

Vocation: From worship to the world

It was Monday morning after spring break. We were beginning a week of activities on campus designed to lift up the concept of vocation for students, faculty and staff. “It’s Celebrate Vocation Week,” I said to a man as he walked by, trying to get him to take a flier. He didn’t want to, but he stopped, took the flier and looked at me, puzzled: “I thought we had our vacation last week?”

Vocation. It’s a word capable of drawing puzzled looks. It’s also one of those words that—even when it’s not confused with *vacation*—means different things to different people.

For many, vocation means little more than a job. That’s why there are vocational schools where one learns a trade. For others, it’s a religious word most often associated with a call to full-time church work. For Lutherans, though, vocation is deeply embedded in our history and theology. It’s a foundational principle of the Reformation. Yet it still confuses people, and its promise remains largely unfulfilled.

Our vocational call to serve God in our everyday lives is embedded in our baptism, and in weekly worship we’re reminded again and again to live our faith in all we say and do.

Though many may experience a stubborn disconnect between faith and daily life, a solid understanding of vocation brings meaning and joy.

Many names, one promise

Vocation has gone by many names. Martin Luther talked about the “universal priesthood,” which shortly thereafter morphed to the more familiar “priesthood of all believers.”

In the last century, during a revival of interest in the concept, people started talking about the

“ministry of the laity.” It didn’t take long before that phrase came to be associated with things laypeople do in and for the church (serving on committees, being a lay reader or visiting the sick). The phrase “ministry in daily life” was born.

Of late the word *ministry* has caused some to stumble because it sounds too churchy. So the language shifted to *calling* and *purpose*. Most recently people talk about vocation in terms of “spirituality in the workplace.”

While this shifting language might cause us to despair (what are we supposed to call it after all?) there is reason for hope: the promise of vocation just won’t let us go. History shows that we keep coming back to the potential for connecting faith and life—each time as if we’re discovering it anew—precisely because it holds so much promise.

Vocation is on our lips and in our heart, but our practices and priorities often betray us. We see the call to connect faith and life as being critical to our purpose, but we keep short-circuiting this connection with a persistent focus on what we do as the gathered church.

Tracing the mystery

Not long ago I brought pastors together to discuss vocation. Hoping for a handful to respond, I was overwhelmed when more than 100 showed up.

The pastors said they yearned to put ministry in daily life (vocation) at the center of their ministries, but either they didn’t know how to do this or were aware of congregational dynamics that would resist any effort to turn attention outward. On top of that, there was considerable confusion about “ministry,” what it is and who does it. They were intensely interested in the topic but unsure about how to shape their congregations around it.

After more than a year of discussions with pastors, I engaged laypeople in the conversations. Surprisingly, these conversations showed that laypeople don’t limit ministry to what happens in church. They clearly affirmed their baptismal vocations, but they also expressed a need to be better supported in their various ministries in life. Far from limiting ministry to what pastors do,

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one participant observed, “We can reach people whom the clergy cannot.”

One thing became clear over time—we know we’re called to ministry in daily life because we hear it all the time in worship.

- Listen to this post-communion prayer: “Renew our faith, increase our hope, and deepen our love, *for the sake of a world in need.*”
- Hear the Affirmation of Baptism: “Serve all people, following the example of Jesus.”
- Sing this hymn: “Will you use the faith you’ve found to reshape the world around, through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 798).
- Ponder this gospel reading: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (Luke 10:36).
- Be sent with some version of “Go in peace. Serve the Lord.”

Next time you worship, pay attention to the words you hear, speak, sing and pray. You will likely find references like the ones above that call us to connect our faith with all that we say and do, not just in the church but in the world.

Moving forward

Good news: we know we’re called to various vocations in the world, and we’re already engaged in ministry in countless places, relationships and responsibilities.

Even better news: people are increasingly hungry to make connections between faith and daily life. Just look at the number of books and blogs devoted to finding meaning and purpose. We *want* to live up to the baptismal promise of vocation.

Tom Nelson, author of *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Crossway, 2011) is successfully addressing vocation in his congregation. Members respond with profound gratitude when the connection between faith and daily life is made: “Pastor, I have always felt like a second-class citizen before” or “Pastor, thanks for telling me my work matters.”

Making the connection between faith and life brings us new meaning and joy.

What would it mean to shape our congregations around vocation? Making this shift is easier than one might think. It begins with acknowledging, affirming and supporting what we’re already doing in the roles and responsibilities of our everyday lives.

This work deepens when we change our way of thinking: instead of seeing ministry as something

that only happens in and through the church, we start talking about and supporting ministry taking place in our everyday lives. It may be as simple as responding differently to someone who can’t participate in a congregational activity because of responsibilities with work or family by saying, “That’s your ministry right now. How can we help you do it better?”

We can become bolder in this work of reimagining our congregations by revisiting the language we use in worship and translating our generic and lofty words and phrases into concrete realities. A recent prayer petition was: “Make your church a prophetic voice for the voiceless, a bold witness of love to the neighbor and a force for hope in all the world.”

But the church isn’t just an institution, it is the people. If people can’t see themselves in that petition (leaving that “voice” to someone else) perhaps they would see themselves in this one: “Make us all prophetic voices, bold witnesses and a force for hope in our homes and neighborhoods, in our work and our community involvement.”

Preaching and teaching plays a vital role in making the connection even more specific, so we see our lives, relationships, work and passions all as part of God’s desire to bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

We get a good start when we pray for people in our congregations (and beyond) who are involved in agriculture, naming that they’re fulfilling Scripture’s call to “feed the hungry.” We do this when we train people in legal and judicial roles so they can speak (yes, testify!) in our congregations about their efforts to “strive for justice and peace in all the earth.” We can create a means to check in on Sundays to see how our various ministries went during the week. Doing so puts delicious meat on the bones of the prior week’s “Go in peace. Serve the Lord.”

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we would do well to lift up and celebrate the vocation of the baptized in all our congregations. Making vocation—that connection between faith and life—the core of our life together renews the faith and hope of all members, revitalizes congregations and shines the light of God’s love on a hurting world. 



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