

VOCATION

When I go into a restaurant, the waitress who brings me my meal, the cook who prepared it, the person who delivered the food to the restaurant, the wholesalers, the workers in the food-processing factories, the butchers, the farmers and everyone else in the economic food chain are all being used by God to “give me this day my daily bread.” This is a good example of Luther’s doctrine of vocation. The word “vocation” comes from the Latin verb “vocare,” which meant “to call,” and it expresses the idea that God calls each one of us to do the kind of work we do in life in order to help him care for his creation. Through our vocations, our callings, He cares for others through us.

At the time of the Reformation, the Church taught that only the clergy had vocations. Monks, abbots, priests, and bishops were called by God to their offices and the work they did was of greater value to God than the work done by common laborers. Luther rejected that view and taught that every Christian is called by God to the kind of work he does and that all forms of work have equal value in God’s eyes. Wife and husband, father and mother, bishop and shoemaker, prince and farmhand—all were vocations through which men served God and each other. Common labor was not merely a way to make a living, it was a calling from God. As Luther put it, *“The plowboy on his way to the field with a hymn on his lips serves the Lord as well as Martin Luther.”*

Luther’s teaching on vocation had the effect of “ennobling” work by conferring upon every job honor and value in God’s eyes. This idea spread rapidly throughout northern Europe and unleashed unprecedented commitment and energy to common labor. It was a significant factor in producing what later came to be called the “Protestant work ethic” which inspired the Puritans who settled and helped build our country.

The doctrine of vocation was one of the three cornerstones of Luther’s theology. The first cornerstone was the doctrine that we are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not by works. The second cornerstone was what he called the priesthood of all believers which meant that just as we receive forgiveness for our sins through our great high priest Jesus Christ, we are called to be priests—little Christs—to our neighbors by mediating God’s love to them. In other words, Christians are called to be conduits or aqueducts through which God’s love flows into the world. The third cornerstone was his doctrine of vocation.

Luther said that vocations function as “masks” of God. On the surface we see an ordinary human face—our mother, the doctor, the teacher, a waitress—but God is hidden behind these masks and ministers to us through them. In the same way, as we live out our callings as spouses, parents, employees and citizens, God works through us to minister to others. Whether we realize it or not, we all function as masks of God.

God ministers to us and we minister to others in this way every day—even if we fail to see it. Sometimes God’s work in our lives is more clear to us than it is at others. When God calls a woman and a man into marriage and gives them a child, they can see God working through them to create a new life. When they take their child to Sunday School they can see God working through them to raise the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. But in the relentless work of changing diapers, dealing with temper tantrums, going to parent-teacher conferences and driving to soccer practices this sense of God working through them can fade away. Still, God is at work, caring for their child through them.

Jesus summarized the entire Old Testament law in two commands: *“Love the lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Mark 12:20-31) God Himself fulfills the first command for us. At His initiative and by His grace He works faith in our hearts which absolves us of our sins and brings us into a loving relationship with Him. We obey the first command by faith and not by works. But the second command—to love our neighbor as ourself—does involve works. As Gustav Wingren said, *“God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.”* (Gustav Wingren: *Luther on Vocation.*) One way we meet our neighbor’s needs is through our vocation.

Luther argued that those who sought to serve God through elaborate religious ceremonies, self-deprivation, vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and so forth were not really serving Him at all. Through the prophet Hosea God had said, *“I desire mercy, not sacrifice...”* (Hosea 6:6). Through Amos He had declared, *“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them...But let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream!”* (Amos 5:21-24). And Jesus said, *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”* (John 15:12) If we want to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, we do so by loving our neighbor as ourselves. The neighbor we serve may be our boss, our employee, our parent, our child, our customer, our husband or our wife.

To be sure, we often sin in and against our vocations. God did not call parents to abort or abuse their children, but to love and serve them. God called physicians to heal their patients, not to kill them. God called businessmen to serve the needs of their customers, not cheat them. And God called those in government to protect those they govern, not oppress them. Husbands are called to serve their wives not dominate them. Wives are called to respect their husbands, not demean them. Workers are called to be conscientious workers, not slackers and complainers. In the Catechism, we are instructed to apply the Ten Commandments to our vocations:

“Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, servant: whether you have been

disobedient, unfaithful, slothful; whether you have grieved any person by word or deed; and whether you have stolen, neglected or wasted anything or done other injury.”

Even when we sin and fall short in our vocations, God continues to work through us to help others. Gustav Wingren gives the example of a business owner who cares nothing for his neighbor; his only concern is to make money. Yet for all his selfishness, God still uses his business to provide useful products or services to the community and employment to his employees so that they can take care of their families. In the same way, God brings children up through imperfect parents—as we all are. He provides ministry through imperfect pastors. God delivers his gifts in vessels of clay, but that by no means diminishes their value.

If God uses us as masks to minister to others, it's also true that God is hidden behind the mask of our neighbor for us to serve. Sometimes this is inconvenient and unappealing to us. When our neighbor comes to us in need and presses his need upon us we can easily become resentful and inclined to send him somewhere else to get the help he needs. After all, what are government agencies and social workers for? At such times we would do well to remember that when we serve our neighbor, we are serving Christ. At the final judgment, when Jesus sits on His throne and judges all mankind, he says to the righteous: *“Come, you are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”* And when the righteous asked him when they did all these things for him, he replies: *“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”* (Matthew 25:40) By serving our neighbors, we end up serving Christ after all.

Work in this life and in this world is troublesome—sometimes almost unbearable. That is because ever since the fall work is under the curse of sin. As the old saying goes, *“That’s why they call it work.”* Mothers bear children and raise them in pain and anxiety. Fathers earn their living by the sweat of their brow—figuratively if not literally. The word “work” itself has negative connotations for us. But it's important to remember that the reason we have a negative idea of work is precisely because it is under the curse of sin. God gave Adam work to do in the Garden of Eden and it was joyous work because there was no sin. Work is not the problem; sin is. When we come to understand that through our work, our vocations, God is using us to serve Him and bless others, work becomes more than drudgery, it becomes something noble, honorable and holy.

This works for me and I hope it also works for you!

Amen.

Genesis 3:17-19

¹⁷ To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

Gen. 4:1-12 Cain and Abel

4 Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.” ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”