

“Call Waiting.”

Micah 6:8-10; Matthew 22: 34-40

Reformation Observation: **Vocation**

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When I was in seminary, our president had a sort of stock recruitment speech, or sermon even that he used when he was visiting supporting congregations. He'd begin by talking about some of the special features that the phone company was offering back then—this was back in the early 90s, before anyone really had cell phones at all, let alone smart phones that all seem to have these features more or less standard now. Anyway, he'd describe some of these features of the phone company, especially a relatively new convenience known as “Call Waiting.” Some of you remember call waiting, right? It was actually a service you paid extra for, that let you know even when you were on a call that you were getting another call—that you had a call waiting. Again—pretty much every phone, every plan has this built in now, but it was kind of a big deal in 1991. And he get to the high point of this recruitment speech and ask the people in the congregation: have you ever wondered if YOU have a call waiting for you?

It was cute, memorable, and actually kind of clever, now that I think about it. It was timely, and it tied in very well with pop culture at the moment. Had it been fifteen years later, he may have had a recruitment sermon that had the line “can you hear me now” in it. But as I think back on it now, particularly as we're thinking about the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, as we're highlighting some of the central teachings upheld by Martin Luther and his contemporaries, I wonder if this speech, this sermon maybe missed the larger point. Given the Reformation notion of Vocation, his line about asking people to consider whether they might have a call waiting for them was right on, in it reinforced the idea we each have a calling from God. But since he was using that line—using that idea of a calling from God specifically as a tool to have people consider attending seminary, to discern whether they may have a future as a Christian Public Leader—as pastor, or deacon or associate in ministry, for example—it seems, looking back to miss the point that Luther was making about vocation: that God's call is not just for some, not just for those in specifically religious professions or offices, like Pastor, or Priest, or Monk or Nun. Despite the centrality of this teaching, sometimes called the “priesthood of all believers,” we Lutherans can at times give mixed signals about this notion of vocation and calling.

I was sort of lulled into a false sense of the importance of my own sense of call or calling when I first graduated from Seminary, received my first call (capital “C”) to serve a congregation in Brattleboro, Vermont. I was so proud of myself, my new degree, my official status. Before I had even unpacked any books or anything else in my office, I put up on the walls my Ordination Certificate, my Diploma for a Master of Divinity (With Honors!) from PLTS, as well as my official

Letter of Call, signed both by my bishop Robert Isaksen of the New England Synod and the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA Herbert Chilstrom. These, I thought, were what authorized me to do ministry. They gave me permission or even a mandate to do God's work to lead those people in that place. They were signs of my calling, my vocation, or so I thought.

But it was there, in that congregation, as well as in so many other congregations since that I was reminded in so many ways of what the Reformers tried to get people to understand 500 years ago: that God's call is not reserved for the so-called church professionals. That a vocation or calling is not limited to certain tasks of leadership in the church, but that our vocations—our callings—are all of the various roles in our lives where we can live in a gracious response to what God has already done. That each of us—and not just clergy or future clergy among us—actually do have a call waiting.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that since the word vocation means a call or summons, having a vocation means more than having a job. It means participating in the work of God, something that many of us just don't believe we do. She suggests that somewhere along the way "we have misplaced the ancient vision of the church as a priestly people, set apart for ministry in baptism, confirmed and strengthened in worship, made manifest in service to the world."

Perhaps we should revive Luther's vision of the priesthood of all believers," she continues, "who are ordained by God at baptism to share Christ's ministry in the world." To believe in the priesthood of all believers—and maybe more to the point to believe in your own priesthood is to see the hand of God at work in the world. More than that, it is to see your own hands as necessary to that work.

God's Work, Our Hands, for the past decade or more, that's been the ELCA's slogan. More than a marketing tool, this is the essence of who we are as the people of God. It's the idea that each of us with a call waiting for us, that each of us is invited to respond to God's call and enter God's work with our hands. Whether those hands are diapering an infant—as Luther once so colorfully suggested—or otherwise caring for a child, or assembling an automobile, or teaching a class of sixth graders, or engineering the next generation of pacemaker, or stocking the shelves at Walmart, or balancing a corporate bank account, or caregiving for an aging parent, they are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God's will on earth.

Whatever our particular tasks, we are all called, as the prophet Micah reminds us, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Whatever the specific contours of the work we perform with our hands, our feet, our

voices, our minds, we are all called—each and every one of us—to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. How exactly that gets worked out is different for each one of us. None of our vocations, none of our callings are exactly the same.

Still, we have a sort of collective vocation—a shared calling, if you will—as we respond to God's love in concrete ways as a group of followers in a particular time and place, and not simply as individual followers. Maybe my seminary president would have referred to this as a sort of Friends and Family calling plan, building our own state-of-the-art network of those responding together to call God has waiting for them. This is where we see how much we need one another as we respond to the call—that our vocations actually complement one another, and when placed together become greater than the sum of our parts. Part of our calling is to support one another in responding to the call, to share our gifts to help equip and empower others to share theirs, too. That common calling—the fact that we each have a different role to play, a different task to perform, a different set of gifts to share—is something to keep in mind as we discern what ministries we plan to engage in, to fund, and to put into place in the coming calendar year. Such planning, such stewardship, such generosity, is part of our vocation as well. Part of our calling is to Live Generously, as the Thrivent t-shirts remind us. We are called to work together, to pull in the same direction, and to multiply our efforts as we respond to God's grace-filled action in our lives.

In all these things, each of us, and all of us do have a call waiting. Each and every one of us has a vocation through which we love God and serve our neighbors. Each of us have been called with a holy calling, according to God's own purpose and grace, given to us in Christ Jesus, revealed to us our baptism. What a great thing we get to witness today, as Malcolm receives the call that has been waiting for him. What a great reminder to each of us, too, that it is in our baptism that the incoming call interrupts what we're doing at the time, and speaks to each of us a word of peace, a word of belonging, a word of calling—a calling into the priesthood of all believers.

A few years into my call at Trinity Lutheran in Brattleboro, I took down all those diplomas and in their place put up this little one in its place. It's my baptism certificate, from August 29, 1965, signed by my pastor and godparents, on behalf of all my fellow ministers at St John Lutheran Church-by-the-Sea in New York. In every office ever since—in Dakar, Apple Valley, St. Paul, Forest Lake and right here at CTK, it's on my wall, reminding me of when and how I received the call that was waiting for me—in the waters of baptism, as a helpless, baby child. We are called, each of us, in these waters. We are authorized for ministry, each

of us, in these waters. We equipped, each of us, in these waters. We are ordained, each of us, into the call that is waiting for us.

Frederick Buechner has famously said, "the place to which God calls you is that place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." What brings you joy—deep and abiding joy? And what does the world—and especially your own corner of the world—most need? Beginning to answer these questions you may just discover—or rediscover—God's call waiting for you, who God is calling you to be, what God is calling you to do. Amen.