

## THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 20, 2022

ISAIAH 55:1-9 | PSALM 63:1-8 | 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13 | LUKE 13:1-9

For Lent this year, we're building out a theological toolbox. Every week, I'm giving you a new tool, something that you can use to get started when you run into a theological problem. This week, we're going to do vocation.

This past summer, there was this big article in *The Atlantic* about this seventeenth century priest named Frances Poulan, who had surprisingly progressive views on gender for his time. And the article ends with Poulan's view that parenting is as worthy a calling as political leadership. The domestic sphere is as worthy as the political arena. And the author writes, "Who among his peers could have imagined a world that placed parenting on the same social rung as ruling and judging? I would guess none of them."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe none of his peers but at least some of his predecessors. Because what Poulan discovered is really just the Lutheran idea of vocation.

The word vocation comes from the word "calling." The root comes from *vox* or voice. To have a vocation is to be called by God to do something. Around the time of the Reformation, the common view was that vocations were something that priests and nuns had. You can imagine the mental model here. Some small percentage of people are called by the voice of God to become priests and nuns. And then they go off somewhere and do the spiritually significant stuff while everyone else just sort of does normal life.

From that mental model, you can spin out a few assumptions about vocation. One is that some small group of people have vocations. Most people don't. Another is that vocation is ultimately about work. If you work as a priest, you have a vocation. If you work as a tradesman, you don't have a vocation. And another is that vocation assumes a hierarchy. God calls some people to be nuns, but God doesn't call anyone to be a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker. So it's better to be a nun.

Few of us would buy into the medieval view wholesale, but you can still see the residue of it on our thinking. First, we often assume that work is the primary means of identity formation. When someone refers to the "real world" they mean work. Markets determine what's real. Second, we often assume that clergy have some unique relationship with God that other people don't have. The word for this is "clericalism," and you can find a lot of it even in Protestant circles. And third, we often assume that only some group of people does really important things in life while everyone else just sort of gets through the day.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Shulevitz, "I Found the Feminism I Was Looking For in the Lost Writings of a 17th-Century Priest," *The Atlantic*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/09/francois-poulain-radical-feminism/619499/>.

The Lutheran expression of vocation gets rid of all that. It turns it on its head. And it does that by relocating where the calling of God happens. Remember, in the old model the voice, the vox, comes out of the blue part of the way through people's lives. But in our tradition, the voices of God calls people through their baptisms.

And you that shifts everything. To start with, who gets a calling? All the baptized people of God. Everybody. One fun way to see this is in a group that got left out of the old medieval scheme: kids. Because vocation comes from baptism, kids have vocations they live and serve in today as kids the same way that adults do. There's a line in one of Tim Wengert's books where he says that Luther makes childhood a holy order.<sup>2</sup> Which is a fun way to think about it. When we lecture kids about what life is like in the "real world," we're not just being insufferably annoying. We're assuming economic productivity is realer than their baptisms.

Is your vocation your job? Maybe. But maybe not. Vocation is just any way that you love God and serve your neighbor. That might be a job, but it might not be. Is it better to be a priest, a carpenter, or a stay-at-home caregiver? Doesn't matter. You can serve God and neighbor equally in a variety of roles. Is it better to be a parent or a king? Doesn't matter. A priest or a carpenter? Doesn't matter. A student or a teacher? Doesn't matter. You can serve God and neighbor doing either. Francis Poulan would agree.

And can you have more than one vocation? You bet. Because the calling from God comes in your baptism, you can have multiple ways you live out your vocation at once. You're not this or that. You're both this and that. And what's more, your vocations can evolve throughout your life.

So how can you use this vocation tool in your life? Well, one way is to clarify how we make decisions about our lives. Imagine that you're trying to make some Big Life Choice. Should you keep working or retire or work part-time? Should you take care of a relative? Should you have kids or not? Should you relocate? Should you take on a new role in your community? Should you go back to school? When you're making those choices, it can be tempting to think there is one correct answer that God is calling you to.

Our understanding of vocation gets rid of that. And it says that one choice might make you happier or improve your relationships or be more prestigious or be more interesting. But there is no one choice that is going to cut you off from participating in God's mission in the world. It's not as if you would get a vocation if you relocated to South Carolina, but you stayed in New Jersey, and unfortunately God is really focusing on the Sun Belt right now. Vocation is a perspective on life. It's not a goal that you get to if you make all the right choices. So vocation might get rid of some of the existential dread we feel about the choices we face.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Marcia J. Bunge and Marcia JoAnn Bunge, *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 180.

That's the ordinary way to think about it, but there's another more fun way to think about this, too. Not long ago I was in some meeting where we were asked to rank the greatest priorities in our life. So, you know, great. The expected answer here is something like #1 is God, #2 is family, #3 is work, #4 is my community, #5 are my hobbies, etc. And let's be honest, no one really cares about #2 through #5. The point of this exercise is really just to say that God is #1.

But our vocations allow us to see that differently. That God isn't this one priority that I deal with over here, and then I go deal with everything else over here. If that's the way you think about it, you'll end up asking really silly questions. *Is God more important than my family? Is God more important than my community?* But vocation tells us that God is involved with everything. The revelatory question is *How do I love God through my relationships with my family? How do I live my faith through my relationships in my community?*

Vocation means that every part of our lives, every "station of life" to use the reformers' phrase, has the potential to be spiritually significant. So imagine your life for a second. Every station in life that you occupy. Every relationship. Every position. Every role. Every connection. Every single one of those has the potential to be theologically significant and to manifest the love of God in the world.

So instead of shutting our lives down (Do you have a vocation or not?), our understanding of vocation opens them up. How can I live out my baptism in this context? How can I love my neighbor from this station in life? How can I serve God within this relationship? It's vocation not as end but as beginning. Beginning to love more deeply, beginning to trust more fully, and beginning to see signs of resurrection in our midst.

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