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The Journey's the Thing: Reflections on Learning to Hear God's Call

DARRYL TIPPENS

Few things in the Christian life are as important as understanding one's vocation, in the true sense of hearing and obeying God's call. Indeed, the church is the assembly of those who have heard God's call. The church (the *ekklesia*) is quite literally a gathering of people who have heard a "call." Yet few concepts are as murky or as vulnerable to distortion as calling.

This has been so for quite a long time. As early as the 16th century, William Shakespeare gently mocked the Puritans of his day through his portrayal of the rotund, beer-swilling Falstaff. When Prince Hal accuses Falstaff of purse snatching, Falstaff's defense is theological, "Why Hal, 'tis my *vocation*, Hal; 'tis no sin for a man to labor in his *vocation*."

Most would not so brazenly sanctify their vices by justifying them as God's call. Yet people do it every day—consider terrorists who feel "called" to kill others because it's their divine mandate, for example. There is always a lurking danger that our personal preferences and prejudices will turn out—coincidentally—to look exactly like the will of God. How do we avoid this self-serving distortion? How do we avoid baptizing our own preferences and declaring them "the will of God"? How, in other words, do we discern what is *truly* God's will for us?

Daily we come to forks in the road, and we must choose. Even if we want to be like Robert Frost (or Scott Peck) and choose "the road less traveled," even when we are most earnest and sincere, we sometimes have trouble knowing which path to take. Frost, wisely, describes the dilemma of choosing in "The Road Not Taken":

And both [roads] that morning *equally* lay
In leaves that no step had trodden black. (my emphasis)

The point is, at the critical moment when the choice had to be made, the poet could not easily distinguish one road from the other. They were worn "really about the same." Though the poet does choose, he admits his uncertainty. The route he took had "*perhaps* the better claim" (my emphasis). Frost's dilemma represents what happens to us all. Through the years I have listened to countless students and friends anguish over how to know their vocation. After prayer, reflection, and not a little trial and error myself, I offer these insights that may help others think through vocation.

SOMETIMES YOU CHOOSE YOUR VOCATION

In the film *October Sky*, Homer, a young boy stirred by Sputnik in the 1950s, dreamed of outer space and building rockets. But Homer lived in a poor coal-mining town in West Virginia, and his father did not share the son's dreams. The



father only wanted his son to follow in his own footsteps, but the son had an unquenchable passion for science and rocketry. The climactic point in the story comes when the father orders the son to return to the coal mine. The son politely and firmly refuses. Yet the boy's assertion of his passion was not really an act of defiance or egotism. It was the natural and direct consequence of the boy's true gifts. He was obeying his truest nature in following this dream. In Frederick Buechner's terms, Homer's deep passion met the world's deep need.

Sometimes it is absolutely clear what one is called to do. Your gifts are clear. Your passion for preaching, teaching, building, parenting, or healing are so obvious that you have no doubt. Early in my life, certainly by age 20, I acquired a deep sense of calling as a teacher. Teaching, for me, is no secular occupation. It is my ministry. It is my means to help others and to lead them to faith. Like C. S. Lewis, I came to see that the scholarly life is a means to glorify God. Lewis remarked that it is "not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us."

I recall coming home from college during my sophomore year, quite excited at the prospect of becoming an English teacher. Yet my father received my plan rather coolly. Even so, I never looked back and never doubted. Now, 35 years later, it seems as though no other path would have been right for me. Of course, such clarity is not always available. In such a case, there are other ways to find one's path.

SOMETIMES YOUR VOCATION CHOOSES YOU

Throughout Scripture, we find accounts of godly servants being approached by God or a heavenly messenger who hands them a difficult assignment or an unexpected task. One thinks of Abraham, Jonah, Mary, and Paul. The call comes; the servant must obey. Even if the call is onerous, the faithful always obey, whatever the cost.

George Herbert presents this situation with unusual clarity in his poem "The Collar." Herbert, a 17-century Anglican minister finds the clerical collar unusually burdensome. Feeling "collared" quite literally, he mounts a revolt and declares his intention to leave the ministry—until the final lines of the poem, "Methought I heard one calling 'Child.' And I replied, 'My Lord.'" Suddenly, upon hearing his Master's voice, the spiritual tantrum ends, and the faithful minister submits.

The spirit of accepting a burdensome call is wonderfully illustrated in J. R. R. Tolkien's classic novel, *Lord of the Rings*. A great force of evil threatens the community with destruction. The ring must be removed from the hobbits' shire in order to stop the annihilating evil of Mordor. The awesome duty to remove the ring from the shire falls to Frodo the hobbit. In the book, Frodo asks Gandalf:

'What must I do? I am not made for perilous quests,' [Frodo declares]. 'I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?'

'Such questions cannot be answered,' said Gandalf. 'You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have.'

"You have been chosen." People of faith sometimes experience a call like Frodo's. Sometimes your vocation chooses you, as Jeremiah knew:

If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jer 20:9)

VOCATION IS DISCERNED THROUGH CAREFUL LISTENING

Sometimes people have difficulty discovering their vocation—not because there is an absence of direction but because there is too much distraction. Sometimes you have to get very quiet to hear the still, small

voice of the Almighty, the “sound of sheer silence” (1 Kgs 19:12). We cannot count on a dramatic Damascus Road experience, such as befell the apostle Paul. God more often reveals himself in ordinary and routine ways. Learn to listen to your own life, as Frederick Buechner urges:

There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly. ... Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

Discernment is not always a private matter; it is more often an exercise in community. Often, great spiritual wisdom is conveyed by wise Christian leaders, flesh-and-blood voices of profound truth. Just as Timothy listened to Paul, so we must be guided by older, wiser mentors. When standing at the crossroad looking for understanding, ask: *Who are my companions on the journey? Who challenges my thinking? Who interrogates and exposes my hidden motives and secret, selfish desires? Who keeps me honest? To whom am I listening with the utmost attention?*

Prayer also is another vital means of *listening*. Prayer, by fixing our attention on God, opens us up to him in remarkable ways. Jesus promised to give us clarity and answers when we search honestly, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matt. 7:7). Eugene Petersen’s paraphrase of Romans 12:1-2 in *The Message* suggests how fixing one’s attention on God is the best means to gain clarity about one’s life:

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

TRUE VOCATION IS COSTLY

When choosing a vocation, be wary of the inauthentic call, the one that may only satisfy personal preferences, that flatters the ego, or promises great personal benefit. Bonhoeffer reminds us, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” True discipleship is expensive—to the pocketbook and the ego. Jesus’ way is the *downward* way, the way of the poor, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. Nouwen confesses in *The Road to Daybreak*:

Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world surrounding me, and against the culture of which I am a part.

While there can and should be great joy in following one’s true vocation, be on guard when an apparent call turns out to be a mere variation of the American Dream—the promise of more money, more prestige, and more creature comforts.

VOCATION DOES NOT PROTECT FROM DOUBT OR FAILURE

One of the greatest misconceptions about calling is the notion that a true calling protects a person from doubt or failure. Everyone wants certainty, of course; but, truly, if we had absolute certainty about our call,

then we would hardly be living by faith. Walking by faith means we are not walking “by sight,” that is, with absolute certainty. Rather, we “trust and obey.” Trust implies risk and occasionally uncertainty and—in the short term—even apparent failure.

As I listen to people—especially young adults—talk about their lives, I imagine life as a giant road map. They view their lives as a great journey across the continent. They are starting out in New York, and they must reach the West Coast, let us say, San Francisco. The trouble is, as they stare at the road map, they become bewildered by the infinite array of routes—the main interstates, the federal highways, the lesser “blue highways,” the secondary roads, etc. They despair because they suppose that God has preordained only one particular path for them. Given the number of routes, how can they possibly find the single, true path of their life?

Such a view of life inspires headaches if not deep anxiety. Nothing I read in scripture says that God dictates such particularity for our lives—at least not as a rule. Could it be that one’s real duty is not to find the one right highway but simply to be a certain kind of person in the world—humble, attentive, and obedient? The important point is that “The Way” be in us, for if The Way is inside us, then we will always be in The Way, wherever we travel, as John Bunyan so poignantly states.

Even when we are on the right path, we may experience periods of uncertainty. Consider John the Baptist. In prison, John begins to doubt. He thought he had been called to be the great announcer for the Messiah, but alone in prison, he wonders, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Luke 7:19). While this text is usually cited to show that John momentarily doubted Christ, it suggests something else as well. John experienced *self-doubt*. Despite all he had done, John reached a point where he wasn’t sure of his vocation. People can do exactly the right thing with their lives, like John the Baptist, yet still lose clarity from time to time. Even when we are on the right road, crises and consternation can strike. Faithfulness is not always doubt-free. Faithfulness is being patient, attentive, and constant—even in the dark places.

YOUR VOCATION BEGAN BEFORE YOU WERE BORN

According to scripture, our deepest vocation does not come to us when we decide to be a fireman, a nurse, a basketball star, or movie star. In the biblical view, we acquired our true vocation a long, long time ago—even before the world was fashioned, in a sense even before we were born. Consider Paul’s words as rendered by Peterson:

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! ... Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son ... Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working in everything and everyone. (Eph 1, *The Message*)

Genetically, we understand that a child, in part, is the “product” of the parents’ genetics. Similarly, we know that a child is shaped by the moral choices of parents and others, even if these choices were performed before the child’s birth, even if the child is totally ignorant of these acts. In a similar way, the Bible asserts that our true spiritual identity derives from our long spiritual history, which began ages ago.

We find our vocation, therefore, when we discover our spiritual origins. Because we are created in his image, because we derive from him and will return to him, we possess a very particular, immutable identity, as distinct as our fingerprints or DNA. And the key is this: *our identity encodes our vocation*. In brief, we are called to be like him, to be shaped in his image, and to live a life modeled on Jesus’ life. So, we discover our vocation by studying our own spiritual history closely as found in Scripture.

YOUR VOCATION CONTINUES EVEN AFTER YOU DIE

Many people are confused because vocation-as-divine-call easily morphs into vocation-as-occupation. Although one might fulfill one's vocation within and through a particular occupation, vocation and occupation are not the same. We must firmly resist using worldly measuring sticks (typical of occupations) to determine the "success" of vocation. Vocation, theologically speaking, begins before life on earth and extends beyond this life as well. Who has the empirical instrument to measure something that goes beyond space and time?

Some professions are easily recognized as having important multi-generational effects. Painting, architecture, ministry, and teaching are among them. Henry Adams correctly observed, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." It is this very sense that one can affect the future that inspires great teachers. But the truth is *every* life has the potential to touch lives beyond its own.

Each of us is the recipient of the good choices and decisions of forebears we never knew. Each day we stir invisible ripples in the pool of life that will arc throughout eternity. Some of us do it in dramatic ways, such as Otto Schindler did in World War II. Thousands of people live today because of Schindler's courageous defiance of the Nazis. Many others, quietly, humbly, and invisibly, do good deeds daily that will yield fruit for eternity. Jesus tells us that the farmer plants seeds, and they will grow and produce great fruit, though the farmer does not know how (Mark 4:26-27).

FINALLY, VOCATION IS A MYSTERY TO BE REVEALED BY CHRIST HIMSELF

On the last day, there will be some surprises. The true bearers of vocation will not necessarily be the captains of industry, the great generals, politicians, philosophers, or entertainers. When all the nations are gathered before Jesus, those who truly found their vocation will ask:

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Matt 25:37-40)

True vocation, finally, is so simple—so ever-present, so concrete, so real, and yes, so easy—that it escapes us. While we assume the complicated and the grandiose, Jesus speaks quietly from below, in simple, earthy terms: *Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. This is your call.*

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