. Perhaps we are the ones – *Jesu Juve* – who can get it right, shouting grace to the woman in the toll booth as loudly as Luther first shouted it to the man behind the plow: “Jump for joy, you king, you priest.” The theologian-clergy of the WELS are well qualified to articulate the doctrine of vocation as the great unifying principle over against the unnatural divide between real religion and real life. This is still more for us to say to God's holy people about “the gentle art of getting used to our justification.”³⁷

It is the sense of this essayist, that when they hear it, they will be glad.

II. On Having Two Things to Say

How do we tell them? We now give our attention to the constant conversation between a pastor and his people. In his classic, *The Quest for Holiness*, Adolf Koberle explores the idea that expressing Lutheran theology usually involves having *two* things to say.³⁸ Saying one thing – the word of Gospel without Law, the word of Justification without Sanctification – manages to be at one time both true and a potentially serious distortion. Our church body is not immune to the polarization that comes from having one thing to say. Our “one thing” might be the word, “change” – change liturgy, change music, change programs – and we can that poor verse about becoming “all things to all people,” (1 Corinthians 9:22) to make it say things foreign to its context. After all, loving sensitivity to the way people's consciences are informed doesn't always argue for changes in worship or church polity. We might make an appeal to Christian liberty as if this is the end of the conversation instead of a very good place for the conversation to begin. If those in our circles with recognized gifts in theology see the many innovations among us and cry, according to *their* calling, “Oh, be careful. Something is being lost,” the rest of us might want to listen.

Perhaps in reply our “one thing to say” is that found in books on our shelves, the forms, habits and traditions by which faithful people expressed our theology of grace *for another time and for another place*. For the sake of *these* we stamp our tiny feet. When someone wants to open a window, we perhaps should perceive their tender desire for deeper worship and for lost souls, respect their sensitivity to the ever-changing needs of real people in times of such phenomenal change as we see today, without, ‘automatically turning on the icy water of our superior criticism from operation keep-things-the-same.’³⁹ “All things to all people” *does* call for a sacrifice of customs held dear.

Defend sound doctrine according to God's changeless Word *and* let unrestrained love be the proof of our teaching, lest our wrangling have little to do with Jesus or he with it.

Having *one* thing to say has the advantage of consistency. The more difficult position is for those who say *two* things, not meaning by this timid compromise, but expressing both truths loudly and energetically; that's when you can make almost everybody angry. To this essayist, the doctrine of vocation at a surprising number of points calls for the wisdom and generosity of saying two things: to recognize the value to God of all works done in faith *and* still to hold out the privilege of being, every one of us, Christ's own ambassadors; to hold out meaningful service within the gathered church *and* to truly free her and release her to her callings in the world; to better honor all honorable vocations *and* still to hold out the public ministry as special and set

³⁷ Gerhard Forde, “The Lutheran View” of sanctification in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, edited by Donald Alexander (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 13-32.

³⁸ Adolf Koberle, *The Quest for Holiness* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1936), 266-268.

³⁹ This is a paraphrase of J.P. Koehler, who actually wrote, “operation Isolation” in “*Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law.*” Thirty-fifth Convention of the Evangelical Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, August 5-12, 1959.

apart; to always be asking, which side has been emphasized and which neglected?

For example, sometimes love needs to say that there is a reason for pastors, and for the investment we make in their training, including the indispensable years required for them to learn their art. Who benefits when a layman gives a sermonette that muddles Law and Gospel? Least of all, that layman. There remain many critical functions for which our parish pastors are uniquely qualified and properly called: such as preaching in and leading public worship, general doctrinal and spiritual oversight of our congregations, and administration of the sacraments. While the specific form of the pastoral office is an expression of Christian liberty, we must recognize that it has been a source of inestimable blessing. To have every Christian in our circles able to say, “I have a pastor,” to have the broadest scope of Gospel ministry expressed in this one office found so universally throughout our body, has resulted in the doctrinal unity and God-pleasing order that we still enjoy.⁴⁰ Blessed be his name.

And then you listen to a layman talking about what it meant to him when he preached a sermon for the pastor some fifteen years ago, or that he read the Scriptures in church last week-end, and you sense that the way he feels about that activity is the way he does *not* feel about anything else in his life. Then you have something *else* to say, and with the same insistent joy, about his ordination as priest in the waters of his baptism, and about *his* life and *his* vocation, and about this very moment. “*How is possible that you are not called?*” By “wisdom and generosity” I mean with pastoral care sensing which side of the coin has usually been showing and which holds the glimmering surprise.⁴¹

Regarding the most formal and important communication of pastor to flock, namely his preaching, two things: if more time is now to be given to guiding the believers in their God-given vocations, let it not come at the expense of the space you have always made for the cross; *and* if we are ever hesitant to preach sanctification and good works, the doctrine of vocation provides the perfect vehicle as well as truly Christ-centered and thoroughly evangelical avenues for doing so. The grace of God comes unasked for and unearned, *and* he asks much of those who mean to follow him.

On the Preaching of Justification by Faith

For joy in vocation to become the lived experience of believers, there must be, if anything, more, not less, attention given to grace, that attitude in the heart of God that planned and carried out so great a salvation.⁴²

⁴⁰ The content of this paragraph is drawn from a fine paper by Tom Nass, “*The Pastoral Ministry as a Distinct Form of the Public Ministry*” (Milwaukee Metro-South Pastoral Conference, September 20, 1993).

⁴¹ While the universal priesthood is not to be equated with part-time lay ministry, or worse, seen as the grounds for demanding more rights in the context of the church, more could be said on behalf of lay ministry. August Pieper himself warned against “a wrong monarchical, monopolistic view of the office, according to which the pastor concentrates all church offices, even the purely external ones, from preacher to janitor, in his own person.” August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?” (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 86:1 Winter, 1989), 47.

⁴² Of course, our highest art is to preach “law is if there were no gospel, then gospel as if there were no law.” The way love confronts us daily with its smattering of demands is first all a means to startle awake, with specific law, the terrors of conscience. If you want the knees to bend all on their own, let each “consider his stations.” God becomes real, and his righteous judgments, for example, in the context of all that a man is supposed to be for his bride. “Love your neighbor” can seem to lack force until the neighbor has a human face and a name – my actual boss, my customer, my student, my daughter. That their need failed to reach me is a crying shame. Christ walks among us hungry, naked and poor, but we fail to notice, and God’s thoughts of love failed to achieve their end. To inhabit my vocation for my own sake, consulting always my own self-interest, is an offense against God. I am not what I am supposed to be, and I take it pretty hard. In the light of all that God intended for us all in our many callings, one can only concur with the fierce judgments of God’s holy will against all of humanity as one wretched, fallen thing. There was nothing for it, only to gather it all into one awful spot, condemn it, kill it and send it to hell. Who knew that that one awful spot would be the body and soul of his own dear Son? “Therefore when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me... Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, O God.’”⁴² It is Jesus answering his Father’s call, come to lay his body down as the perfect sacrifice, the only one possible, that you might be righteous by faith, washed by the blood, covered by the robe, ushered by his Spirit into the very presence of a smiling God, where you shine. No law condemns you. No fear disturbs you. You have nothing whatsoever to prove or defend, nor anything still to gain. No higher status can be thought of than the one you now have in Jesus through Holy Baptism. As surely as he lives, you have hope for the day Jesus holds you up, beaming, to present you to his Father and yours. This was that “joy set before him” so that he called the cross worthwhile. “Here they are, Father. I have redeemed them all.” And God, your God, tilts his head back to sing.

It is still all about Christ crucified, and the forgiveness of sins set against the backdrop of the condemnation our sins deserve. It is still the pastor's joy to "walk this world as the pardon of God."⁴³ After all, the presupposition of all Christian activity is a soul at peace, justified by faith in Jesus. Before this Gospel, you cannot ask what God wants of you in the right way. Left to ourselves, we would use the law for the purposes of gaining favor in God's eyes and maintaining a distinctiveness or exclusive identity in the eyes of other people. Our holy status in the sight of God is a finished and settled thing, according to his blood-dripped promises cancels such grave, self-centered concerns, setting freedom and joy in their place.

"Never believe that you have a correct understanding of a thought of Luther [such as the doctrine of vocation] before you have succeeded in reducing it to a simple corollary of the thought of the forgiveness of sins."⁴⁴

The opposition to Luther's key thoughts on vocation – 'ah, but the world is a very different place nowadays' – is not so formidable as it may have seemed. We are simply to let God be God. In the peace of forgiveness, we just do not need to know how he will use each work of ours in the purposes of his kingdoms of power or grace.⁴⁵ Faith can never pass into seeing all things clearly. Even if our love gets lost in the world, "oh what of that, and what of that." The Old Man inquires constantly into the worth and importance of his works; *faith knows only one righteousness*. In the end, we are humble people doing humble things.

"We would search in vain through Luther's whole preaching about the call for a single place wherein he seeks to encourage zeal in one's calling by referring to great cultural achievements or the like...on the contrary he always chooses the most humble work as examples, and makes hardly any attempt to reveal links between them and some great common goal to which they are all meant to contribute. The radiance with surrounds them does not come from in front, from their goal, but from behind, from their source. *The forgiveness of sins is and ought to be the only sun in life.*"⁴⁶ [emphasis mine]

This removal of the motivation for extraordinary works (that "already have their reward") and the brilliant play of light upon the everyday are uniquely Lutheran. Both Catholic and Reformed writings have many and diverse teachings to sustain the life of bigger and better deeds. Only a Lutheran can make sense of Billing's suggestion for the one who finds no meaning in his vocation and hungers for something *more*: tell him he is forgiven, and leave it to the Holy Spirit to draw near and teach what one thing has to do with the other.⁴⁷

Simply put, nothing is more practical than the *habitus practicus*, that we pastors should live our theology, and drag ourselves daily to Sinai, walk all the way up, touch it and die; that we daily blink alive outside an empty tomb. Let this be in our heart and mind, and you will not need to remind yourself to continually tap the bedrock of assurance and hope; you will know no other way.

God has declared the world "Not Guilty" for Jesus sake, and you, child, are you not part of the world?

As far as our people perceiving no line between the glowing sacred and the merely secular, everything depends on the way you preach the foreign righteousness of Christ and unveil the new status of the saints with all energy and power, that you portray Christ before their eyes as crucified for their sins and raised for their justification with all clarity and sanctified creativity; that you declare the overwhelming grace of God with all the mighty narratives and stirring metaphors that Scripture sets at your disposal. "We preach Christ crucified." (1 Corinthians 1:23)

⁴³ G.K. Chesterton, quoted in Guinness, 200.

⁴⁴ Billing, 7.

⁴⁵ "The Christian life is not lived out in heaven, where the risen Christ is enthroned at his Father's side, surrounded by ranks of angels and bathed in unapproachable light. Our life is lived out here on earth, where Christ was crucified...Often its essence [the Christian's cross] is the hostile and indifferent reception that the Christian's deeds of love meet with out in the world. Christian love is utterly defenseless as it makes its way through this godless world. Love must be prepared to be misunderstood, rejected, taken advantage of, and abused...At these moments the resemblance of the Christian's cross to that of his Lord becomes clear – the Lord whose love brought him nothing from the world but pain, humiliation and death." Cherney, 283.

⁴⁶ Billing, 9.

⁴⁷ Billing, 21.

“Life organized around the forgiveness of sins, this is Luther’s idea of the call.”⁴⁸

On New Avenues for the Preaching of Sanctification

For Luther the forgiveness of sins is not only a teaching to apprehend or a purely subjective experience, but something far beyond: “a real act of God, the living God, through Christ, the living Christ.”⁴⁹ Justification is “a completely new kind of encounter between God and man.”⁵⁰ In such grace and mercy, we see *who he is*, and are renewed by the staggering event in the power of the Spirit. The Father and the Son make their home within us, furnishing for themselves an Upper Room. He has removed our heart of stone and given a heart of flesh. All glory to God, we love him.

The posture of our inner being toward his will and Word is new through faith as well. Addressing this new creation of God involves, says J.P. Koehler, “a speech of an entirely different nature to the law that was pitted against our damnable flesh. There the preaching knows nothing of the gospel; here it is always intimately connected with the Gospel...[it is] rather a coaxing, a refreshing of the spirit, a picturing and unfolding of the good yet to come, and always all bound up in the Gospel.”⁵¹ The best sanctification preaching always circles the cross; with the thought of *What He Did* never far from our minds, intruding into our paragraphs, messing up our tidy, linear outlines again and again. The “tone” Koehler refers to is joy.

“What would you have me do?” she says to her king about to die.

“I would have you smile again.”⁵²

This is joy of a sort that never gets replaced by a growing satisfaction with ourselves. Nor should it be tarnished by prescribed works and endless “shoulds.” A Christian does not feel that everyone ought to do as he does.⁵³ We would imitate the *forgiving love* of Christ and the *faithful way of life* of those who have gone ahead of us, but to imitate their actual behavior would reopen the door to that slavish obedience of the religion of works. He describes how such imitation would involve “cutting ourselves off from time and place”⁵⁴ – we would have to have the same neighbors in the same relation to ourselves, and be responding with the same resources, gifts and abilities to the same needs. Instead, let us be like Jesus, taking our life moment by moment from our Father’s hand.⁵⁵ Let our love be free to find its own way, as God himself did, through womb and stable, cross and grave.

There it is again...*see how he loved us!*

While the two are not actually separated in time, the cause and effect relationship of justification to sanctification are important to understand. Salvation by faith alone is at stake, and the sinner’s assurance against the realities of his stumbling Christian life. At the same time, *our sanctification preaching is lacking if it is limited to the fine systematic distinctions*, if it begins and ends with analogies as if to master intellectually how the thing works.

“The hard work of trying to understand the thoughts completely monopolized our inner participation. Beyond this it is not put into practice, not in the case of the individual Christian, nor does the work (Seelsorge) of the pastor point to that goal. The result in that case is a certain indifference regarding sanctification.”⁵⁶

The doctrine of vocation provides an alternative. We give regular attention to God’s will in our real

⁴⁸ Billing, 11.

⁴⁹ Billing, 10

⁵⁰ Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 11.

⁵¹ Koehler.

⁵² From “Lord of the Rings: the Return of the King.”

⁵³ Wingren, 181

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 48.

⁵⁵ For just one example, he faithfully followed his call as one sent “to the lost sheep of Israel,” but recognized a new direction in the startling faith of the Syrophenician woman. See also Cherney’s discussion of vocation as being “thoroughly grounded in the present” (286) and Wingren’s on needing to tear the day loose from yesterday and tomorrow (216).

⁵⁶ Koehler.

world stations, the way the Luther did, and the apostles before him. Avoiding every coercion, we direct the believe to his or her neighbor, addressing the new man with the simple, winsome imperatives from God's Word, granting permission to do what grace has made him eager to do. We learn from Luther to put the hermit monk, tragically engaged in works for God has never asked, and the girl happily wiping a plate for her mother, in the sharpest possible contrast.⁵⁷ To think which one melts the heart of God! The Lutheran preaching of sanctification promotes that deep and earthy spirituality that does not require time off from the stuff of real life.⁵⁸ We are called, wherever we find ourselves, to open our eyes to the needs of others, and to participate in divine providence "by being provident ourselves."⁵⁹

Luther wrote, "Having been justified by grace, we then do good works, *yes, Christ himself does all in us.*"⁶⁰ He himself provides the moment, the relationship, the definite task, the reason, the will, the energy, and best of all, his pleasure, through the inner certainty of saving faith. Indeed, help your people to look at all their hands found to do in faith as if Christ himself had done it. According the Confessions, good works are the Lord Christ celebrating his victory over the devil.⁶¹

Now it should be recognized that regardless of our tone, *lex semper accusat.*⁶² Though in Lutheran piety we speak of God's love for us and our love for others with one breath, and although some people will be refreshed at our teaching about vocation, others will be burdened to have been made to think of all that their callings really ask of them. The reality is, if they have never strived to meet their obligations with the love that comes from Christ, it is important that they begin to. "Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48) is a sanctification text, Jesus' word to the redeemed, not merely the law in its first use. You cannot make a person who does not mean to live a pure and decent for Jesus' sake, or who does not take God's will seriously, know himself at all. There is a depth of repentance unavailable to the one who is skeptical of works, or who treats intellectually or otherwise explains away the call to give up everything, and to take up our cross every day. He looks at his life not understanding what he is seeing. But for the one who strives, awareness of sin and Savior grow side by side. When the gathered church rises to sing, "Lord, have mercy on us..." he will be found all safe in his pew, and all he can think of is, "Lord have mercy!" Then the absolution. And everything is Christ.

"Each new experience [of forgiveness] makes us feel that we had no understanding of it at all before. Each time it rises heavenward above all other thoughts. As soon as it appears before us, we say instinctively, this is God's thought...Each new experience of forgiveness is a new assurance that he is present as my Father and works out his Fatherly purposes through my deeds."⁶³

Thus the sanctified Christian life as a thing lived between these two poles. *The forgiveness of sins refreshes and restores me to the callings in my life. The callings in my life reveal me and chase me back to the forgiveness of sins.*⁶⁴ In sanctification preaching we speak in the name of Jesus his *two* words for his faltering bride, "Neither do I condemn you," and with no less love, "Now leave your life of sin." If she will hold them both, take both to heart, together they will bless her. She will come to know a deep and abiding joy, a joy not incompatible with life lived under the cross, but in fact quite at home there.

⁵⁷ See "The Fourth Commandment," *Luther's Large Catechism*, 613 (*Triglotta*).

⁵⁸ When I read Luther's sermons I continually find things I do not typically bother about in my own, as he would find in mine. I hope I'm starting to get it.

⁵⁹ Douglas Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 54.

⁶⁰ WA 319, 46.

⁶¹ AC III (71) 174 (*Triglotta*), quoted by Cherney, 289.

⁶² "The law always accuses."

⁶³ Billing, 25, 27.

⁶⁴ Billing, 38.

The Conversation Continues

As the conversation begun in the pulpit continues in the narthex and the classroom, in counseling and social settings, we keep asking ourselves, “Does this way of talking enhance or detract from this person’s appreciation of his own calling, that is his or hers as a gift from God?” We can trace the wisdom of *having two things to say* when the talk turns to...

Choosing Life’s Vocation

Pastoral love finds a way to honor all God-given vocations while taking nothing away from our zeal for public ministry. We see the future pastor, teacher or staff minister in a young person – a heart easily broken over sin, a special hunger and appreciation for grace, a character being molded in repentance, along with nicely developing intellectual gifts and personal qualities – and we say, “I have something I’d like you to think about.” It is not too much to say, ‘what vocation is better situated to result for the highest good of souls than public ministry!’ “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.” (1 Timothy 3:1) All of that is true. So is this: God needs good tax preparers. Why? Because I do.

God allows an incredible diversity of needs to persist in this groaning world, and has so shaped individual people that they are sensitive, attentive and equipped for different ones among them. To do so in full-time vocation is more than just legitimate. *The doctrine of vocation dramatically broadens the scope of what a person may consciously offer to God with a happy conscience, as a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and which he will receive in his good pleasure.* If his eyes light up for doctors and the mechanics, so might ours.

On the one hand, no vocation is morally superior,⁶⁵ rather, the person in any given position either *is* or *is not* a true priest before God by faith. It is not a matter of degrees. There is no holier existence than the life lived by faith in Jesus, I according to my obligations, you according to yours. On the other hand, one vocation can tend to be more useful than another in terms of serving people here and now. Even though our ability to judge such matters is limited,⁶⁶ Christians want to choose well in gratitude to God and in a desire to serve. Given the huge investment of years and tens of thousands of dollars spent on preparing people for their chosen professions, let a pastor not take his hands off so critical and far-reaching a decision. Bring your good questions to the choices of young people. “So tell me about that. Why would you like to be an architect?”

Likewise there are two things to say to the person who does not find meaning in his life’s vocation. A person never needs to change his vocation in order to offer his very life to God as an offering of praise; neither sin nor inadequacy are necessarily reasons to leave a calling; sometimes love must help a person “stay and do his duty.” *And*, having weighed such things as the impact on people – who might be served, who might be hurt, what burdens does my own conscience carry in the present calling – one is free to follow ‘a more burning Yes,’ and to pursue a new vocation.⁶⁷ (Can we thank God enough that Luther left the monastery?) How liberating is the scriptural imperative, ‘If a man’s gift is (fill in the blank), for Jesus sake, *let him do that* with all the energy God provides!’⁶⁸ What joy when that particular puzzle piece falls into place, namely, that I should pour myself out in the place and the way that best fits my gifts and temperament!⁶⁹

As a former colleague would tell his pastoral advisees at Martin Luther College, “*Every day is Christmas for God.*” A thousand opportunities confront the believer, all of which conform to God’s law. There need be no ringing of hands, God’s mercy being what it is, when the choice is “between good and good.” You

⁶⁵ Of course our use of the term “vocation” excludes occupations that are inherently sinful, such as prostitution or drug dealing.

⁶⁶ Eternity will certainly surprise us. Compare the theologian who survived by the skin of her teeth, and the mighty tool in God’s hand that was a butcher or CPA. In any case, I like the answer of the failing old man, when asked, “How was your life?” Answer: “Necessary.” May God help me attend to my vocation in faith, as you attend to yours. In Christ, nothing is holier than this.

⁶⁷ Our covenantal relationships are vocations as well, and it goes without saying that these we are not free to leave. When there is a cross, one learns more about Christ by heaving it up than by stepping around it.

⁶⁸ Paraphrase of 1 Peter 4:11.

⁶⁹ We can honor the sacrifices of the man who chooses public ministry as a second career, for they are considerable, *and* we can honor the one denies his own need for fulfillment, stays in the place in life God has already given, and offers an electrician’s life to God. He pays a price as well. Of course, there is no need to go looking for self-imposed crosses, or to assume the vocation that is more difficult is necessarily God’s will for us.

choose one option knowing it would not have been a sin to choose another. It is like entering a department store, ambling up to a certain shelf in a certain department until your eyes fall on the item that seizes your gaze, the one you select just for your Father. You will crawl up into his lap. He will peel off the wrapping and exclaim, “Oh and what a delight!” This is grace.

And it is mystery as well – what you chose for him is what he chose for you.

On Offering Vocation to God

We offer our stations to God in gratitude for his salvation. As to what it looks like, how the thing is done, our “two things to say” are prepositions. We serve *in* and *through* our vocations, and one or the other may be of special interest as we counsel those who strain to find the meaning in their lives.

The greater challenge may lie in convincing people that they really serve God *in* their vocations, by simply fulfilling the tasks that their callings daily present to them. It will be counterintuitive to many Christians to think that they serve God while performing activities that are identical to those of unbelievers who are in a similar station. No one has yet discovered a Christian way to shingle a roof. Students don’t learn Hebrew by praying – I’ve seen it tried – but by drilling grammar and vocables, the same as at the university; and if learning Hebrew is part of your vocation, *then this is what God wants you to do*. Luther wrote,

“The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays – not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.”⁷⁰

Tell a Christian banker that he does his Christian duty, not by putting stained glass in his office building, but by executing fair deals and making prudent investment decisions on behalf of his clients, because God loves good ethics and sound business.⁷¹ The requirements of each vocation reveal what God’s will is and how to work with him.

Meanwhile, we are “in the world, not of the world,” performing the same functions as unbelievers in the kingdom of God’s left hand. We inhabit the same spaces, but live in the foreignness of our thoughts, looking forward to another country, a heavenly one. We work in close proximity with pagans but with an inner distance, nurturing that other point of view like inhabiting a different world, that kingdom of grace and God’s *right* hand, in which angels are always watching over us and the Father has his face always turned toward us, for Jesus’ sake.

To withdraw from our duties in the world would be sin. To feel that the works one finds at hand are not worthy of us – “to do nothing because it is not everything” – is arrogance.⁷² To witness to clients and give bad tax advice is counterproductive to both credibility and God’s intimate care. What good is a farmer singing hymns on his tractor and ruining the field? In the second century, Justin Martyr grew up over the hill from Galilee; he notes that the plows made by Joseph and Jesus were still in use in his day.⁷³ Those must have been some plows. Those who replace such God-honoring attention to the task with a legalistic veneer of Christianity and a manufactured religiosity “drip their false religion on everything they do,” never content to let anything be what it is, merely earthly. In Pietism, a certain shame hangs about any external similarity between the dutiful Christian and the civically righteous unbeliever.

The sensitive believer who works in a cut-throat business environment strains to devise works he can consider unambiguously good in such a place, and only personal evangelism comes to mind. Instead, for wholly untainted works, we can only rest ourselves in the deeds of Jesus – his “woe to you hypocrites, you blind guides,” and his “Let the little children come to me...” – his whole life pieced perfectly together moment by

⁷⁰ Quoted in Lynch.

⁷¹ James D Lynch, “Finding Vocations in the Corporation” (*online Journal of Lutheran Ethics*).

⁷² Buechner’s famous saying is well and good, “Where our own deep gladness meets the world’s deep need, there is calling.” But who’s going to clean the bathrooms?

⁷³ Guinness, 191.

moment in our place. “The Lord our Righteousness,” (Jeremiah 23:6) and our justification by faith in him, alone make our works acceptable to God. Meanwhile, God’s ennobling command is in the current place as in every other. So answer the Savior’s call in faith. Serve your employer as serving your Lord. Know that he is pleased.

And...by serving through daily callings, we refer to the fact that vocations put our people in contact with many other souls in the course of the working day, and in position to do much that is good beyond their job descriptions. Christians are situated at work to daily interact with people that have needs of all kinds, physical, spiritual and interpersonal – the love of Christ compels them to feel the needs of others and accept their interests as their own. This could mean personal evangelism, empathic listening, a ride home, or the shirt off our back; again, need is the call and love its fulfilling. For one who recognizes that call, as Luther famously said, “ten hands won’t be enough.”

Someone has called the doctrine of vocation an adverb, influencing *how* we do everything our hands find to do in the moment. A check-out clerk at a grocery store, capable of ringing up forty items per minute, slows things down to chat up an elderly bachelor. She sees more than just an object in her social world, sees more than just his station, his attributes, or his usefulness to her. She is a “*person encountering a person*,” in what Martin Buber would have called “*I-Thou*” versus “*I-It*” relating.⁷⁴ She saw the loneliness in his eyes, and did what occurred to her. Her love is spontaneous and creative, her own person forgotten. As a Christian, she gives no thought to how her relationship with God is being affected. It isn’t. Instead, she recognizes the ‘prior Yes’ that hangs over everything she does in faith.

Professional people in leadership positions are situated to affect the system for improved working conditions, reform the company’s dealings with customers and other businesses, and so on. The doctrine of vocation changes the way a man or woman thinks about virtually everything, and calls for a *bending* of any given station with a view to better serving people when employees are clearly being oppressed, or when their job satisfaction could be enhanced by allowing for their input, decision making and creativity. As we see what is there to see and fashion our response – for example, when our callings take across cultural boundaries, or involve us in the tangled lives of people with formerly unheard of dysfunctions – Luther would not begrudge the most strenuous possible exercise of human reason or forbid us to draw on the legitimate knowledge of this world to answer the question, “What does love look like *now*?”

This is the world of ideas we would open up to those who wonder why they get up in the morning. Like so many members of one body, believers take Jesus’ love and holiness with them into the world, as they must, not losing their connection with Christ their Head. “Love cooperates with God through whom he enters day by day into life with an ever changing countenance.”⁷⁵

A Pastoral Concern

The universal priesthood of all believers means that personal evangelism is a sacred act of great value to God...*and* so is *every* expression of love for our neighbor⁷⁶; lay believers are privileged to offer service to church ministries and organizations as their sacrifice of praise...*and* they already do the same in their regular daily callings. Will these examples of “saying two things,” giving due emphasis to works besides evangelism and beyond church programs, result in less activity in those areas?

Perhaps the bravest thing I ever witnessed took place in a smoke-filled break room in a distributing company here in Mequon. A seminary student’s wife had miscarried the night before. So he walked in that room, closed the door, sat up on the back of chair, and began to speak to his captive, blue collar audience, “I want to tell you what happened to my family...and how we’re going to get through it. We believe...” From a comment overheard later, I knew he had added humiliation to his loss, blending Christ’s suffering with his own. To have done such a thing at such a time, clearly, he must have thought of that company as something more

⁷⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufman (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 15.

⁷⁵ Wingren, 159.

⁷⁶ Note how well Ken Cherney (289) expresses both what a vital and glorious work it is to do personal evangelism *and* what a mistake it is to think that only this work can possibly value to people or to God.

than the place that paid his tuition...he must have believed he owed his coworkers something, just because they were *his* coworkers; he must have understood that faith-expressing-itself-in-love can only *ever* happen in a place called “here” at time called “now.” If a Christian thinks of his hours on the loading dock as completely unrelated to his faith, how will you get him to think any differently about the break room? A person’s life as Christ’s own ambassador is not energized by the discouraging notion that the vast majority of his time is neither sanctified nor of any great consequence to God.

The doctrine of vocation calls for life to be integrated with faith, as a whole of a piece, no tightly sealed compartments, no tacked on faith, no stepping in and out of the Christian’s breathtaking worldview. Instead of looking for opportunities to witness, let them simply long to be who they are, and learn to speak freely and openly about Jesus in the fullness of faith, telling his story with the naturalness of telling their own.⁷⁷ For the sake of the lost, it can only help to have a Christian man or woman look into any mirror and see a king and a priest, for the sake of Christ, become a beggar and a curse in our place. “Out of the overflow of the heart, his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)

What about lay participation in church programs? Will that suffer (in ways it should not) under an emphasis on the doctrine of vocation? During my time in the parish I strove mightily at promoting innovative programs and was nearly always disappointed in the participation of my members in the works ‘I prepared in advance for them to do.’ *But...* let a member lose a job and watch love spring to action, tireless and delighted, in a network of believers exploiting every connection to find that person a job. Let a family threaten to quit the church in discouragement, and hear later how their phone rang off the hook all weekend with words of enfolding love. Let the pastor’s wife suffer a mysterious disease, and see an entire congregation instantly mobilized, the Spirit providing his energy and joy in service to respond to gut-punching need according to the ways Providence had situated each one. That family of faith was astounding in all the ways it needed to be. They were “God’s workmanship,” (Ephesians 2:10) serving not just *in* but *through* their callings, doing good to everyone, especially the family of faith. (Galatians 6:10) The point is not to discourage church programs but to submit them one by one to important questions informed by the doctrine of vocation: does this effort equip people, by growing in the knowledge of Christ, to understand and address the actual needs of people?

People cannot “love” the priesthood of all believers while despising their own congregations in need. Like home, workplace and society, the church is a place of responsibility, a sacred stage to look across, asking, “Who needs me here?” The doctrine of vocation honors the diversity of skills honed in the endless diversity of vocations; this can only enhance the special satisfaction of offering these very aptitudes in service to their church home: an accountant serving as treasurer, a banker helps the congregation secure a loan, a public relations officer overseeing the congregations publications, a nurse offering her empathy, a salesperson making cold calls in search of the “low hanging fruit,” a busy mom her organizational skills, and so on. At the same time, Luther’s doctrine teaches us not to judge other believers, but to respect their choices. Among the long list of things we cannot see into, is the full weight of all the burdens people are carrying in their several callings, and how heavily they carry them.

When the pastor says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and “Take and eat, this is my body...” this is when the only righteousness we have is put extravagantly on display, over against the irrelevance of any special appearance of piety we might have tried to arrange. Such an understanding allows the highly talented and visible lay person (not to mention the pastor) to serve humbly and adds luster to the servant-like work of soup stirrers that is by no means overshadowed.

Attention to vocation will not lead away from involvement in the community of believers. Vocation exhausts us, drives us to prayer, creates the hunger of absolution, and opens a space within for the Word of grace. The Word of God compels a man to no longer live for himself, and to speak the Word he hides in his heart.

“We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

⁷⁷ Much could be said about evangelism methodology and training that take into account the realities of the workplace, college campus, and so on, for example, giving more room for listening skills, spiritual friendship and ethical dialogue. We need to ask ourselves, being daily surrounded by Lutheran Christians, how well we are equipping people for ministry out there beyond our walls, in a pluralistic culture.

If it sounds optimistic, it is...with an optimism rooted entirely on the continuing power of the Gospel, against all sense, against all sight, to create a response in the likes of us.

On Being Good News for Hardworking People

“I thank my God every time I remember you.”

Let the doctrine of vocation serve for the encouragement of some of our favorite people in the world, the lay people whom we are privileged to know. When the look inside reveals only her sin and shame, when she see the corruption of all our works, when sanctification is found to be a hidden life, more from herself than anyone else, and the search for higher works that would enhance her holiness has proven futile again, there is only the cross of Jesus. *“Enough already. The law has done its work. Good. Now send it away...and let us talk of Jesus.”*⁷⁸

That, and, *“Your life is now hidden in Christ your Lord.”* (Colossians 3:3)

By means of this doctrine, we can speak to other matters over which people may have considerable anxiety: have I missed my calling and lost an irretrievable opportunity? Am I in the wrong place? Do the things I do matter at all? You look into the earnest face of some believer who only wants to know, with a depth of feeling she can barely conceal, how she might somehow serve her Lord. And you reflect to yourself how she doesn't know what a blessing she is and you wonder, is it even possible that God can resist such a face breathing out such a prayer? *“Serve your Lord? But you already do! If you cannot see it, then let me tell you what I see....”* You offer, in the phrase of Larry Crabb, *“a taste of Christ delighting.”*

To address the Christian's daily vocations in this way is to find ourselves addressing the unavoidable cross. The note of this essay is joy, but we have two things to say here as well, so that we describe the Christian experience in the way that will be true of all, and so that we do not, with happy talk, inadvertently discourage. For those baptized into Jesus, everything is not resurrection song, just as everything is not crucifixion agony. Both mingle in the life of the *“little Christ.”* Why the sleepless nights of the new parent? Why the family man's ulcers? Why the endless, weary days of unfinished pastoral duty? Why the agony of the shy evangelist? Why do we each suffer in the particular ways we do? Because we must. *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”* (Acts 14:22) Joy hides within that verse for those who anguish and yet believe. We participate in the sufferings of Christ.⁷⁹

What does this have to do with vocation? God has simply not commanded us to go after our dreams; when was our old flesh ever right about what would make us happy, anyway? Far from occupying our callings for the sake of our own personal fulfillment, we instead find ourselves participating in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, emptied by the demands of our callings, by the necessary denial and crucifixion of our flesh with its endless childish clamoring and selfish misery, and the shame-faced realization of what we are really like...emptied out to be filled with Jesus. We are driven to somehow make sense of the futility and failure, the search that exhausts every resource of our own, until it leads us back to him, that is, to the peace this is found in Word and Sacrament. He waits for us there.

And it all takes place through vocation, in the context the Lord has chosen for each...with the result that the neighbor gets loved. When a person's calling is not the one he or she would have chosen, and in fact, they are unhappy there, this is not evidence of having missed calling, or all by itself a reason to change one's circumstances. It is here that our sinful self is daily disciplined, even as the groans and pleas rise up from every true calling and echo through the loving mind of God, even as the fist at our chest tightens around the string that

⁷⁸ In fact, consider the positive side to forgiveness, the wonderful negative being the removal of our objective guilt before God *“as far as east is from west.”* Someone has captured what we're apparently all after with the phrase, *“the joy of being enjoyed.”* What else is the euphoria of falling in love, the palpable happiness of the new mother gazing at her baby, the intoxication of the artist being adored up on a stage? So just imagine. A sinner looks up toward his judge and hears...*“As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”* (Isaiah 62:5) The joy of being enjoyed *by God...* to be the Father's delight...his beloved, for Jesus' sake, and not because of me. The joy is expressible, when forgiveness is the only sun.

⁷⁹ The Church as one body and each individual believer imitates the life of Christ in his humiliation. God has an agenda we fail to appreciate as we each try to get our little lives just so, that of forming within us the likeness of his Son, to get us home, whatever the cost to him, whatever the cost to us. God has always done his best things in the midst of weakness, suffering and apparent defeat. What could be made more clear by the Friday we call Good?

runs to his own heart, as we sigh the name of Jesus. We grow up in Christ.

In both the most difficult and in the most futile of vocations, we are taken to the end of ourselves, praying prayers that admit what we are. With our whole being, with a pathos and energy not possible without the heavy weight of our callings, we seek his face...*and find it*. That finding is joy; that cross is dear. Disappointment in life's unrealized dreams puts us each in touch with the truer dream of our Christian heart. 'What do I really want?' the crushed soul asks, and answers, "I want...to know you, Jesus...to somehow make you known....to see your face in heaven."

"Then come and know me."

Part of our pastoral calling is to help our people learn to draw more deeply on that well that is the Word of Christ, and then to *drink their cup*, and this not with bland acceptance – ok, so this is my life – but with an embracing of their reality, lifting to their lips with thanksgiving and trust that cup the Father has specially poured for each. 'I want to know how *this* life, not some other, is uniquely situated to know Christ and live in him in the sight of others. Not every life, so temporary, so like a mist, winds up in the glory of him in the end. This one does. I *want* this to be my life. It's from him.'

Does a person find no meaning in their calling? Let willingness transform their prison. Implore them to say 'yes' to their own life, to this place and this moment, all for the love of God that he has placed beyond all doubt in brave self-sacrifice of Jesus for us all. Let us "submit to the Father of our spirits *and live*." (Hebrews 12:9)

The point is simply this: if we daily enter our ministry contexts with minds full of grace and its corollary, the priesthood of all believers, this will occasion rich conversations permeated by the sweetest possible gospel. We learn to speak from a deep place in our pastoral heart and out of long experience as men hated by the world, on the theology of the cross. And we remember to jump up and down for the people we serve. No flippant remarks about "flipping burgers."⁸⁰ We let them know what we really think about the way they offer their very lives, in all its aspects, in service to their Lord, that it is beautiful in our eyes. In God's design, as relational beings, we are not always able to meet our own need, to answer these questions for ourselves, or work up our own peace. But Christ is strong in the word that comes from a brother, that speaks powerfully to the fears hidden inside, and results in a quiet and abiding joy.

III. Time to Get Practical

The specific suggestions to follow are soft; the congregation's shepherd will know what to do with them. The idea is, again, only to *bend current* activities in whatever way seems appropriate to pastoral care, toward a richer understanding on the part of lay people and public ministers alike, of the privilege of their call to faith, to life, to heaven and to God as the rich inheritance of Holy Baptism.

The Pastor Goes to Work

A person misunderstands the doctrine of vocation whose mind turns only to paid work. Yet, of all the callings that occupy the waking minds of Christian people, what they do at work may be the area least understood by clergy. William Diehl writes about the time he approached his pastor for counsel about a difficult ethical decision involving his career in the steel industry, and the pastor's well-meaning advice would have had him breaking the law. "My church had no real understanding and nothing whatever to say about how I run my business."⁸¹

In the experience of this essayist, while more and more people in our high stress culture "cocoon" in their homes and can resent intrusions there, a visit at their workplace can be very welcomed.⁸² People may be pleasantly surprised when they find out the pastor's real agenda, "I see part of my calling and that of our congregation as supporting the many callings of our members have from God in the world. I want them to

⁸⁰ Ask me for a portrait of faithfulness and I'll tell you about a man who runs a hot dog stand in downtown Rockford, IL.

⁸¹ Diehl, 49.

⁸² This suggestion is also found in Bennethum, 80.

know the same joy in their vocations that I do in mine. To do that, I need to understand their working lives as much as I can.” You sit in the office of the small business owner and chat, insisting that she accept the calls that interrupt the conversation, asking afterward what each was all about, how she made the decision you just heard her make. You ask open-ended questions. What challenged her this week? Where is the joy in this work? Where is the cross? What does it have to do with her Christian faith? How do her devotional life and her worship life sustain her for such demanding work? How does she establish the boundaries and open up the sacred spaces for her other callings?” You aren’t there in search of sermon material, but you’ll find plenty. After you leave, her secretary asks her, “So what in the world did your pastor want? What does he want you to do? *Are you in trouble?*”

“No.” she answers wistfully. “He wanted to better understand my life away from the church, and wanted me to find joy in responding to the love of Christ when I’m here. When the phone rang, he made a little joke that I had Jesus on line 2....”

The next time you see her she tells you how much it meant to her: “My church actually came into my world.” “But that’s just it! The Church was already there,” you’ll tell her. “People who know Jesus as you do are the only Church there is.”

Many writers on vocation make the appeal that ministers make more effort to understand the difficult ethical questions that daily confront Christians at work.⁸³ Our circuit meetings often have “questions of casuistry” on the agenda, for practical matters for which there are often no simple answers. In the presence of peers who are invested, who gently probe his thoughts and offer insight, a pastor talks through his situation, describes how he sees it, what he’s thinking about doing about it to bring the most honor to Christ and good to people. Some wise soul knows how to shine the light of the cross on that situation and even more, on the troubled mind of the man. When do lay people get to experience the same? Who helps them sort it all out, when one Christian value is pulling the opposite direction of another, when obligations within a vocation point down a path at the end of which they see people somehow getting hurt? Let the pastor assess whether such a forum could be offered and whether it would meet a need in his congregation. And when the answer in some dilemma becomes painfully clear – this is Jesus calling you to speak for the one who can’t – who will stand behind the Christian lawyer about to lose his job? Explore the various areas of concern for working Christian people.⁸⁴ Develop interesting discussion starters⁸⁵ and case studies.⁸⁶ Thinking synodically, is it time for “Schools of Vocation” to follow on the heels of our “Schools of Outreach?”

Pastors cannot and need not become experts in tax law or die casting. But the pastor can demonstrate his deep desire to find out. The engineer is best situated to speak with understanding about how engineers serve Jesus. So let the pastor cast the die caster in the role of teacher and himself as student, facilitating the questions, drawing out the stories, practicing active listening and honoring the questions he cannot answer. Through it all, *his* calling is to provide the intellectual and doctrinal framework for that life “charged with the holy for Jesus’ sake.”

⁸³ Vocation has much to do with ethics, as an activity can be sin for me, and for you, an answering of God’s call. (For a timely example, Luther was especially concerned that people whose calling involves the use of force to keep the peace should serve with a clean conscience.) How does a person weigh the needs of the neighbor in a failing business in competition with your more successful one, against your obligation to help your own employer “improve and protect his property and business?” The truth is these are just the sort of simplistic examples that a pastor like me would invent, without the context, gritty detail or interpersonal complications of real life. Might we find a way to teach Lutheran ethics in our worker training system, that ethical system entirely construed as a response to objective justification, and with which the doctrine of vocation has everything to do?

⁸⁴ Competitiveness, job transitions, relationships at work, salary and benefits, power issues, grace and works, working at home, and maintaining boundaries. (Bennethum, 75)

⁸⁵ Provide the reference with the idea. Write down 5 activities from work in the past week. Prioritize them least to most enjoyable. Discard the middle 3. About your least and most enjoyable activity, answer these questions: why did you do it, who was effected, what did it mean to you and what did it have to do with your Christian faith? (Don’t give the answer, pastor. Let them wrestle with it.)

⁸⁶ Gloria is on the phone. She is asking for Steve’s references. Steve is both a friend and a former, often disappointing employee, who has a large family and a huge mortgage. He *might* be able to do the job for which Gloria is thinking of hiring him. What does “love your neighbor as yourself” mean now? (Gloria is also your neighbor.)

Communication With the Congregation

A Lutheran pastor looks at his communication to the flock, willing to ask, ‘Does this particular list of announcements, this talent survey, this church directory, this set of prayer requests, this mission statement, and so on, enhance or detract from the lay person’s understanding of vocation?’

Newsletters are a good example. When a newsletter only promotes the in-house activities of the congregation, it may perpetuate the perceptions of the “eighty” that the church is just one of many competitors for their scarce and precious time, or what is just as ignorant of vocation, that her programs are a mere leisure time activity to take part in if you happen to enjoy that sort of thing. The busy church calendar threatens to define a higher form of Christian piety...*if it is not balanced by another message.*

The essayist will spare you the research indicating that when a church member actually reads the articles we write it is a rare and special thing. (Yours are probably an exception.) At any rate, one pastor has suggested that, for a newsletter that will be anticipated and widely read, the lead article be composed of a semi-structured interview with a congregation member.⁸⁷ The pastor could so fashion the questions to frame, month by month, a Christ-centered, grace motivated exploration of the doctrine of vocation at work in the life of the saint next door, as the vocabulary of faith intersects with the feelings and experiences of people doing what they do. The process might serve as a wonderful education to the person whose life is explored in such a way: “What does faith have to do with my life as a Mom and part-time hairdresser?” Let the answer come from her, how she serves her neighbor as though serving her Lord *in* her calling – God’s intimate care extends to the very hairs on our heads – and how she serves *through* her callings – declaring “the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9) In either case, she is the church, just being the church.⁸⁸

There might be value in letting the church know about the full, Christian life of single people whose lives are *not* “curved inward” or spent waiting by the phone; rather, their wholeness in Christ and their single life is rich with opportunity to serve along paths not open to others. There is no reason to exclude church volunteerism in the total picture of life’s callings. Likewise, our culture offers the dream of retirement as the time when life is finally lived for us – and won’t we love it? Let some faithful old servant in your family of faith offer a different point of view on what one does, even as energy diminishes, with the wisdom and experience of their years, and even as one prepares for the last great work of faith in this world, that of showing our loved ones how to die in Jesus.

“This, too, is mine.”

A bulletin board display picking up the idea of this essay’s introduction, in which symbols or pictures represent the primary callings of church members, would require constant explaining, just as the word “vocation” itself does. That would be the whole point. Talent surveys can include items relating to other callings beyond the church’s program. Prayers and announcements can mark new vocational starting points or milestone anniversaries in the lives of working people – it won’t be difficult to muster a prayer upon a man’s 40th anniversary at John Deere. With effort, a church directory could include the primary vocations of church members. More and better ideas will come to mind as you tour your own facility or skim your daily planner. In fact, I humbly ask you to join the essayist in thinking them through. An important concern is that we do not allow *what we do* to become larger in our minds than *who we are in Christ*.

After all, we have *two* things to say. You are telling your people with consistency and grace that there is a family of believers that knows and cares about what they do with their lives, as does their Lord. *And...* “There is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:29)

The Pastor As...

Having commented along the way about the pastor’s role, preeminently, as a preacher of Christ crucified, and also as counselor, recruiter, program director, and others, what other roles of the parish pastor

⁸⁷ Bennethum, 80.

⁸⁸ Other ideas one comes across in the literature might not be advisable at all. Have everyone wear their work clothes to church on Labor Day week-end? Better to erase the distinctions as we worship at the throne of grace.

might be informed by the doctrine of vocation?

Perhaps most important of all is the pastor as liturgist and administrator of the sacraments. Here is the main forum for his guidance of the congregation in that rhythm of the gathering and scattering Church. Baptism is the place to begin, with the issue of whose we are made final in that moment for which God moved heaven and earth. The call in Holy Baptism to find ourselves bound inseparably to Christ for time and eternity is indistinguishable from the call to live up to what we have received. Life's circumstances may remain the same; it is the person who occupies them that is always being made new in our Lord. "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." (Romans 6:4)

In Holy Communion the Lord bends down to serve us with his own body and blood, so that we might offer our very body and blood "with might and mane"⁸⁹ for our neighbor. This understanding is embedded in the *Deutsche Messe*: "We implore you that of your mercy you would strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love for one another..." and in our hymns: "The Supper is ended, oh now be extended the fruits of this service in all who believe."⁹⁰ Let us teach, in Carter Lindberg's phrase, "the liturgy after the liturgy,"⁹¹ impressing upon God's people an understanding of worship that is so radically different from that which sees "going to church" as one's spiritual duty for the week, assuring ourselves that we are religious. No, here in worship the dear God meets the poor sinner in the Means of Grace to restore us and give strength for our lives of vocation in which every day feels more and more like Sunday.

As teachers of adults, if the pastor has developed a curriculum for Christian discipleship, an outstanding Bible Study by Ken Cherney⁹² will supply a wonderful, eye-opening unit on the doctrine of vocation. Further, the pastor may think of other units that will deliberately equip the saints for efforts that may take place outside the formal ministries of the congregation, such as peer counseling, biblical encouragement, active listening (so necessary before the needs of the neighbor can be known at all), ethical dialogue, empathic support, and so on.

As catechism instructors, we can convey the marvelous design of the enchiridion that begins with the Father's creation and providence, flows through such rich and vast Christ-centered teaching and winds up so appropriately in the Table of Duties, that stringing together of biblical imperatives according to the stations of life. Here is the place to creatively teach the doctrine of vocation to confirmands in a way that lays the foundation for future dialogue about their vocational choices. Luther provides the prayers to punctuate daily life, not with slavish duty but as thoughtfully chosen habits, the crutches on which genuine piety loves to lean.

The pastor does not mind the "glass house" in which he lives, but sees his calling as one of commending his very way of life to the people he serves. In his own devotional life, (perhaps bracketing his weary days with matins and vespers), he enters the Most Holy Place like a high priest, with the souls under his care like jewels on his breastplate.⁹³ Even as the pastor strives for a ministry that is vitally addressed to the caring for souls, the doctrine of vocation lights up his more mundane duties as much as those times he his handling God's Word. His people need to see this, too. He models a life informed by vocation, a life of such honesty and kindness, joy and contentment that it awakens the desire in others, especially his own children, for the depth of Christian understanding that he has pursued all this life. He shows himself capable of being sorry and of forgiving in the mess of the day to day, so that people will know that *theology is life*. Through it all, let the pastor never underestimate the degree to which his attitude sets the tone. "Der Christ ist ein Optimist"⁹⁴ – his example includes the courage it takes to be joyful in hope, not matter what sadness his eyes have seen in this world.

The single pastor does not resent his singleness, but in humility, recognizes how much his station means to unmarried believers who struggle to find their place in a family-oriented church. What may be difficult for him is a service to his neighbor. So he kisses the dear cross and receives while it lasts his freedom to give himself outright to his flock. He can model the gift of hospitality by his willingness to open up space in his own

⁸⁹ Luther, quoted by John Pless, "Vocation: Where Liturgy and Ethics Meet" (*Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. Volume II, Issue 5, May 2002.)

⁹⁰ "Sent Forth by God's Blessing" (CW 318).

⁹¹ *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor*. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), 163.

⁹² "My Vocation in Christ: A Bible Study Course for Adults." Milwaukee: NPH, 2004.

⁹³ A memorable image borrowed from a Dan Deutschlander's lecture on the Lutheran pastor.

⁹⁴ "The Christian is an optimist" in a way firmly rooted in our eternal hope and perspective.

life for new people, for the stranger, and the outsider. (Or think what unique and interesting vocation it is to be someone's uncle.)

The people served by the married pastor need to see his affectionate and covenantal devotion in this foundational calling. Let a man not go looking for more works to perform while he is neglecting the “woman God put in his arms,”⁹⁵ that “neighbor” whose face first greets him every morning. At all cost, a married pastor must labor at nurturing such a wedded life as any married couple would want to realize. He moves toward his wife, not in order to be treated in a certain way according to a certain need, but that out of the fullness of his Christian heart, he might reflect to her something of Christ.

If the pastor has children, he understands what Luther termed the “hidden majesty of parents,”⁹⁶ knowing that God's own Fatherhood stands behind his own. Students at Martin Luther College have opportunity to tell their stories for the sake of their self-understanding; I am constantly impressed and stirred by the deep currents of feeling within each student's life having to do with their parents. You may have no idea!

The teaching pastor's interest is in influencing his people with his love, not impressing them with his knowledge. He does not claim to understand love if his own does not find concrete expression in the gift of his time, his words, and a life of generosity that reaches out to need according to whatever resources he has. “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” (1 Thessalonians 2:8)

But enough. Who is capable of all this? The point of articulating such responsibility in the callings of a pastor is not to achieve it all by the strength of our resolve, but to be willing to be crushed in utter dependence on Christ. We “pour contempt” on all our pride and groan with Luther, “Lord, I'm tired of making promises to you. You must make me good. I cannot change myself.” At precisely this spot we display that uniquely Lutheran piety, that speaking in one breath about real life in this world and the love of Jesus that forms the center, holds us together, and makes all things new. We do not live off our own resources; let all who dare to be pastors be absorbed more and more deeply in the Gospel, gripping its promise and not letting go until it blesses them. And no, in the end, we are not the same as we once were, but are continually being equipped to be truly evangelical, that is, helping God's people to see all things in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He is always with them, always calling, with a smile like the sun.

“Follow me.”

Lastly, in this spirit, the pastoral life also displays regular times of rest. In this way, too, the pastor glorifies God, by rejecting work as his god. If he seems to labor at his ministry as though all depends on him, his own rhythm of work and Sabbath (and his attention to other callings in his web of relationships) reveals that he actually knows better. He knows that deeper sort of trust that regularly watches the world go on without him. He understands Luther's ripping of the pen from the hand of Philipp at dinner crying: “We worship God also when we rest.”⁹⁷ He leaves it to the Holy Spirit to prosper his mighty Word, in hopes of the day his heavy burdens will at last be set aside.

One Last Application

“Every member a minister.” In spite of the vital truth that slogan tried to convey – to all believers belongs the “ministry of reconciliation” – how did it sound to people, given our traditional use of the noun “minister.” The service of a person's life is valid so long as it resembles the work of a pastor? The work of a pastor is of such a kind that anyone can and has the right to perform it? And if a Christian engineer is actually a minister, why does he bother with engineering? Does honest labor need the word “ministry” to ennoble it?

The only reason to revisit this past conversation is to suggest that we have had the word we were looking for all along. There is a word that allows us to capture in a comprehensive way the many important callings of life, including the highest privilege the believer can know, as he says, “In the name of Jesus, I

⁹⁵ Luther.

⁹⁶ WA 30:147.

⁹⁷ AW 3:299-300. Althaus (104) relates the incident in which Luther said to Melancthon something very close to this comment in the confessions.

forgive you,” and fits the most important key into the most important lock. The word is “vocation.” The most important application for this practical essay on vocation may be to say that reviving that word would be a significant achievement in our time.

Linguistic scholarship calls our attention to the way words work. Semiosis refers to the interplay of symbol, referent and meaning, as shaped by the differing fields of experience unique to every communicator. Simply put, I know what *I* mean by this symbol, “vocation,” but it cannot be assumed that this meaning will show up as an event in your mind when I speak the word. In fact, that is very unlikely if you have experience with the term “vocational school.” We live in a culture that means something radically different than we do in the Church, when it comes to virtually every important word we have, from justification and salvation, to simple faith, hope and love. The need is for “a certain kind of talk,” namely, talk about our symbols and what we mean by them, so that over time we may come to know that we and others are *using words the same way*, actually communicating and being comprehended. To restore to our vocabulary with its original meaning intact so rich and subtle an abstraction as “vocation,” and its synonym, “calling” will require a great deal of such talk.

Einar Billing:

“The word ‘calling’ is indeed an every day word with a splendor of holy day about it, but its holy day splendor would disappear the moment it ceased to be a rather prosaic everyday word...it began to dawn on Luther that just as certainly as the call to God’s kingdom seeks to lift us infinitely above everything that our everyday duties by themselves could give us, just that certainly the call does not take us away from these duties but more deeply into them.”⁹⁸

E.E. Kowalke said it more than a generation ago. “We want our pastors to be theologians.”⁹⁹ What does a busy parish pastor do about the doctrine of vocation? He teaches it. He allows it its proper place and emphasis within the endless, joyful duty of instructing souls in the Word of God. If our members come to a deep understanding and a happy realization of their callings in life, it will not come without giving serious attention to theology.

We cannot foresee all that a renewed understanding of the doctrine of vocation could mean for our dear church body. In regard to the complicated work of institutional change, it’s been said that ‘we overestimate what can be achieved in one year, and underestimate what can be done in ten.’ That Sunday should be married to Monday – the Church remembering herself and her Lord with joy and resolve when she is busy in the world – calls for a consistent, intentional focus. Just like grace itself, the thing “slips from the mind as soon as the Word does.” A slogan won’t do it, unless, of course, you like... “*Vocation! Vocation! Vocation!*”

Conclusion

Clearly, there is much to do. It is true of no one more than the parish pastor, that when he looks to his vocation he will see that “all times are too short, all spaces too cramped.” He stands daily at the edge of a bottomless pit of human need. If he rises to face that pit and meet every call, every day for the rest of his days, when he is old and spent, he will find before him that pit just as bottomless as when he began.

“This too is mine.”

To Jesus belong the structures of society and every human community. His is the endless clamoring of desperate human need. His is the salvation that plunged earthward to meet it. His the reality that alone can fill it. His are the impulses of love and the promises of benediction that cannot be broken. His is the strength found in weakness, without which we can do nothing at all.

Ours is to faithfully pour ourselves in.

We do so in humble recognition of our finitude and human limitation, well aware that we need that *only sun* of God’s forgiveness to shine down on everything we do...and that it does. We daily turn to him, with that upward glance in which all authority of ours disappears, and with it every distinction and title. We are not

⁹⁸ Billing, 5-6.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Nass

“Professor” there, not “Pastor.” Only “his.” Emptied by daily vocation, faith flies naked to God. In his gracious presence and right-hand kingdom we do not work but only receive. What he gives is Christ. If anyone wants to serve him effectively and well, let him desire something else even more, that is, to know him.

“*I want to know Christ.*” (Philippians 3:10)¹⁰⁰

His saving will is going to be done. His saving gospel will reach into time and grasp the elect; not one will be left out. His glories will be known. Dear brothers, all is forgiven. Jesus died for us all and, see, he is most certainly alive; and for the apostle Paul in his great “resurrection chapter,” the thought that follows on the heels of that one is... “*not in vain.*”

“Your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)

It’s not about the success our flesh still craves. It’s not about the praise of men, or if anyone should notice us at all. It’s about *whom we serve*. And at last, on the coattails of Christ, we will enter our Master’s joy, eternity without need or ending stretches out before us, in the wonder of his “Well Done” that never wears off. The very foundations of the universe are not so certain as this. We have his Word.

Soli Deo Gloria.

¹⁰⁰ An expansion: We are shepherds like David. He knew what it was to search for a lamb and carry it home rejoicing. He knew about long, weary hours feeding them with what he had. He knew what it was to take his stand between the flock and the bear, ready to lay down his life if that were necessary. And then one day the Spirit opens still further his gift to David in sudden insight following fast on the sudden sharp inhale. “The Lord is *my* shepherd.” There is one who is to me what I was to my sheep...*only more*. Ah, Lord, you are the only joy I seek. Will not your goodness and love pursue me all the days of my life! Will I not dwell in your own house forever! The Lord is *my* shepherd.

A man stares at this sleeping child and gets lost in the sudden love burst, thinking, “Would I not walk through fire for this little girl? If I lost her, what would I give to have her back?” He could almost hold his hand to the wall to steady himself against the thought. God is *my* Father. There is one to me what I am to my children...*only more*. And so we learn in the midst of our vocational lives, what we could never know if we set them aside. We come to know Jesus.