

# VOCATION

## *Life in the Real World*



*We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same **in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another**; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.*  
(Thanksgiving Collect, LW, p.174, TLH p.15 revision, p.20)

### **Definition - Vocation**

- ◆ In common usage today the term has become virtually synonymous with a “job” or “profession”
- ◆ However, the word vocation (in its Latinate form *vocatio*) means “calling”
  1. Historically used in reference to the sacred ministry and various religious orders
    - Devoting time to “religious things” was seen as being “more holy” (i.e. to be a monk was thought to have more spiritual value than being a maid)
  2. Martin Luther was the first to use it in reference to secular offices/occupations.
    - True holy living is found not apart from, but in, the spirituality of ordinary life (i.e. to be a maid has more value than to be a monk if her work is done in faith)

### **Stations – Stand in the place where You are!**

- ◆ A vocation is a “station” which by is by nature helpful to others if it is followed.
- ◆ A station by definition is “the place where a person or thing stands or is located, especially an assigned post, position, or location.” (Webster’s)
- ◆ Any given person has a variety of vocations. A typical man might have the following vocations simultaneously:
  1. Husband (serving his wife)
  2. Father (serving his children)
  3. Son (serving his parents)
  4. Employer (serving his workers)
  5. Employee (serving his boss)
  6. Citizen (serving his country)
  7. Neighbor (serving those nearby)
  8. Friend (serving those close to him)
- ◆ How do I know if I have a vocation? Ask a better question: “Who is my neighbor?”

### **The Place of Vocation in the Christian Life - An Overview**

- ◆ Summary of the Law: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’” (Luke 10:27)

- ◆ We are tempted to think that some vocations are better than others, but all vocations are the same in the sight of God precisely because he desires the salvation of all all possible neighbors.
- ◆ Stations are like snowflakes; each is unique just as we each
- ◆ The most simple, mundane, earthly work becomes a heavenly vocation when done in faith (1 Samuel 10:7 – “*Do as the occasion demands, for God is with you*”)
  1. A mother nursing her child or changing its diapers
  2. An elderly husband taking care of his wife with Alzheimer’s
  3. A young boy taking out the trash on Saturday mornings
  4. A wife making sandwiches for lunch
  5. A worker stocking the shelves of the local hardware store
  6. Offering a thirsty person a cup of cold water in Christ’s name (Matthew 25:31-40)
- ◆ We tend to define ourselves by what we do (i.e. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, “So, what do you do?”) but vocation gives shape to *who we are*.
- ◆ The Christian life is not about “doing” but about “being.” It’s not about what you can become, but who you already are (what God has made you to be).
- ◆ Thus, vocation is intrinsically tied to Baptism
  1. I *am* baptized vs. I *was* baptized.
  2. The best way to tell what you should do as a Christian is to grow in your understanding of who you are in Christ.
  3. We’d just like to know what to *do*, but God insists on just telling us who we *are*, namely a baptized child of God..
- ◆ We do a fairly good job of preparing for one vocation (i.e. job), but we don’t do as good a job preparing for the equally important vocations of being parents, spouses and the like.
  1. We can use our work as a pretext for neglecting what are perhaps more important offices.
- ◆ Christian vocation is not the end goal of the Christian faith; it’s an extension of the Christian faith.
- ◆ It is not about what I can become, but how can I best be who God has made me to be.
- ◆ The work of every Christian in this world is actually the work Jesus Christ is doing in and through them. (Gal. 2:20)

### **Masks of God - “Behold I bring you fresh eggs from God”**

- ◆ Lutheran theology speaks of two kingdoms, that God rules both the spiritual and the earthly realms, though in different ways.
- ◆ God is active he works through means:
  1. Spiritual Realm – through Word and Sacrament
  2. Earthly Realm - through vocation.
- ◆ Definition of Mask: “A covering of the face or part of the face, to conceal or disguise the identity.” (Webster’s)
- ◆ We are to work for the good of other people. We receive blessings from others in their vocations, just as there are blessed through us in our vocations. But God is behind it all. We simply serve as His masks.
- ◆ The casual observer sees business activity or industrial policy (i.e. the outward things); the Christian sees them as masks of God working through them.
  1. One who does not have the gospel cannot differentiate between God and His mask.
- ◆ Examples from Luther:
  1. “All our work in the field in the garden, in the city, in the home, in struggle, in government – to what does it all amount before God except child’s play, by means of which God is pleased to give His gifts in the field, at home, and everywhere? These are the masks of our Lord God, behind which He wants to be hidden and to do all things. (Luther, *Exposition of Psalm 147*, as quoted by Wingren, p.138)
  2. God Himself is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid.

## The Selfish Pursuit of Independence – *A False View of Reality*

- ◆ We Americans have a false ideal of self-sufficiency and often dream of “not” being dependent on anyone for anything at any time. We think that that is what real life is all about.
  1. Man’s constant mistake is that he thinks he is doing something by himself. (Wingren, 135)
- ◆ But our proper condition is interdependence on others. This starts with our dependence on our Triune God and is reflected as a result in our service to others

## The Relationship of Creation and Vocation – *Reality with Flesh on it!*

- ◆ In the First Article of the Creed we confess:

I Believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

*What does this mean?*

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, ***and still takes care of them***. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

- ◆ God Himself is active in everyday life.
  1. Daily Bread: We pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “*Give Us This Day our Daily Bread*” and he does. Yes, He has done it directly like providing manna for the Israelites in the desert, but normally He does so through means (i.e. the whole economic system, everything from farmers, bakers, truck drivers, retailers)
    - a. Even creation itself is engaged in caring for our daily needs
    - b. When we pray before/after meals we thank God and not the cook.
  2. Healing (through doctors, nurses, etc.)
    - a. God heals the sick. Yes, he can do so directly, but in the normal course of things he does so through doctors, nurses, etc.
  3. Teaches (through parents and teachers)
  4. Protection (through government, police officers, military)
  5. Forgiveness (through pastors)
  6. Care of children (through offices of husband/wife, mother/father)
    - a. Luther: God could populate the whole earth by creating each new generation of babies from the dust. Instead, He ordained that human beings should come together in community to bring up, nurture children in families.
- ◆ In His earthly kingdom, just as in his spiritual kingdom, God bestows His gifts through *means*, namely in relationships and communities existing in a state of interdependence (dependence is our proper human condition). Through these various means (vocations), God providentially cares for his people.
  1. Luther: “He gives the wool, but not without our labor. If it is on the sheep, it makes no garment.”
  2. Luther again: “In his vocation man does works which effect the well-being of others; for so God has made all offices. Through this work in man’s offices, God’s creative work is love, a profusion of good gifts. With persons as his “hands” or “coworkers,” God gives His gifts through the earthly vocations, toward man’s life on earth (food through farmers, fisherman and hunters; external peace through princes, judges and orderly powers; knowledge and education through teachers and parents, etc., etc.). Through the preacher’s vocation, God gives the forgiveness of sins. Thus love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations, through both spiritual and earthly governments.”

- ◆ God uses the things of his creation to care for His creatures:
  1. Wingren on Luther: “Tools and food, needle and thimble – not even excepting ‘your beer-vat’ – call aloud, ‘Use us for the well-being of your neighbor.’” (p.72)

### **Baptism – *A Double Calling***

- ◆ Work is good; Man was created by God to work (Gen. 2:15). Adam’s work was his calling. Following the fall he was still to work, but his work would be drudgery (Gen. 3:17-18)
- ◆ God did not throw Adam’s vocation out with the daily bathwater of sin (work was toil; but daily bread was still provided)
- ◆ Because creation is tied to vocation it is necessarily part of the baptismal life
  1. Baptized into Christ, we have put on Christ. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). As it was in the Garden of Eden, so it is with us, newly created by water and the Spirit. The Lord God not only invites us into His fellowship, He invites us into partnership with Him in this world. Every baptized child of God has a double calling: called into the holy Christian church and into a daily calling – a vocation – where he or she labors as a co-worker with God in the care of His creation. (Senkbeil, p.167)

### **Divine Service – *The Hiddenness of God***

- ◆ The prophet Isaiah – in the midst of national apostasy, political collapse, and divine judgment concludes, “*Truly You are a God who hides Himself.*” (Isaiah 45:15) To say God is hidden, of course, does not mean that He is absent. On the contrary, someone who is hidden is by definition actually present, just not seen. (Veith, p.56)
  1. God is present through His Means of Grace, though hidden
  2. He serves us in extraordinary ways through quite ordinary means.
- ◆ The solution for Christian living is the same as the solution for sin: forgiveness. Thus, you can’t isolate vocation from the Divine Service.
- ◆ All life is liturgical living; We worship God (in response to His service to us) by serving our neighbor.
- ◆ Every word and every action of every Christian is carried out *by* the Holy Trinity *for* the Holy Trinity
- ◆ God seeks to serve us in the earthly kingdom the way He does in the spiritual kingdom – hidden in humble means.
- ◆ Christ came in the flesh through humble means (a babe born to poor parents in an animal’s trough); Christ comes to us today through humble means (simple words, simple water, simple bread and wine); and He still works through us in the world through humble means (in our various vocations)
- ◆ In the Divine Service we stop working so God can work in us. He serves us; we respond. But how? And to who?
- ◆ The Christian’s vocation in the world is to live as a member of the Royal Priesthood of Believers in the particular stations of life God has given him. We receive life and strength for such service in the Divine Service
- ◆ “Our Lord gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink. Finally His blessing moves us out into our calling, where His gifts have their fruition.” (Introduction to Lutheran Worship, LW, p.6)
- ◆ He serves us (through hidden means) and then we go and do likewise through service to our neighbor (we become his hidden means to them)
- ◆ Remember, the post- communion collect on the top of page: “*We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another...*”

### **The Vocation of Pastor – *An excursus***

- ◆ All Christians are “called” by the Gospel into faith.

- ◆ Though the vocation of pastor is no more meritorious than that of the farmer and factory worker, it is nonetheless of particular importance because through the pastor's preaching, teaching, shepherding, and administering the Sacraments, God Himself is working, bringing sinners to Himself through the work of a human being.
  1. The pastor is acting "in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ." In other words, he is a mask of God.
  2. It is God who baptizes, through the hands of a pastor. It is Christ who presides over His Supper, as the pastor distributes the wine. It is God's Word that rings out in the pastor's sermon.
  3. In the pastoral office (or station), as in all callings, God is hidden.
- ◆ Laypeople too have vocations they can bring to the life of the church (Organist, treasurer, administrator, altar care, etc.) These are not properly speaking "ministries" though; they are however vocations pleasing in God's sight when carried out in faith.
- ◆ The faulty notion of "everyone a minister" is a great confusion of vocation. Not only does it keep people away from exercising the vocations God has given them, but it also inhibits the pastor from carrying out his vocation.
  1. Luther was particularly vehement when earthly rulers presumed to tell pastors what to preach (i.e. who to carry out their vocation): "You fool," he said, addressing the prince, "you simpleton, look to your own vocation; don't you take to preaching, but let your pastor do that." (*Exposition of John 1 and 2* as quoted in Wingren, p.114)
- ◆ As mentioned above it is a false premise that only "religious" professions are "holy vocations."

### **Stations of the Cross - *Contra the Theology of Glory***

- ◆ Indeed we are still sinners:
  1. The New Adam – Always lives in Christ and therefore lives to love others.
  2. The Old Adam – always lives for himself
- ◆ It is impossible to sort out our motivations. Yet God can even serve through the sinful flesh/selfish motives of those in their own vocations:
- ◆ The vocation of marriage itself cause normally selfish adults to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of their children.
- ◆ An employer may be selling his product for the sake of no one but himself. Yet, in doing so, besides for providing jobs for others, he is also providing a good or service through which God provides daily bread for his people
- ◆ Because of sin, the flesh, and the power of the devil, the cross cannot be separated from vocation
- ◆ The cross is not to be chosen by us; it is laid upon us by God for His purposes.
- ◆ Experience demonstrates that we often fail, suffer and experience frustration in our vocations
  1. In spite of how parents raise their children, they may rebel against them.
  2. Problems arise in marriage.
  3. A Business owner's company may go bankrupt leading to the layoff of workers.
  4. A pastor's congregation may turn against him though he is being faithful to God's Word
- ◆ Since God is at work in vocation, observes Wingren, the devil seeks to thwart vocation.
  1. He will tempt us to place our own needs and desires above our service to others.
  2. The temptation to self-aggrandizement, pride in good works, and earthly success.
  3. The ploy of trying to pry someone out of their vocation by tempting them to quit, get a divorce, quit a job, give up on one's talents and abilities.
- ◆ How do you know you are in the right vocation?
  1. Luther: "Take it as a sure sign that you are in a right station which is pleasing to God, if you feel disgust and dislike for it. God is certainly at hand. He permits the evil spirit to attack and tempt you, to see whether you are fickle or steadfast, or not; and he provides an opportunity for your faith to fight and grow stronger."
- ◆ But if we feel like running from our vocation?
  1. "Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called." (1 Corinthians 7:20)

2. Vocation demands that we sacrifice our wants and desires (i.e. a mother wants to sleep but her baby is crying)
- ◆ The worldly view of vocation is as a means to getting things and stuff for this life; but our hope is for the next life and we carry out our vocations in view of the life to come, in spite of the crosses we face.
    1. Vocation is earthly, just as shockingly earthly as the humanity of Christ, apparently so void of all divinity. In the crucifixion of Christ the divine nature was only hidden, not absent; it was present in the lowly form of love for robbers and soldiers. Similarly, God conceals His work of love to men in cross-marked vocation, which is really of benefit to the neighbor. In Christ's victory on the cross, which looks so poor- love's victory in lowliness- God is hidden; therefore the resurrection takes place on the third day. Now Christ's victory is proffered through the Gospel to sorely tried man, who in the labors of his vocation undergoes the crucifixion of his old nature. Through faith in the Gospel, I arise as a new man, born of the Church, in hope possessing heaven and eternal life beyond bodily death. From the roughness of earthly life there opens up a vista of life and freedom in the coming kingdom, and only one way leads to it – subjection to the cross here. (Wingren on Luther, pp.57-58)
  - ◆ When God gives a vocation, he also gives his promise to be with him who endures vocation's cross and cries to God. (Wingren, p. 208)

### **Cross and Vocation - *An Impetus for Prayer***

- ◆ Desperation arises in our vocation, and stimulates prayer. Prayer leads to the yearning for the Gospel.
- ◆ Thus, vocation in driving us to prayer leads us back to the Divine Service, and therefore, back to the gifts that enliven our vocation in the first place.
- ◆ Prayer is the door through which God, Creator and Lord, enters creatively into home, community, and labor. Man simultaneously directs his effort downward and his faith upward, thus becoming a collaborator with God and a mask for him. (Wingren on Luther, p.194)

### **The Purpose of Vocation - *Living Outside Ourselves***

- ◆ The purpose of all vocations is the self-sacrificial service of others. As Wingren puts it “God does not need our works, but our neighbor does.”
- ◆ Strictly speaking, we don't “serve” God; He is always the one serving us. Rather, we “serve” our neighbor.
- ◆ Luther: The Christian always lives outside of himself – in Christ by faith and in the neighbor by love.
- ◆ Thus, through His Divine Service to us and in us, Jesus turns our selfishness inside out.
- ◆ (Senkbeil) “Holiness before God is a gift of the Gospel, already established by Christ. Love towards the neighbor is a requirement of the law (Mat. 23:29 “You shall love your neighbor...”)
- ◆ It is only before God that man stands alone (i.e. as an individual) In the earthly realm man always stands in relation to, and bound to others. Before his neighbor, the Christian is a doer of what God wants done in the world; Before God, the Christian is not a doer but a receiver.
  1. “The sun shines in exactly the same way on all: the peasant and the king, the thorn and the rose, the pig in the alley and the lovely girl. They all receive alike of the sun's light and warmth. But the works and actions which such diverse creatures carry on in the sunlight are widely different, and must be so. Likewise, all people are alike before Christ, who, like the sun, gives himself alike to all. All receive the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper; and all hear the same gospel. As for the reality which makes us Christians there is not the slightest difference between man and woman, young and old, learned and unlearned, great saint and frail character. The differences among persons all lie in the things which they can severely do, a capacity or a work, and these activities are directed ‘downward’ to the service of others. Before God in heaven there are no differences; all are simply human beings and sinners, to whom Christ is

given, just like the sun that sheds its light on all without discrimination.” (Luther as quoted in Wingren, p.174)

### **Living the Baptismal Life - *Passive in Faith; Active in Love***

- ◆ Vocation is temporary, it has nothing to do with salvation
- ◆ Though justification has nothing to do with good works, vocation does involve good works.
- ◆ Thus, the Christian is passive in faith; active in love.
  1. A housewife sits quietly in church and listens, whereas at home she is active and does her work (passive in the spiritual realm and active in the earthly). The serf is silent and receptive before his master, but imperative and active toward the livestock...The father is the instrument of procreation, but God is the fountain and author of life.” (Wingren, p.133-134)
- ◆ Again, to quote Wingren: “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does. It is faith God wants.” Our neighbor needs not faith from us, but love which is the expression of faith.
- ◆ Faith is upward (vertical) / Love through works is downward (horizontal)
  1. Remember that collect of Thanksgiving again: **in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another**
- ◆ Love does not think about doing works, it finds joy in people.
  1. Love never does something because it has to. It is permitted to act and keeps no record of its actions (Matt. 25:31-40)
  2. What earthly government would compel we now do freely. So love works on the earth, in the realm of the law, but it is not aware of any law.
  3. Love is the inner willingness to do and bear all that is required by vocation, but does it gladly and w/o resistance.

### **Conclusion - Or “Summary” (whichever you like best)**

- ◆ In short, your daily routine is anything but routine.
- ◆ The Christian life is not about “doing” but about “being.” It’s not about what you can become, but who you already are (what God has made you to be).
- ◆ As God works through humble means to serve you, the vocations he gives to you are humble means through which God serves his creation.
  1. The work of every Christian in this world is actually the work Jesus Christ is doing in and through them. (Gal. 2:20)
- ◆ Real life is not about my finding independence from others, but rather, about my serving Christ by living my life out in my neighbor.
- ◆ We are to work for the good of other people. We receive blessings from others in their vocations, just as there are blessed through us in our vocations. But God is behind it all. We simply serve as His masks.
- ◆ So how do we do our best in our various vocations- simply by receiving the gifts that God seeks to give us In short, this brings us right back to the Divine Service, where it all begins.
  1. “Our Lord gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink. Finally His blessing moves us out into our calling, where His gifts have their fruition.” (Introduction to Lutheran Worship, p.6)
  2. He serves us (through hidden means) and then we go and do likewise through service to our neighbor (we become his hidden means to them)

### **For Further Reading**

This presentation relied heavily on, and borrowed liberally from, the following resources. I can not recommended them enough to help you gain a deeper understanding of the doctrine of vocation as it relates to the life of the Christian:

Senkbeil, Harold. *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*. St. Louis: CPH, 1994. Perhaps the best book available (written in a clear and captivating style) on the very basics of the Christian life. It can be ordered by calling CPH (1-800-325-3040)

Veith, Jr., Gene Edward. *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals*. St. Louis: CPH, 1999. Written by a laymen (a professor at Concordia University – Wisconsin), this book is a simply yet profound treatment of the theology of the cross, the “hiddenness” of God, and Christian vocation. It’s also a great book to give someone who is somewhat of a spiritual nomad to help lead them into the core of the Gospel. It can be ordered by calling CPH (1-800-325-3040)

Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation*. Trans. Carl C. Rasmussen. Minneapolis: Augsburg; reprinted, Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1994. This is simply the best book on the subject of Christian vocation and will transform the way you look at ordinary life. It can be ordered from Ballast Press, P.O. Box 1193, Evansville, IN 47706-1193.

“Table of Duties” – *Small Catechism*. It’s neglected, but trust me, it’s there! Here we see fleshed out what the Scriptures speak of Pastors/Laity, Government/Citizens, Husbands/Wives, Parents/Children, Workers/Employees, etc.

### Let us Pray

Faith clings to Jesus’ cross alone  
And rests in Him unceasing;  
And by its fruits true faith is known,  
With love and hope increasing.  
For faith alone can justify;  
***Works serve our neighbor and supply***  
The proof that that faith is living.

(LW #355:5, “Salvation Unto Us Has Come”)

Confirm in us Your Gospel, Lord,  
Your promise of salvation.  
And make us keen to hear Your Word  
***And follow our vocation:***  
To spend our lives in love for You,  
To bear each other’s burdens too.  
And then at last, when death shall loom,  
O Savior, come  
And bear Your loved ones safely home.

(LW #357:1, “I Trust, O Christ, in You Alone”)

*God our Father, Your Son grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men. Bless, guide, and govern the children and young people of Your Church by Your Holy Spirit that they may grow in grace and in the knowledge of Your Word. Grant that they may serve you well and usefully, **developing their talents not for their own sakes but for the glory of God and the welfare of their neighbor**...through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Petition “For Young Persons,” LW, p.127)*

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*The Circumcision and the Name of Jesus*  
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