

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 17, 2021

1 SAMUEL 3:1-20 | PSALM 139:1-6, 13-18 | 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20 |
JOHN 1:43-51

Sometimes we Lutherans have a tendency to overstate the innovations of the Lutheran reformation. Based on the way we sometimes talk about Luther and the reformers, you could be led to believe that the idea of grace itself didn't exist before 1517. (Sorry, St. Paul.) What made the Lutheran reformation so new was less the originality of the ideas than the fact that those ideas stuck. There were people making similar arguments about God and criticisms of the church's abuses before Luther's time. The difference was that their ideas didn't travel very far and their lives didn't last very long.¹

But one area where the Lutheran social program did offer a radical break from the past was in its understanding of vocation. The dominant belief in Western Europe in the 1500s was that some select group of people were called by God to perform tasks with spiritual significance, and everyone else sort of went about their lives and payed them to do things on their behalf. It was believed that only priests or people in religious orders had vocations. People thought that those select group of people were closer to God, had superior responsibilities, and possessed unique spiritual powers. The word that's often used to describe that view is "clericalism."

You can still find examples of clericalism in the church today. As you can imagine, sometimes clericalism can be really harmful. One of the reasons the Catholic Church has such a hard time rooting out abusers is because their institutional authority relies so heavily on clericalism.² When you're ordained in the Catholic Church, you undergo an ontological shift that changes the very nature of your being. That's not necessarily bad, but it makes it hard to develop systems of accountability. Sometimes clericalism can be kind of silly. A couple of years ago, I was backing out of a designated clergy spot at Valley Hospital (clericalism) when someone else backed into my car. They seemed surprisingly unconcerned that they backed into me until I got out of the car in my collar, and then they got very concerned and kept saying to themselves, "I can't believe I just hit a priest." They were half right.

Anyway, one of the truly novel ideas the reformers had was imagining and working toward a church, a society, and a world free of clericalism. Of ascribing vocations to everyone, not just this one class of people off in some church or monastery doing spiritual work on behalf of everyone else.

¹ Jan Hus is the sort of classic example of this. Hus and Luther had very similar theological beliefs but Hus was burned at the stake while Luther was hidden in a castle. Funny enough, Luther actually never read Hus until the Catholic Church asked him if he had gotten his ideas from Hus. Luther asked for a day to read Hus and returned saying, "Yea, Hus is basically right."

² Story by James Carroll, "Abolish the Priesthood," *The Atlantic*, accessed January 13, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/to-save-the-church-dismantle-the-priesthood/588073/>.

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At first glance, this probably seems like the sort of thing that's historically curious and practically useless. Who cares? What does this have to do with me? Well, if you're interested in God, it has everything to do with you.

There's a hint at the reason why in the word itself. Vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare* or "calling." Luther's big insight here is that God calls everyone from different stations in life and you can serve God in a variety of roles. Is it better to be a priest, banker, prince, tailor, scribe, or shoemaker? Well, from an economic point of view, probably a banker. From a political point of view, probably a prince. From a practical point of view, probably a shoemaker. But from God's point of view? It doesn't really matter. You can love your neighbor as any of those things, and so they're all equal in the eyes of God.

This isn't to say that you serve God and neighbor doing anything³, but that there's no a kind of hierarchy of how spiritually important people's lives are. There's nothing in our lives that's spiritually or theologically insignificant. You love God as a shoemaker when you make good shoes. You love God as a prince when you care for your citizens. You love God as a tailor when you make clothes that protect people from the elements. And you serve God as a scribe when you copy manuscripts.

This is all basic Reformation stuff so far. The fun part comes when you take it a step further. Because vocation isn't just about your job. It's not just spiritualized capitalism. Vocations are about all the stations we occupy in life from which we love and serve one another. So to take some common examples, is it better to be single, partnered, married, in a relationship, or divorced? It doesn't matter. You can love your neighbor in any of those positions. Is it better to have children or not have children? Doesn't matter. You can love your neighbor and serve God either way. Is it better to invest yourself in your career, step away to care for family, or do both at the same time? Doesn't matter. You can love your neighbor and serve God either way. I could go on, but you get the idea. You can be called by God from wherever your station in life.

This is good, but it might create a little bit of anxiety in us as well. After all, in the medieval world, only a tiny percentage of the population had vocations. You probably didn't. So just don't worry about it and you'll probably be fine. Let them do the hard work for you. But if everyone has a vocation, that means you have a vocation, and what if you choose the wrong one? Sometimes we imagine vocation as being cast in a play. God is waiting for you to step on stage and save the day, but you're off somewhere doing something else. What if God called you to be an unmarried accountant with two children who lives with two dogs in a big city, and you chose to be a partnered non-profit worker with no children who lives with two cats out in the country?

Well, this is where today's reading from 1 Samuel, the call story of Samuel, can give us a little bit of insight. The setting of this story is important. It happens when "the word of the LORD was rare... [and] visions were not widespread." It was a time when people felt

³ If there's an argument for how you can serve God and neighbor as a tobacco lobbyist, I'd be very interested in reading it.

separated from God's involvement and care for them. There were times in the Israelites history when God was always around. Maybe even around too much. *Where'd you guys hide in the garden? What happened to your brother? What's up with the golden calf?* But now God appears to have checked out for a while. And their spiritual life seems to be coasting on fumes.

The problem for the Israelites, for the non-clergy in Luther's day, and maybe even for some of us, is that life seems to be devoid of any real significance. It goes by. It happens. But it really doesn't mean much of anything beyond getting to the next day. Life happens later. Life happens somewhere else.

And it's in the middle of that separation and estrangement that the voice of God drops into Samuel one night. And it's interesting here that the experience isn't an overwhelming vision. This isn't Moses by the burning bush. It's not Isaiah with the seraphim. It's not Jonah and the whale. It's a boy who can't figure out where the voice in the house is coming from. It's not a story about doing. It's a story about listening. It's a story about being attentive. It's a story about what lies underneath all the noise and commotion we fill our lives with.

The truth is, vocation really isn't about doing. If vocation is about doing, then at some point you're going to do the wrong thing or choose the wrong path or end up in the wrong station of life.

Vocation is about listening. It's about attentiveness. Sometimes when we get so caught up in our busyness, in our hustling around to try to make sure that we're on the right path, we miss the voice entirely. We forget it's there. Inhabiting a vocation isn't about choosing a career or a major or marital status or family configuration or a home or whatever other descriptions we might think of. Vocation is a posture. It's about trusting that God is always calling us, and creating space in the world and ourselves to hear that voice.

The question of vocation is so interesting because it's really a question of where God happens. Does God happen when a special class of people say the right prayers on your behalf? Does God happen somewhere else? Or does God happen here? Does God happen in the seemingly pedestrian meanderings of life? Luther's big insight, Samuel's awakening, our revelation is that it happens here. Kitchen tables are as holy as marble altars. Work benches are as holy as pews. Bread ovens are as holy as pascal candles.

Which means that none of our words, none of our actions, none of our hopes ever falls to the ground. Everything in our lives is held in the embrace, in the voice, and in the constant pressure of God's love. To live our vocations is simply to say, "Speak, Lord. For your servant is listening."

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