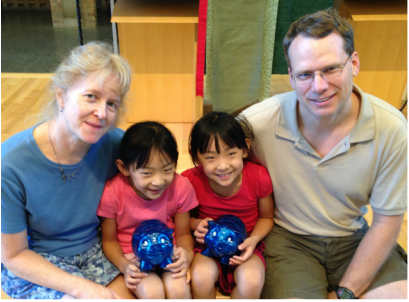


VOCATION: FAITH AS A WAY OF LIFE



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INTRODUCTION

The decrease in the numbers and status of mainline denominations over the last fifty years has been well documented. Some believe that this points to the death of this expression of the church. While we believe that the language of death is, in many ways, appropriate in describing what is occurring, we also believe it is only accurate when connected to the language of resurrection and new life. There indeed is much of the 1950's expression of mainline Protestantism that is either dead or in the process of dying. We believe that this is both sad and painful (death is never pretty after all), but it also points to a tremendous opportunity.

In addition, the reality of our culture is one of unprecedented change that brings many challenges to our individual lives. All of this suggests that we live in a time of transition. We believe that this transition presents at least these following challenges/opportunities.

Challenges/Opportunities

- Theology – It is well documented that a large majority of Americans believe in God. The deeper question underneath this statement is, “What sort of God do you believe in?” Our experience suggests that many believe in either a God who exists but is distant (and life happens apart from any influence of God), or in a God who has designed and written out a play in which we are merely actors (determinism). In both of these, God is uninvolved in life and essentially non-relational. Is there a belief in God that actually confesses that God is present and active in the world in a way that is not already pre-determined?
- Does the church matter? – We live in a post-modern age in which the previous trust in the “goodness” or “importance” of institutions is no

longer the case. This is certainly true of the church. At the same time, our experience is that many have a desire for authentic community that matters in the world and in their lives. What does a church that matters look like? What is the purpose of the church?

- Identity – In today’s society, we are constantly bombarded with messages of who we are based on race, where we live, class, sexuality, political affiliation, our successes, our failures, etc. What actually is the basis of who we are?
- Segmented lives – We live in a world in which many parts of our lives are compartments unto themselves. The most obvious example is the well-documented public/private split. Is this how we must live given today’s realities, or is there a way for our lives to be lived and experienced as integrated wholes?
- Meaning – Douglas John Hall has written that the religious question of an earlier age was whether or not there is anything after death. He believes that, increasingly, the question that matters most for people today is, “Is there anything *before* death?” What does a life that matters/has meaning/is purposeful actually look like?
- Community – In a culture that is focused on the individual, there appears to be a deep desire for community. What might authentic community look like?
- Messiness/suffering – One can hardly watch television, look at social media, stroll through a bookstore, or drive by a church without seeing/hearing some message about how to live a perfect, blessed, or purpose-filled life through “5 easy steps.” The message we hear is that life will be great if only you find the right formula for living it. The truth, however, is that we are never fully in control of our lives, and they all contain elements of messiness, brokenness, suffering, loss, despair,

confusion, etc. Are these things signs of failure? Or can a life that matters actually embrace these elements instead of denying them?

Vocation

In light of these and other realities of life today, we believe that the way forward for the church will be to re-engage the Christian understanding of vocation from a Lutheran perspective. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul argues that, in baptism, we are both buried with Christ, and, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might walk in “newness of life” (Romans 6). For Paul, there are at least two defining elements of this “newness of life.” The first is that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 8). Secondly, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (Romans 14). This second confession has most often been used at the time of death or at a funeral. This fails to capture the full confession that, in *all of life*, we are also the Lord’s. With this claim comes the call to fully live life in Jesus’ name. We as Lutheran Christians utilize the word “vocation” to understand this: that we who have been claimed by Christ in our baptisms are a called people. We believe that this is significant for the church in today’s world for the following reasons:

- This understanding of vocation confesses that God is present and at work in the world.
- This understanding confesses that we as individuals and as a community are called.
- Our vocation/calling is not just lived out in our professional life. It includes all the roles in which we find ourselves: family member, friend, citizen, worker, etc.
- While respecting that we are likely to be more or less passionate about different roles we are called into, this understanding of vocation suggests

that our lives are integrated. Each realm matters because each realm is lived for the sake of our neighbor and the world God loves. We are called to hold each role in tension with the others.

- We believe that this understanding of vocation calls us to deep engagement with the complexities, messiness and suffering of our world and our own lives with the hope that God is already at work. Instead of denying or downplaying these realities, they are central to why we are called into community as we struggle with what it actually means in the real world to work out our callings. For example: If God has called me in *all* of my roles, and I hate the job that I can't leave because it allows me to support my family, how do I make sense of this?

The Set-Up

For these and other reasons, Westwood has committed to deeply engaging this understanding of vocation. We have started this process by first seeking to teach a new language (the word “vocation” in itself is challenging, as many have either never heard it, or those that have heard it have several different definitions for what it means!). We are doing this through a process of retreats, small groups and preaching opportunities with the whole congregation. Second, we have just begun to work towards viewing all aspects of Westwood’s ministry from the perspective of vocation. For instance, what would it look like if all our Children, Youth, and Family ministries began from the perspective of engaging the twin pillars of the Reformation: Grace and Vocation? What in our programming would be dropped? What would be added? What would change?

We are at the beginning of this process and are impressed with the depth of engagement already. We are very interested in what this will mean for both the life of our congregation as a whole, and for the lives of each individual within it.

WEEK 1

FREED TO LOVE

Introduction

God already loves you. You can't do anything to make God love you more than God already loves you right this minute. God has already claimed you and called you. As it says in the verses from Isaiah 43 that we read last Sunday, "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine... You are precious in my sight... and I love you." You don't have to *prove* or *earn* anything! This is where we, as Lutherans, start: with God's action towards us.

Note: This is where Martin Luther struggled, and the whole Reformation began, from his realization that it's not about me and what I do, but rather it's first about God and what God has already done!

If we don't have to worry about our own status with God – if God already loves and accepts us – then we are free to turn outward and love our neighbor. We are free to love because God first loved us.

In our Gospel lesson this week, we hear Jesus lay out the cornerstones of his ministry: love God, love neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39). Jesus even suggests that these two are connected. The love we have from God and for God plays out in the love we share with those around us.

So you see, the whole idea of "vocation," how God invites us to live as God's people in this world, starts with God's love for us. How we respond to that love, then, is our vocation, our calling! And that vocation or calling is lived out in a variety of ways and in a number of different roles in each of our lives: as a parent or spouse, as a teacher or businessperson, as a neighbor and volunteer.

The first reading by Jack Fortin will help lay a framework for this, and then you'll read part of the story of a young woman who discovered this love and grace from God...and it completely changed her life.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 22: 37-39

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

From *The Centered Life* by Jack Fortin

Dr. Jack Fortin (Senior Fellow at the Christensen Center for Vocation, Augsburg College), in his book The Centered Life, talks about the "twin pillars of the Reformation" – grace and vocation. Once we discover the good news that we don't have to work to earn God's favor (grace), Fortin talks about how that then frees us to turn outside of ourselves and care for our neighbor (vocation). As you read, think about the things that you are set free from, and what you are set free for.

Awakened to Grace¹

Many in our society experience life as meaningless, fragmented, compartmentalized, isolated, anxious. There is an answer to this based on two key ideas from the Christian tradition, expressed clearly in the work of the church reformers of the sixteenth century, like Martin Luther. These “twin pillars” of the Reformation are the doctrines of grace and vocation.

The first pillar of the Reformation is the doctrine of grace, the note sounded by Martin Luther, John Calvin and their colleagues of the biblical doctrine stated in Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God---not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). According to this central tenet, shared by Christians throughout the world, is the idea that we do not go out in search of God; God is searching for us. God calls us in love to be in a living relationship with God. We are called to Someone, not to something. One of my favorite biblical promises about God's call is in Isaiah 43:

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (43:1-2).

In these verses “Jacob” and “Israel” refers to an individual, but also to the whole people of Israel. We experience God's call to us as personal, but it also comes to us in community.

God continues to call us through the church, through word and sacrament. There we experience the good news that our salvation comes from God; it is not our own doing.

¹ Jack Fortin, *The Centered Life: Awakened, Called, Set Free, Nurtured* (Minneapolis, MN: AUGSBURG FORTRESS, 2006), 41–43.

The German theologian Eberhard Juengel wrote in *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*:

For believers know that since God has done enough for our salvation, we can never do enough good for the world. So we are justified by faith alone, but faith never stays alone; it strives to, it has to become active in love; faith is never alone. There is no more liberating basis for ethics than the doctrine of justification of sinners by faith alone.

At certain times and places in the Christian church the grace of God has been mistakenly limited to the issue of guilt and forgiveness. Grace then is seen only as a rescue from this earth, the means whereby we “get to heaven when we die.” But God’s grace is much larger than the matter of sin and guilt. Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler wrote:

The grace of God is not simply a holy hypodermic whereby my sins are forgiven. It is the whole giftedness of life, the wonder of life, which causes me to ask questions that transcend the moment.

Among those questions are two that are basic to the lives of each one of us: Where do I belong? Where can I make a difference? In grace God calls us to join in God’s creative work here in the world, in “down-to-earth” ways.

As we awaken to God’s saving, guiding, empowering presence, we are able to recognize what God is calling us to do with our lives.

Set Free from What?²

The grace of God sets us free from the need to earn our own salvation, from having to prove our self-worth by what we do, by our accomplishments. Our self-worth is already guaranteed by God, sealed in our baptism. Liberated from the need to justify ourselves or earn our standing with God, we are free to serve our neighbor, the people around us, even people in far places.

We are set free from the game of “compare and contrast.” We no longer need to compare ourselves with others and to have more than they have or accomplish more than they do. Instead you can look to God as your Center and at the way God has created you with your unique set of gifts and abilities and passions. Others no longer have to lose in order for you to feel good about yourself.

Related to this, a life centered in God frees us from consumerism and drive for money and success. One woman described how her daughter was set free from a search for status and money when someone who knew her well helped her recognize her dependable strengths of nurturing and teaching young children and encouraged her toward a vocation as an elementary school teacher.

With a life centered in God, we are set free from a sense of meaninglessness. Knowing that God, our Center, has given us gifts, called us, and sent us to serve in God's world, we have a reason for living. There are ways in which we can make a difference. This is true even for those who are elderly or limited in mobility.

We are set free from self-absorption for self-giving. Your needy self is no longer the center of your life. With God as your Center, you are able to think not in terms of “what's in it for me?” but instead in terms of “what do I have to give my neighbor?” This does not mean that we should never care for ourselves. We are called to be good stewards also of our own mental, physical and spiritual health. Self-care then is not just for self-gratification but also to allow us to be more self-giving.

² Ibid., 74–76.

We are set free from the feeling of hopelessness, that there is nothing we can do that makes a difference. God can take whatever you have to offer and make something of it - like the boy who brought a few fish and a few loaves to Jesus, who used them to feed more than five thousand people (John 6:1-14).

We are set free from the fear of failure or the need to be right. Assured of God's grace and forgiveness by God's word of promise, we can dare to move, to risk, to falter, and to fail. Every day gives us a new opportunity to live out the meaning of our baptism, in a daily dying and rising again.

Sally Peters, manager of a Centered Life Initiative, says:

Another kind of freedom comes when I give up perfectionism and the need to control and instead focus on daily faithfulness. When I consider that success or failure is not ultimately in my hands but God's, I am free to act faithfully, to do the best I can with the strengths I have, and not worry so much about the outcome.

We are set free from paralyzing fear – fear of our own safety or success. After Jesus' capture and death, his disciples were huddled in fear (John 20:19-23). Jesus came among them and the first thing he said was, “Peace be with you.”...Jesus was sending them right back out into the world that had crucified him. For them this would have been an impossible calling if Jesus had not also said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” As God the Father had sent Jesus, Jesus was now sending them, with the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Set Free for What?³

In *Our Lives are Not Our Own*, Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley write:

God's saving act in Jesus does more than free us from the bondage of sin. God's act frees us for service to God, the community of faith, and the world. In loving gratitude to God for all that God has done for us, we live accountable both to God and to one another.

In a sense, because we no longer have to worry about our status in the realm of God – we are free to act boldly for the welfare of others. The “pressure” is off. The outcome has been decided. We don't have to worry that our actions or missteps will somehow lose us the keys to the kingdom. What we do with our lives says “thank you” to God; it's our gift back to God for all that God has done for us. We have been made free by God, and in that gracious state, we can use all that God has given us to act on behalf of others and the world. We are free to be the words and hands of Jesus to those we meet each day.

From *Pastrix* by Nadia Bolz-Weber

This excerpt comes from Nadia Bolz-Weber's book entitled Pastrix, from the chapter “Thanks, ELCA!” Nadia comes out of a conservative Christian church background, from which she'd been alienated, and in this story she tells about how she began dating a great guy (who happened to be a seminary student) and how he had brought her to his Lutheran Church. Through the liturgy, the hymns and the welcome of the people, she discovered not only a God of grace and welcome, but a God who intimately understands our brokenness and pain and who comes to heal us and love us in the midst of that. Nadia now serves as pastor of an ELCA congregation she started in Denver called “House for All Sinners and Saints.”

One Sunday,⁴ Pastor Ross announced that he would be teaching an adult confirmation

³ Ibid., 79.

class, since it ends up that there were a lot of people like me who loved St. Paul's and didn't know a single thing about Lutheranism. He said that there would be information available in the narthex. I leaned over to Matthew and whispered, "The Narthex? Isn't that a Dr. Seuss character that speaks for the trees??"

"It's a lobby, he smirked. "And just the fact that you just said that makes me think maybe you should go to the class."

It was disorienting to soon find myself voluntarily spending my Wednesday nights in the basement of a church that was filled with churchgoers and not recovering alcoholics. The first day of class, "grace" was written on the chalkboard in the classroom. Pastor Ross is old school; no dry erase for him. To this day, the man types all his sermons on a typewriter. He has no computer. When I came to St. Paul's because I liked the idea that their pastor was gay, I had no idea he would end up being so old-fashioned.

He pointed to the word "grace" on the board. "Everything I'm going to tell you goes back to this," he claimed. I simultaneously doubted and hoped that was true. Most of what I had been taught by Christian clergy was that I was created by God, but was bad because of something some chick did in the Garden of Eden, and that I should try really hard to be good so that God, who is an angry bastard, won't punish me. Grace had nothing to do with it.

I hadn't learned about grace from the church. But I did learn about it from sober drunks who managed to stop drinking by giving their will over to the care of God and then tried like hell to live a life according to the spiritual principles. What the drunks taught me was that there was a power greater than myself who could be a source of restoration, and that higher power, it ends up, is not me.

A lot had happened to me in church basements. I'd had my first kiss, had been taught to fear an angry God, learned to trust a higher power, and now had my life changed again. In short, there's what Pastor Ross taught me:

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (Jericho Books, 2014), 47–50.

- God's grace is a gift that is freely given to us. We don't earn a thing when it comes to God's love, and we only try to live in response to the gift.
- No one is climbing the spiritual ladder. We don't continually improve until we are so spiritual we no longer need God. We die and are made new, but that's different from spiritual self-improvement.
- We are simultaneously sinner and saint, 100 percent of both, all the time.
- The Bible is not God. The Bible is simply the cradle that holds Christ. Anything in the Bible that does not hold up to the Gospel of Jesus Christ simply does not have the same authority.
- The movement in our relationship to God is always from God to us. Always. We don't, through our piety or goodness, move closer to God. God is always coming near to us. Most especially in the Eucharist and in the stranger.

(Write out these bullet points, memorize them, and you could save a lot of money not going to Lutheran seminary.)

I have been a Lutheran since then because the Lutheran church is the only place that has given me language from what I have experienced to be true in life, which is why I now call Pastor Ross Merkle the Vampire Who Turned Me. I need to clarify something, however. God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word. My selfishness is not the end-all...instead; it's that God makes beautiful things out of even my own shit. Grace isn't about God creating humans as flawed beings and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace – like saying “Oh, it's OK, I'll be a good guy and forgive you.” It's God saying, “I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new.”

Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console,

To be understood as to understand,

To be loved as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

Small Group Questions

Opening Question:

What does the word “grace” mean to you? Does the good news of God’s grace impact the way you live each day, or does it primarily enter in only in times of crisis or hardship?

1. When a Pharisee tries to entrap Jesus with a question about the law, Jesus responds by pairing together two of what he believes to be the greatest commandments in Jewish teaching: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul (Deuteronomy 6:5), and you should love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). For millennia, then, God has been calling all of God’s faithful people to a fuller love of God and neighbor. How interesting that Jesus makes these teachings a cornerstone of his own life and ministry! In fact, we might understand these “greatest commandments” as the cornerstone of our own Christian vocation. What does it mean to love God with all of your heart, mind, and soul in everyday life? What are some challenges to doing this? Does love of God (the first commandment) call us to love our neighbor (the second commandment) in a particular way? Are the two laws related? Put this second commandment in dialogue with the Gospel of John’s version of this teaching, where Jesus says, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Does this change anything in how we understand the ways we are called to love the neighbor?

2. Jack Fortin writes, “According to this central tenet [grace], shared by Christians throughout the world, is the idea that we do not go out in search of God; God is searching for us. God calls us in love to be in a living relationship with God. We are called to Someone, not to something.” For Martin Luther, grace and vocation were inextricably linked. God’s persistent and unconditional act of loving and forgiving us makes us free to live as beloved children in and for the sake of the world God loves. Have you ever felt as though your “vocation” was just another ladder to climb, a way to win over favor with God? The Good News is that God has already declared you righteous and loved! So what do we do with this freedom? How might it affect the way we view our vocation? How might it affect the ways we approach our relationships with others?

3. *Get into pairs.* Fortin begins each paragraph in his section “Set Free From What?” by naming something from which this good news of God’s grace sets us free! Together, name each of them out loud, one by one, and share with one another which of the things he names hold you most captive. If we are, in fact, truly freed from these really strong forces of sin and death, what does that mean for how we ought to live? How does this freedom *feel*?
4. In her memoir, *Pastrix*, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber recalls the first time she first learned of the good news of God’s grace. Talk over the bullet points she provides of some basic Lutheran teachings. Did any sound surprising or confusing to you? Liberating or challenging? Do you, like Nadia, find anything in there that “gives [you] language for what [you] have experienced to be true in [your] life?” Is there anything about her description of “grace” throughout this excerpt that you found particularly helpful or evocative?
5. Nadia’s clarification at the end is an important one: Grace is a source of *wholeness*, not merely a temporary band-aid to cover up our brokenness. Share with one another situations in your own life, community, or world that you long to be made whole. How might your sense of vocation be formed by your attentiveness to these places of brokenness? What is needed to heal them? How might God be at work in these places? If time allows, reflect together on Nadia’s final pronouncement: “[Grace] is God saying, ‘I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new.’”

Closing:

Close your time together by praying the Prayer of St. Francis.

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Notes:

WEEK 2

WHAT VOCATION IS NOT

Introduction

So what does the word “vocation” really mean? Like any word of depth, a basic definition is an important start. One way to gain understanding of what something means is to spend some time naming what it does NOT mean! Because “vocation” is a word that has meant many different things over the centuries, this week we address what we view to be the myths, or misuses, of the term “vocation” in the church.

Specifically, we will be looking at three such incorrect (or insufficient) understandings of vocation. They are as follows:

1. Vocation is NOT just about our occupation; it is certainly not just about clergy, nor does it primarily refer to doing work for/in the church.
2. Vocation does NOT refer to one specific calling that each of us must figure out in our life (such as a specific profession, or volunteer work, etc.). While we may have moments in our life when we sense a call in a new or different direction, there is never a moment in which we do *not* have a vocation as a child of God.
3. Vocation is NOT primarily about “me, me, me!” Hardly a day goes by when one doesn’t hear or read phrases about feeling like one has a “purposeful” life, or about the desire to “make a difference.” While these are wonderful by-products of realizing God’s call in all the roles of our life, ultimately our vocations are for the sake of our neighbor and the world God loves.

This week we invite you to spend time pondering four readings. The first is a scripture reading from Galatians 2. After stating that we are justified (brought into relationship with God) through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:16), the Apostle Paul

shares a specific view of our lives in Gal. 2:20. We invite you to wonder about viewing your life in this way.

The second reading is an excerpt from Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor's book *The Preaching Life* entitled "Vocation." We invite you to ponder how Taylor seeks to get rid of the perception that clergy are called and the rest of us are not.

In the third reading, Gary Badcock invites us to ponder the options he had in his life and how each of them would have included different yet equally important opportunities of living out his vocation. Is it the same for each of us?

Finally, we invite you to read a short story about a high wire artist and how he views his professional vocation as something engaged for the sake of his neighbors (in this case, his family members).

Scripture Reading

Galatians 2:19b-21

For through the law I died to the law,
so that I might live to God.
I have been crucified with Christ;
and it is no longer I who live,
but it is Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh,
I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me.

From *The Preaching Life* by Barbara Brown Taylor

A priest in the Episcopal Church, Barbara Brown Taylor believes that the vocation of clergy is really not all that different from that of the non-ordained. She contends that we all are “claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God’s will on earth.” Have you ever thought of yourself as a “priest” before (as Barbara Brown Taylor invites)?

Vocation¹

Not too long ago, I spoke with a recent college graduate about his desire to be ordained. He was an articulate Christian that had been active in campus ministry and deeply influenced by the Episcopal chaplain at his school. He was bright, committed and knowledgeable about the faith, but as he talked I grew perplexed. He did not want to serve a church, did not think he would like being held accountable by a denominational body, and was not attracted to a ministry of the sacraments, although he did believe he would like to preach once a month or so.

“Then why do you want to be ordained?” I asked him. He thought a while and finally said, “For the identity, I guess. So I could sit down next to someone on a bus who looked troubled and ask them how they were without them thinking I was trying to hustle them. So I could walk up to someone on the streets and do the same thing. So I could be up front about what I believe, in public as well as private. So I would have the credentials to be the kind of Christian I want to be.” His honesty was both disarming and disheartening. God help the church if clergy are the only Christians with “credentials,” and God help all those troubled people on the bus if they have to wait for an ordained person to come along before anyone speaks to them.

When God calls, people respond in variety of ways. Some pursue ordination and others put pillows over their heads, but the vast majority seeks to answer God by changing how they live their more or less ordinary lives. It can be a frustrating

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 26–32.

experience, because deciding what is called for means nothing less than deciding what it means to be a Christian in a post-Christian world. Is it a matter of changing who you are — becoming a kinder, more spiritual person? Or is it a matter of changing what you do — looking for a new job, becoming more involved in church, or witnessing to the neighbors? What does God want from us, and how can we comply?

In many ways, those who pursue ordination take the easy way out. They choose a prescribed role that seems to meet all the requirements, and take up full-time residence in the church. They forgo the hard work of straddling two different worlds, while those they serve have no such luxury. Those in the pulpit know where they belong, but the people in the pews hold dual citizenship. When they come together as the church, that is where they belong — in God's country, which is governed by love. But when they leave that place, they cross the border into another country governed by other, less forgiving laws — and they live there too.

One man I know describes his dilemma this way. "On Sunday morning," he says, "I walk into a world that is the way God meant it to be. People are considerate of one another. Strangers are welcomed. We pray for justice and peace. Our sins are forgiven. We all face in one direction, and we worship the same God. When it's over, I get in my car to drive home feeling so full of love it's unbelievable, but by the time I've gone twenty minutes down the road it has already begun to wear off. By Monday morning it's all gone, and I've got another whole week to wait until Sunday rolls around again."

It is not a new problem he describes. From the very beginning, being a Christian has meant being a sojourner in a strange land. The reversal in our own day is that for many people it is the church, and not the rest of the world, that is strange. As the moat between the two has widened, the old bridges have become obsolete, leaving commuters to paddle across by themselves the best they can.

What many Christians are missing in their lives is a sense of vocation. The word itself means a call or summons, so that having a vocation means more than having a job. It means answering a specific call: it means participating in the work of God, something that few lay people believe they do. Immersed in the corporate worlds of business and

finance, and in the domestic worlds of household and family, it is hard for them to see how their lives have anything to do with the life of God. From time to time they pay visits to their priests, confessing how they ache for more meaningful work. Lay people are doing their jobs, but are they doing the jobs they were born to do?

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. That vision is a foreign one too many church members, who have learned from colloquial usage that “minister” means the ordained person in a congregation, while “lay person” means someone who does not engage in full-time ministry. Professionally speaking that is fair enough – ordained people make their livings in ministry, and lay people do not – but speaking ecclesiastically, it is a disaster. Language like that turns clergy into purveyors of religion and lay people into consumers, who shop around for the church that offers them the best product.

But affirming the ministry of every baptized Christian is not an idea that appeals to many lay people these days. It sounds like more work, and most of them have all the work they can do. It sounds like more responsibility, while most of them are staggering under loads that are already too heavy. I will never forget the women that listened to my speech on the ministry of laity as God’s best hope for the world and said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be that important.”

Like many of those that sit beside her at church, she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to *do* more – to lead the every member canvass, or cook supper for the homeless, or teach vacation church school. Or she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to *be* more – to be more generous, more loving, and more religious. No one has ever introduced her to the idea that her ministry might involve being just who she already is and doing just what she already does, with one difference: namely, that she understand herself to be God’s person in and for the world.

However simple it sounds, I suppose that invitation will always frighten people, if only because they have heard such hair-raising tales about what happens to God’s representatives. Whether they are reading the bible or the newspaper, the bottom line

is the same: God's people draw fire. Meanwhile, however, their fear causes them to surrender their power, and what they are willing to lay down, someone else is always willing to pick up. Traditionally, it is the clergy that have filled that role, keeping the church neat by gathering up all the power the laity has dropped there. Part of it is their genuine if misguided desire to be helpful, but the rest of it is megalomania – their perverse notion that they are the only ones that can be trusted with the ministry of the church.

Almost five hundred years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther wrestled the same problem. In his day, clergy ruled the church like princes, selling salvation and getting fat off alms. They got away with it because they claimed a special relationship with God. They asserted the superiority of their own vocations and elected themselves to highest offices of the church, until all that was left for the laity was to attend mass as they may attend the theater, watching mutely as the clergy consumed communion all by themselves, and paying their dues on the way out.

In his address to the German nobles, Luther attacked this farce. He made careful distinction between a Christian's vocation and a Christian's office, suggesting that our offices are what we do for a living – teacher, shop keeper, homemaker, priest – and that none of them is any dearer to the heart of God than another. In our offices we exercise the diversity of our gifts, playing our parts in the ongoing life of the world. Our offices are the “texts” of our lives, to use a dramatic term, but the “subtext” is the common vocation to which we are all called at baptism. Whatever our individual offices in the world, our mutual vocation is to serve God through them...

My office, then, is in the church. That is where I do what I do, and what I do makes me different from those among whom I serve. But my *vocation* is to be God's person in the world, and that makes me the same as those among whom I serve. What we have in common is our baptism, that turning point in each one of our lives when we were received into the household of God and charged to confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share in his eternal priesthood. That last phrase is crucial. Our baptisms are our ordinations, the moments at which we are set apart as God's people to share Christ's ministry, whether or not we ever wear clerical collars around our necks. The instant we rise dripping from the waters of baptism and

the sign of the cross is made upon our foreheads, we are marked as Christ's own forever.

I have often wondered whether the church would be even smaller than it is if that cross were made not with water but with permanent ink—a nice deep purple, perhaps—so that all who bore Christ's mark bore it openly, visibly, for the rest of their lives. In many ways, I think, that is the chief difference between the ministry of the baptized and the ministry of the ordained. The ordained consent to be visible in a way that the baptized do not. They agree to let people look at them as they struggle with their own baptismal vows: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to resist evil, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people. Those are not the vows of the ordained, but the baptized, even though we do not even seem to know how to honor them in the course of ordinary life on earth.

Perhaps we should revive Luther's vision of the priesthood of all believers, who are ordained by God at baptism to share Christ's ministry in the world—a body of people united by that one common vocation, which they pursue across the gamut of their offices in the world. It is a vision that requires a rich and disciplined imagination, because it is largely a matter of learning to see in a different way. To believe in one's own priesthood is to see the extraordinary dimensions of an ordinary life, to see the hand of God at work in the world and to see one's own hands as necessary to that work. Whether those hands are diapering an infant, assembling an automobile or balancing a corporate account, they are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God's will on earth. There are plenty who will decline the honor, finding it either too fearsome or too intrusive to be taken seriously, but those willing to accept the challenge will want to know more about what a priest does, exactly.

From *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* by Gary D. Badcock

Gary D. Badcock, an academic, recounts all of the paths that his life very well could have taken, and he believes that all would have been equally worthy vocations. He rejects the belief that God calls us to one particular life vocation that we might “miss” if we’re not paying close enough attention. God works through us no matter what we choose. Does this view of vocation feel liberating to you, or does it make you feel even more “on the hook?”

Vocation and Mission²

For the Christian, however, the decisive consideration is that a life project must be capable of being integrated into the overall mission of Christ. Christ’s mission is a mission of love, of self-giving service, and of obedience to God. My argument has been that the question “What ought I to do?” really leads to another: “What kind of person ought I to be?” There is no clear answer to the first – insofar, at least, as it is a question concerned solely with career choice. However, much clearer answers can be given to the second question. I ought to be a person for whom love, service, and obedience to God are the major priorities. The Christian ethic is flexible insofar as it allows a multitude of possibilities by which one can fulfill such goals, but there is nevertheless an irreducible core concern within it, which can never be relinquished.

Let me illustrate this by outlining three possible paths that I might have taken in life.

The first option requires some references to my own family background. For centuries my ancestors have made a living from the sea. I also might have done so. I come from a region in which the fishing industry is a major source of wealth, and in which there were opportunities for a young man such as I was when I left school. Had I become a fisherman, my life would certainly have been very different from what it is today: I would, for example, most probably have remained a member of the local

² Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Cambridge, U.K: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 136–139.

community within which I was born and grew up and thus maintained the link between my family and that place, a link that has lasted (until now) for some three centuries. The friends of youth would have remained the friends of adult life, and I would have been at hand for my aging parents. The commandment to honor one's father and mother would have been fulfilled in this way. I would also have been able to maintain contact with people and with a place that I love. No doubt there would have been opportunities to become involved locally in community and church work. I would have taken up a useful role in relation to the rest of society providing food for others. Had I married and raised a family, I could have shown love in that context; the monotony of early mornings and days at sea would have been offset by the knowledge that a family was cared for. My Christian faith would no doubt have remained simpler than it is now, for I would probably have read little theology, but this would not have been a great burden or hindrance to my fulfillment, which would have come in other ways. I am, in fact, attracted to such a life still, punctuated as it is by the rhythm of the seasons and based as it is on strong ties with the sea and the land.

Would any of this been incompatible with sharing in the mission of Christ? I do not think so. Some of it would have been much more compatible with it than the path I finally took in life; for one surely owes a debt to one's own society and people, to those, for example, who provided an education, and to the Christian community that nurtured one's faith. The people whose lives might have been affected by my own were very much as real in that world as they are in my situation today. And for me, an especially important consideration is that my own father would not have died while I worked far away.

Another alternative was available. I might well have gone into business. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the business had been successful and that I had gone on to build up a modest company, which after twenty years, employed twenty people and looked set to make me modestly wealthy. Would this have been compatible with the mission of Christ? The answer, I believe, is yes—especially in my home context. In resource-based economies, there is often insufficient secondary industry. The result is that there is much unemployment and sometimes surprising poverty. In such a context, the creation of wealth in business would have been more than self-service or worship at the altar of greed, even were such sins a factor in the whole story. For the

creation of wealth can be the creation of new possibilities for an entire community, with prospects of work for young people and a prosperity that enables social as well as economic well-being. For a few people, at least, the cycle of welfare dependency might have been broken. Economic prospects can generate hope as well as wealth, sustaining communities and helping people to live a full life. And along the way, opportunities for service, for living in love within a family, or for participating constructively in the life of a Christian congregation would also have been present.

In any event, of course, I became a scholar. Contrary to my own expectation, which is that I would enter the Christian ministry and work with my own people in a pastoral way, I was drawn more and more deeply into academic issues and into an academic culture far from my original goals. It has been a surprising journey for me, going against my own plans at a number of crucial junctures. However, I find that the needs for my neighbors are much the same here as elsewhere, and the so-called “ivory tower” of higher education has as much genuine reality in it as does any other sphere of life. As well as the usual grind that is the warp and woof of most occupations, ample opportunities for serving others and even for preaching and pastoral care arise. In the meantime, I have a wife and family, and within the home I am sustained and I help to sustain other human lives in dignity and in love.

Which of the three paths “ought” I to have taken? There is no clear answer to such a question, for there is no clear moral imperative governing the situation. In each case, the opportunity to participate in one way or another in the mission of Christ was open to me. I would go further, in fact, and say that it was *equally* open to me under any of the scenarios presented, for there is nothing especially saintly about my present work as a theologian, nothing intrinsic to it to lift it beyond the possibility of self-centeredness or faithlessness. The calling to be faithful and loving is one that extends to any and all walks of life and that cannot be identified with any one of them. And it is this calling to faithfulness and love with which Christian vocation is really concerned, the calling to follow the one who obeyed the Father to the end, who laid down his life for his friends – the one who, as such, was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father.

The Way of Life³

Jesus speaks of the human goal in two ways. The first is in terms of the great commandments. The human goal and the divine imperative here coalesce: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31 par.). From the standpoint of the spiritual life, the human goal is succinctly summed up in these key statements. The second, and literally crucial way in which Jesus speaks of the goal of life, is in terms of discipleship: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34 par.). According to this teaching, we find life by relinquishing it, by sacrificing our small goods to the overriding good of the gospel of the kingdom and for the sake of the name of Christ. There is no other “way,” in this sense, to our goal. Nevertheless, within this one “way” is a multiplicity of individual paths that we tread. But we navigate by means of the same signs, following the same rules, living one life of love and discipleship.

At the beginning of this book, I wrote of my own childish belief that God had a plan for each life; a plan that a given individual might miss if he or she was not attentive to God’s call and obedient to his voice. As a youth, I took such a view. It was as if I were waiting for a bus, or a “streetcar named vocation;” if I became bored and decided to wander away from the street, it would pass me by. But is it really possible to miss the will of God in this way? I have found such a vision of the Christian vocation to be extremely unhelpful, and because I am convinced that there are many people (especially young people) who are similarly mistaken, I have sought to develop a different understanding of the Christian vocation. Christian vocation is not reducible to the acquisition of a career goal or to its realization in time. It is, rather, something relating to the great issues of the spiritual life. It has to do with what one lives “for” rather than with what one does.

Such an understanding, once developed, can liberate us from the tyranny of such notions as the one that some have vocations whereas others do not, from the idea that having a vocation is incompatible with being unemployed or retired, from despair over

³ Ibid., 141–142.

not being able to “hear” God’s voice when looking into the future at turning points in life. The human vocation is to do the will of God and so to live life “abundantly” (John 10:10). But the will of God does not extend down to the details of career choice. And once this is realized, I believe, then it becomes possible for us to live more adventurously, more freely, breathing in an atmosphere of love rather than law, looking for *our own* way to share the good news of the gospel in daily life, whether in career choices or in business or in the ordinary transactions of the daily round. Here, new possibilities open for the creating of Christian lifestyle and modes of spirituality that reflect the generosity of God in Christ. For this, at heart, is the Christian’s vocation.

From *Callings!* by Will D. Campbell

Will Campbell’s run-in with a troupe of trapeze artists taught him an important lesson about vocation. This short but profound story gets to the heart of how our vocations are interwoven and interdependent. We rely on others in their vocation, just as others rely on us. We must always resist, therefore, the notion that vocation is all about me, me, me! In fact, the needs of others (and our own needs) are always an essential part of the picture.

Vocation as Grace⁴

...I once cornered and talked to a high wire artist in a small traveling circus. I asked him why he chose that particular way of making a living. The first few minutes were filled with circus romance – the thrill of hurling through space, feeling at the last instant that pasty flesh of two always welcomed hands pressing around the wrists, swinging you forward to the next set of pasty hands which in turn deliver you safely back to the starting platform; the joy of laughter and approval and applause in the eyes

⁴ James Y. Holloway and Will D. Campbell, eds., *Callings!*, Deus Books (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), 279–280.

of “children of all ages,” the clanking of train wheels moving you on to the next city; even the part about it being a comfortable life with good pay. But finally he said what I had not expected him to say. “Now you really want to know why I go up there on that damned thing night after night after night?” I said I did. “Man, I would have quit it a long time ago. But my sister is up there. And my wife and my father are up there. My sister has more troubles than Job. My wife is a devil-may-care nut and my old man is getting older. If I wasn’t up there, some bad night, man...smash!” His foot stomped the floor with a bone-cracking thud.

“H’mmm.”

He started to walk away but I had one more question to ask and ran after him. “But why do *they* stay up there?” He looked like he didn’t want to answer, wasn’t going to answer. But then he did. Turning from the door of the boy’s locker room in the county seat high school, with a brown craft cardboard box and heavy crayola sign: MEN’S COSTUMES above it for the evening’s performance, he looked me up and down and then, as he disappeared, blurted it out: “Because I drink too much!”

From *The Parent's Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for Modern Parents* by William Martin

This short poem invites us to consider all of the places in the world – ordinary and extraordinary – where we might encounter the love of God. Learning to recognize all of these places and to delight in them is an important part of our vocation. God does not call us simply to one extraordinary experience or job in life; God is, in fact, reaching out to us in all times and places.

Make the Ordinary Come Alive⁵

Do not ask your children
to strive for extraordinary lives.
Such striving may seem admirable,
but it is a way of foolishness.
Help them instead to find the wonder
and the marvel of an ordinary life.
Show them the joy of tasting
tomatoes, apples, and pears.
Show them how to cry
when pets and people die.
Show them the infinite pleasure
in the touch of a hand.
And make the ordinary come alive for them.
The extraordinary will take care of itself.

⁵ From William Martin, *The Parent's Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for Modern Parents* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999).

Small Group Questions

Opening Question:

How have you understood the word “vocation” or “calling” in the past? Have you thought in these terms at all? If not, why not? If so, has it been a comprehensive idea across all spheres of your life, or has it usually meant one specific part of your life?

1. In Galatians, the Apostle Paul is admonishing the church in Galatia that has become divided because they have “deserted the Gospel” (Gal. 1:6. For more on Galatians see the overview on the Westwood website). Some of the themes in this book deal with our new identity in Christ (see Gal. 3:25-28 and Gal. 5:1), and how Paul would describe our lives (see Gal. 2:20 and Gal. 5:13-14). Spend some time pondering these two themes. What do they mean for you? Do they only mean something for your life in church or about the promise of life after death, or do they actually refer to your normal, everyday life right now? Have you ever viewed your life through the lens of “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me?” If it’s true, what would this mean about your everyday existence?
2. *Vocation* by Barbara Brown Taylor
 - On page 28 Taylor states, “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.” Do you agree? What area of your life (or “office,” as Taylor uses) are you most able to view as this definition of being a “priestly person” (as neighbor, friend, professional life, citizen, church etc.)? Which office is most difficult?
 - Read the two paragraphs that begin on the bottom of page 28 starting with “But affirming the ministry of every baptized...” and ending with “namely, that she understand herself to be God’s person in and for the world.” What are your reactions to these two paragraphs?
 - Read the last two paragraphs. Do you agree with her distinction between “the ministry of the baptized and the ministry of the ordained?” In the last paragraph she argues that the challenge around vocation is one of

vision/sight. Do you agree? What would it mean if you viewed each element of your life with all your successes/failures, joys/sorrows, gifts/faults from this perspective?

3. What was your reaction to Badcock's reflection on the options of his life – specifically, that each would have held very different, yet equally as important, vocations? Spend a few minutes in silence recounting two or three other directions your life could have gone based on real life decisions you made. Then think about how your vocation would have looked when compared with what did happen. Split into groups of two and share with each other. Come back into the large group and share a few observations.
4. What were your observations of the excerpt from Will Campbell? When in your life could you have answered in a similar way, that what you are doing is primarily for the love of your neighbor not first for yourself? Can these be separated? How does this perspective connect with a society that often speaks about “fulfillment” and the desire for “making a difference??”

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Notes:

WEEK 3

THE COMPARTMENTALIZED LIFE

Introduction

So what does an integrated life look like? Does it look like your life? If not, why not? If so, what holds it all together?

This week we look at the challenge of the compartmentalized life. In his book, *Faith as a Way of Life*, Dr. Chris Scharen describes the challenge of a compartmentalized life in the following way: “The core problem is that each of the spheres of modern life has semi-independence, each operating according to its own logic and values.” If he’s correct, it’s not hard to see why Robert Bellah described many modern Americans as living lives that are “fragmented and exhausting.”

But is this the way it has to be? We live in a country that has emphasized the importance of separation of church and state for the sake of having a healthy society. Can we affirm the importance of this separation without having to live segmented lives?

This week we will invite you to consider these questions from the perspective of people of faith who share a core confession: in Christ “whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord’s.” Specifically we invite you to consider these three assertions:

- *God creates and calls us to live in an integrated and interconnected way, holding our faith in God in Jesus Christ at the center.*
- *Vocation (the call to be God’s hands and feet) bridges the gap we often feel between Sunday worship and Monday-Saturday life.*
- *Our vocation is lived out in the many roles/arenas/offices of daily life where we find ourselves (family, professional life, citizen, neighbor, etc.)*

We invite you to engage the following readings: First, we have selected excerpts from Dr. Scharen’s book to lay out the reality of compartmentalized lives and how this

reality undercuts the life of faith in everyday life. Second, there is a short reading from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that argues for a life that understands *every* role in life as a “place of responsibility” for us to Jesus Christ alone. Third, we have excerpts from an interview with the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. In contrast to those who argue that a “balanced life” is defined by the lack of tension/conflict because one has clearly defined ones priorities, she argues that a “life well lived” will always contain points of tension/conflict because one is taking each of the roles of life seriously. This will always produce difficult choices. Instead of seeing this as evidence of failure, this is the place of engagement for a life “well lived.” Finally, we invite you to end your time by considering again the depth of both God’s love and call for you using the words of Ps. 139:1-18.

We pray that this time of engagement about the very real love and calling of God in Jesus Christ, along with the very real reality of your life, will be life-giving for you and your group.

Scripture Reading

Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
 If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,'
 even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end—I am still with you.

From *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* by Christian Scharen

In his book, Faith as a Way of Life, Chris Scharen describes a modern development in how many Christians relate faith to daily life. Religion, he argues, has become one of many different “compartmentalized” pieces of life that is kept in a silo apart from the others. We call upon faith in times when we need it, but otherwise leave it alone and fail to connect it to everyday life. Scharen invites us back into a way of life where faith serves “as the beating heart pumping lifeblood through all aspects of our lives.” Vocation makes this same connection – inviting us to begin viewing life again as an integrated whole, with our faith in Jesus Christ at the center.

Faith as a Way of Life¹

I’ll never forget that morning. I was serving as senior pastor of an urban Lutheran church in a small New England city and Liz, a middle aged professional woman, wife and mother of two, stopped me in the coffee hour following the worship service. With a wry smile she said, “Pastor Scharen, I don’t know how you do it. You have to think about this religion stuff all the time! We only have to on Sundays.” Her laugh betrayed that she was ribbing me, at least in part. But because we were friends, I also knew that her family commitments to leisure time mean taking the entire summer off from church, as if congregational membership was just another piece of her suburban family life interchangeable with school, soccer, or scouts. So, all jesting aside, there was something serious there.

I had two gut responses at the time, one I need to revise and one I stand by. My snap judgment was that all Liz needed was to get serious about her faith, by which I really meant attend church more regularly. Like most pastors, I was putting tremendous energy into quality Sunday worship, preaching, adult and youth education programs.

¹ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2008), 1–3.

I thought that if she were more serious about her faith, she'd participate in the activities that would strengthen her faith. Since she didn't, I figured, she and her family wouldn't grow deeper in their faith life. That was a mistake. I no longer as directly equate seriousness about faith with increased hours spent at church. This book gives witness to the conviction that faith is lived out in daily life. Church, therefore, plays its part – but faithfulness does not equal hours clocked under the shadow of its steeple.

However, I will stand by my second response that day: faith is not a piece of the week, containable and useful in its place. As Liz joked about how I “think about this religious stuff all the time,” I felt like I'd failed. Clearly she and her family wanted something from church. But it was largely faith as a balm, something to smooth over the difficulties of life, rather than faith as a divine transformation of our life that shapes how we engage with life's trials and joys. Balm is, of course, an important aspect of God's care for us in times of trial. Yet I wondered how I could communicate differently, so that she might see God's gift of faith as more than a balm to spread over one's life once a week. I wondered how I might make the case that God wants all of Liz's life – her “church” time as well as her time with family, at work, in the community, out shopping, or at the baseball game.

I went away that day pondering how many of us live compartmentalized lives. I mulled over the way our faith so often fails to do the work of orientating our decisions in the various part of our lives. How often, in fact, faith simply rides to the (spiritual) rescue in times of trouble rather than serving as the beating heart pumping lifeblood through all aspects of our lives...

The Christian faith is a way of life lived in response to Jesus' invitation to “follow me” (Mark 8:34). The life of faith lived in response to Jesus' invitation – and the leadership called to guide and foster faithful lives – follows a basic pattern. That pattern is one of gathering and scattering: gathered into the life of God in Christ through the power of the Spirit and scattered for the sake of witness and service in daily life. In an era when many churches focus almost exclusively on gathering, the reassertion of this pattern has real power.

Yet simply pointing to a fundamental pattern of gathering and scattering is not enough to say how faith comes in the first place through God's work in Christ through the

Holy Spirit. The gift of faith and the life it entails come by God's action for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By offering Jesus for us, God takes away the sin that separates us from God and offers us new life "in Christ." It is through this crucial transaction at the heart of the story of God's dealing with the world that faith comes to us – unexpected and undeserved. While many passages of Scripture speak to this core reality of our incorporation into God's work in Christ, St. Paul's letter to the Romans captures the dynamic succinctly: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). Faith comes to us, Paul argues, by dying to sin and rising with Christ to new life.

Christian faith cannot simply be summed up in the dying and rising that makes us Christ's own. Too often, such core Christian ideas are turned into beliefs thought to encapsulate the core of Christianity. Yet Christian faith is not merely a set of beliefs about God, Jesus, baptism, or new life. No, Christian faith is a gift of God that entails dying to one way of life and rising to another lived not for ourselves, but for God. To receive Christian faith is, in St. Paul's words, "to walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Paul shows that Christian faith is not simply a state of mind or a belief that has no practical consequences for daily living. Rather, it is a way of life marked by the mysterious union with Christ described by Paul in these words: "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Life, Compartmentalized²

“You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both.” Matthew 6:24 (The Message)

There is another side to Liz’s comment at the coffee hour that Sunday after worship. When she ribbed me about how I “think about this religion stuff all the time,” she began with the exclamation, “I don’t know how you do it!” There was a hint of longing there, as if somehow because of my career I could have singleness of focus and an integrated life. In her view, I had solved the struggle she feels as multiple voices within her soul and in her daily life compete with one another for her time. From many other conversations on other days, I knew that she felt pulled in various directions and never felt like any aspect of her life got its due. While this feeling of disconnection, of living in a compartmentalized life, is simply a result of structure of modern society, many find it very distressing. Knowing some measure of peace through participation in worship, Liz expressed through her joking a hope for something more coherent.

Where did the feeling of disconnection Liz expressed come from? Sociologist Robert Bellah, an astute analyst of modern American society, describes it this way:

It is often said that people today find themselves “fragmented and exhausted.” We rush from work to family to school to recreation to church, if there is time for church, shifting gears and changing personalities, it would almost seem, each time we move from one context to another... [W]e jump into our cars and rush from one impersonal location to another, always hoping we can find a little solace at the end of the day at “home.” But at home most of us spend several hours in front of a television set watching things jump around from drama to comedy to sports, always interrupted by incessant advertisements, in a way even more chaotic than the rest of our lives.

Bellah points to the way our lives are caught between various competing parts of daily life. Religion is at best one piece of a busy life, perhaps impacting one’s “soul” or

² Ibid., 14–16.

“heart” as a means to help cope with the hectic pace of the rest of life, where other values rule.

The issue clearly goes deeper than simply fragmentation of our lives. It goes deeper exactly at the point where Bellah, in the quote above, imagines “shifting gears and changing personalities...each time we move from one context to another.” The core problem is that the spheres of modern life have semi-independence, each operating according to its own logic and values. Because we each live in and through them all, we internalize the value conflicts between them and compartmentalize as a mechanism for surviving the tensions. Faith has its own tidy sphere on Sundays and in one’s soul, but the spheres of work, family, politics, and the arts are each oriented by their own values that usurp the proper place of faith in shaping our thought and action. In such a vision of modern life, love of neighbor may rule the soul, but love of a bargain rules in shopping, love of taste and beauty rules in the arts, and so on. In giving our allegiance to these various sphere-centered values, we in a sense make them gods – each the source of ultimate value within its sphere. In such circumstances, we face the question German sociologies Max Weber asked about living in the modern world: “Which of the warring gods should we serve?”

From *Ethics* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In this challenging excerpt from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer argues that our Christian vocation compels us to a special sense of responsibility within all aspects of our life. Vocation, Bonhoeffer writes, requires a “field of activity,” which we might understand as the various roles we all inhabit in daily life (neighbor, family member, citizen, employee, etc.). However, vocation does not keep these roles separate, but rather breaks all of them wide open! We are responsible as Christians to follow Christ within each and every one. God in Jesus Christ calls us within the very real, sometimes difficult situations and roles we inhabit each day. Bonhoeffer concludes this excerpt by asserting, “Vocation is responsibility, and responsibility is the whole response of the whole person to reality as a whole.” What a statement!

The Place of Responsibility³

In encounter with Jesus Christ, a person experiences God's call [*Ruf*], and in it the calling [*Berufung*] to a life in community with Jesus Christ. Human beings experience the divine grace that claims them. It is not human beings who seek out grace in its place, for God lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). Instead, grace seeks out and finds human beings in their place – the Word became flesh (John 1:14) – and claims them precisely there. It is a place that in every case and in every respect is burdened with sin and guilt, be it a royal throne, the home of a respected citizen, or a shanty of misery. It is a place of this world. This visitation by grace took place in Jesus Christ becoming human, and still occurs in the word about Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit brings. The call reaches us as Gentile or Jew, slave or free, man or woman, married or unmarried. Right where they happen to be, human beings ought to hear the call and allow themselves to be claimed by it... Only by the call of grace heard in Jesus Christ, by which I am claimed, may I live justified before God as slave or free, married or single. From Christ's perspective this life is now my vocation; from my own perspective it is my responsibility.

...People do not fulfill the responsibility laid on them by faithfully performing their earthly vocational obligations as citizens, workers and parents, but by hearing the call of Jesus Christ that, although it leads them also into earthly obligations, is never synonymous with these, but instead always transcends them as a reality standing before and behind them... Vocation is the place at which one responds to the call of Christ and thus lives responsibly. The task given to me by my vocation is thus limited; but my responsibility to the call of Jesus Christ knows no bounds...

The question of the place and the limit of responsibility has led us to the concept of vocation. However, this answer is valid only where vocation is understood simultaneously in all its dimensions. The call of Jesus Christ is the call to belong to Christ completely; it is Christ's address and claim at the place at which this call encounters me; vocation comprises work with things and issues [*sachliche Arbeit*] as well as personal relations; it requires a definite "field of activity," though never as a

³ From *Ethics*, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 289-297.

value in itself but only in responsibility to Jesus Christ. By being related to Jesus Christ, the “definite field of activity” is set free from any isolation. The boundary of vocation has been broken open not only vertically, through Christ, but horizontally, with regard to the extent of responsibility. Let us say I am a medical doctor, for example. In dealing with a concrete case I service not only my patient, but also the body of scientific knowledge, and thus science and knowledge of truth in general. Although in practice I render this service in my concrete situation – for example, at a patient’s bedside – I nevertheless remain aware of my responsibility toward the whole, and only thus fulfill my vocation. In so doing, it may come to the point that in a particular case I must recognize and fulfill my concrete responsibility as a physician no longer only at a patient’s bedside, but, for example, in taking a public stance against a measure that poses a threat to medical science, or human life, or science in general. Vocation is responsibility, and responsibility is the whole response of the whole person to reality as a whole. This is precisely why a myopic self-limitation to one’s vocational obligation in the narrowest sense is out of the question; such a limitation would be irresponsibility. It will then be my free responsibility in response to the call of Jesus Christ that leads me in one direction or the other. Responsibility in a vocation follows the call of Christ alone...

From A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women about American life by Bill D. Moyers

During her television conversation with Bill Moyers, philosopher Martha Nussbaum touches on the tragic Greek character of Agamemnon, who is faced with the impossible choice between the life of his daughter and that of his entire army. Like Agamemnon (though not as dramatically!), we are forced to make choices between two things that we love all the time – such is the challenge of living such a full and integrated life, says Nussbaum! If God calls us within the many meaningful roles we inhabit each day, what do we do when these roles (between work and family, for example) come into conflict? According to Nussbaum, this conflict is inevitable, and there is no easy or painless solution. Such is the nature of faithful living. In such times, we thankfully stand in the good news of God’s grace.

Interview with Martha Nussbaum⁴

Moyers: You write about these ancient Greeks – Aristotle, Hecuba, Antigone, Creon – as if they were next door neighbors. Are they really so vivid to you?

Nussbaum: They are. The big problems haven't changed all that much, and the Greek works face these problems head-on, with a courage and eloquence that I don't always find in modern works.

Moyers: What kind of problems?

Nussbaum: Take the problem of moral conflict: In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, a king is trying to do his best to lead his army off to Troy. Suddenly he finds that his expedition is becalmed, and he's told that the reason is that the gods are demanding a sacrifice. He has to kill his own daughter in order to complete that expedition.

So here we have two deep and entirely legitimate commitments coming into a terrible conflict in which there's not anything the king can do that he will be without wrongdoing. On the one hand, if he doesn't sacrifice his daughter, he's disobeying the gods, and his entire expedition is probably going to perish; on the other hand, he's got to kill his own daughter. Thinking about this, as the play says, with tears in his eyes, he says, "A heavy doom is disobedience, but heavy too if I shall rend my own child, the pride of my house, polluting my father's hands with streams of slaughtered maiden's blood close by the altar. Which of these is without evils?"

Often, when you care deeply about more than one thing, the very course of life will bring you round to a situation where you can't honor both of the commitments. It looks like anything you do will be wrong, perhaps even terrible, in some way.

⁴ Bill D. Moyers, *A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women about American Life Today and the Ideas Shaping Our Future* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 449–452.

Moyers: Do you think it's true for the taxi driver out there on the street right now? He doesn't see himself as a King making those horrific choices. Life doesn't present itself to him that way.

Nussbaum: Oh, but I think it does, on a smaller basis. Just take a person who has a career and who also has children, and who has to juggle those two responsibilities every day. Nothing will guarantee that in some event you can't prevent from arising, you'll have to neglect one of those commitments and neglect something that's really ethically important because the very course of life has produced a terrible conflict. I face this every day myself as a mother who has to juggle career and child-raising. So often, just on a very mundane level, you've got a meeting, and your child's acting in a school play, and you can't go to both things. Whatever you do, you're going to be neglecting something that's really important

If you realize that people face these conflicts, there's an awful lot society can do to provide institutions that make those conflicts arise a little less often. But no social situation, however ideal, is going to make those conflicts just go away.

Moyers: No, but we were taught to rank obligations – you know the old term, choose priorities – and not to make of every conflict of competing goods a great moral drama.

Nussbaum: ...I think that view is just a misdescription of what actually happens in people's lives. There is nothing illogical about saying, "I am going to care deeply about my work and my writing; I'm also going to care about my family, my child." That's not illogical. That's perfectly coherent. Over the course of a life, not only can you combine these things, but they actually enrich each other and make the life of each of them better. But that doesn't prevent these terrible situations that you can't entirely foresee.

Moyers: Is this what you meant when you wrote once that "Tragedy is trying to live well?"

Nussbaum: Tragedy happens *only* when you are trying to live well, because for a heedless person who doesn't have deep commitments to others Agamemnon's conflict isn't a tragedy. Somebody who's a bad person could go in and slaughter that child

with equanimity or could desert all the men and let them die. But it's when you are trying to live well, and you deeply care about the things you're trying to do, that the world enters in, in a particularly painful way...

Now the lesson certainly is not to try to maximize conflict or to romanticize struggle and suffering, but it's rather that you should care about things in a way that makes it a possibility that tragedy will happen to you. If you hold your commitments lightly, in such a way that you can always divest yourself from one or the other of them if they conflict, then it doesn't hurt you when things go badly. But you want people to live their lives with a deep seriousness of commitment: not to adjust their desires to the way the world actually goes, but rather to try to wrest from the world the good life that they desire. And sometimes that does lead them into tragedy.

If you really feel what it is to love someone or some commitment and be bound to that, then when a conflict arises, you will feel deep pain, and you will feel what Agamemnon felt. Even at a smaller level you will feel, "Which of these is without evils?"

Moyers: And the good life is the life lived according to your moral values, the life that is trying to find an ethical path through the wilderness.

Nussbaum: It's a life that is trying to live well toward friends, toward fellow citizens, and toward one's own capabilities and their development.

Moyers: There are so many conflicting obligations for an individual today: religion, family, friends, state, country, party, and neighborhood.

Nussbaum: Sometimes people find this so messy that it can't be tolerated, and they retreat into some simplifying view. Either they say, "We know that obligations have to be consistent, and so if there's apparent conflict, it's not really conflict, and all I have to do is find out which one takes precedence, and the other one just simply drops away and ceases to exert a claim on me"; or they might say, "Well, yes, it's a sort of conflict, but really we see that all values are commensurable, so that if I measure up the quantities of goodness that are here and the quantities of goodness that are over here, then all I need to do is ask myself, 'Where is there a greater quantity of goodness?' and then I go in that direction, and missing out on the other one is sort of

like missing out of fifty dollars when what I'm doing is getting two hundred dollars" – and it doesn't seem very painful any more when you look at it that way.

Very often people take up some such way of looking at things because to see that they are really two altogether different things here, both of them seriously worthwhile, both of them things to which you have made a commitment in your own heart and you can't follow both in this particular circumstance – that is very painful. What the tragedies show us is that temptation to flee into some sort of simplifying theory is a very old temptation, and it probably is going to be around as long as human beings are faced with these problems.

Moyers: I asked you about the moral lesson, and you said what the tragedies show us. In one sense there is no lesson and no moral, is there? It's simply the revelation of life as seen through the artist, the philosopher, the sufferer, the pilgrim. There's no effort to instruct.

Nussbaum: But you know, sometimes just to see the complexity that's there and see it honestly without flinching and without re-describing it in the terms of some excessively simple theory – that is itself progress. It's progress for public life as well as private life, because it's only when we've done that step that we can ask ourselves, "How can our institutions make it less likely that those conflicts will happen to people? How can we create schemes of child care, for example, that will make this tragic conflict of obligations less of a daily face of women's lives and perhaps more of a rare and strange occurrence?"

Moyers: Do you say, "Well, philosophy has helped me to see that this is a natural part of life, and I'll accept the stress and the strain and the conflict, and I'll walk on the tightrope with the balancing rod and hope to get to the other side?"

Nussbaum: Sometimes it's pretty clear which one you ought to choose, but it's very, very important to separate the question, "Which is the better choice?" from the question, "Is there any choice available to me here that's free of wrongdoing?"

Agamemnon has to sacrifice his daughter because it's clear the gods are going to kill everyone, including the daughter, if he doesn't. Looked at that way, he had better make that choice. Still, he has not got the right to think that just because he's made the right choice, everything is well. In the play, he says, "May all be for the best," and the chorus says that he's mad. You don't accept an artificial, easy solution to this, but the hope would be that through that kind of pain, you understand better what your commitments are and how deep they are. That's what Aeschylus means when he says that through suffering comes a kind of learning – a grace that comes by violence from the gods.

Small Group Questions

Opening Question:

On a recent trip to Tanzania I explained what Westwood was doing around Luther's understanding of vocation. Included in that explanation was a discussion of the challenge of "compartmentalization" in the lives of people in the U.S. I attempted to explain this by describing the common notion that, in our country, there are some parts of our life that are "public" (our professional lives, our lives as citizens, for example) and parts that are "private" (our faith lives, our family life, for example). After I was done, one of the Tanzanians had the following response: "So do you mean to tell me that Christians in the U.S. see themselves as Christians when they come to worship, but then no longer see themselves as Christians when they leave?" How would you have answered him from the perspective of your life?

1. Scharen reading

- In the opening section, Scharen shares his memory of a conversation with a church member after worship. His observation was that for the woman, faith was seen as a "balm" for hard times in life. He goes on to wonder about how transformation can occur where "faith simply rides to the (spiritual) rescue in times of trouble rather than serving as the beating heart pumping lifeblood through all aspects of our lives." What is the difference in these views of faith? How would you describe your view of the life of faith?
- Scharen uses a quote from Robert Bellah to describe the common experience of "fragmented and exhausted" lives. Later, he further describes the reality and problem of a compartmentalized life in the following way: "The core problem is that each of the spheres of modern life have semi-independence, each operating according to its own logic and values" (read the rest of this paragraph). Do you find this to be true for you? What is the "logic and values" of your professional/school life? Your life as a citizen? Life of faith? As a family member? Are they the same, or are they different? How do you make sense of things when they are different?

2. Bonhoeffer Reading

“The call of Jesus Christ is the call to belong to Christ completely; it is Christ’s address and claim at the place at which this call encounters me; vocation comprises work with things and issues as well as personal relations; it requires a definite ‘field of activity’ though never as a value in itself but only in responsibility to Jesus Christ.” Bonhoeffer’s challenge gets to the question of responsibility. What are the primary responsibilities on your life? Do you think of them as, ultimately, responsibilities to Jesus Christ?

3. Nussbaum Interview

- We invite you to spend a few minutes discussing Nussbaum’s description of a life “lived well.” The following quotes sum up her argument: “Often, when you care deeply about more than one thing, the very course of life will bring you round to a situation where you can’t honor both the commitments. It looks like anything you do will be wrong...” “But it’s when you are trying to live well, and you deeply care about the things you’re trying to do, that the world enters in, in a particularly painful way.”
- Notice how different Nussbaum’s description is from what we often hear about a “balanced life.” In this view, conflicts arrive in a person’s life when they have not set up adequate boundaries or been clear in establishing priorities between their roles in life. Tension/conflict/difficult choices, in this view, is a sign of some personal short-coming (for example choosing between attending a child’s athletic performance or attending an important meeting that moves your business forward, or attending a community meeting for what you consider a just cause). In contrast, Nussbaum sees these conflicts as potential evidence of a responsible person, or of someone deeply committed to a life well lived (in faith terms, we might call it “faithfully seeking to live out the call of following Christ in all the roles of their life”). Which view seems most honest to your life?
- Read Romans 5:1-5. One of the more challenging parts of this text is that we boast in both our hope as well as our sufferings. What do you think the Apostle Paul means? Compare this scripture with the following quote from

Nussbaum: “Now the lesson certainly is not to try to maximize conflict or to romanticize struggle and suffering, but it’s rather that you should care about things in a way that makes it a possibility that tragedy will happen to you.” Are these statements related to each other? Why or why not?

4. Psalm 139

The lesson this week includes lots of talk of having an integrated life, embracing our responsibility to our call to discipleship in all elements of our life, the challenge to wonder about seeing life in a different way. Such are the challenges of taking seriously our identity in Jesus Christ in our real life. Now might be a good time to reassert the healthy tension of our life of faith that we explored in week one. The life of faith is defined by the two powerful acts of God which are God’s ongoing love and promise of reconciliation for you in Jesus Christ (Grace) and God’s call to you to participate in God’s work in the world (Vocation). As a group we invite you to read Ps. 139:1-18 to each other. Can you hear both “pillars” (grace and vocation) in this reading?

Closing:

Luther’s Prayer

Besides his daily prayer practice, Martin Luther also remembered his baptism every morning when he washed. He believed that all we do throughout the day should be done in light of God’s promises made to us in the waters of baptism. Luther’s morning prayer, found in the Small Catechism, asks that we may commend our whole selves – body, soul, and all that we have – to the service of God. The Christian faith, therefore, is inseparable from how we approach the world every day. Close your small group time with each other by praying this prayer:

I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

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Notes:

WEEK 4

BEING A STEWARD

Introduction

Life is a gift and everything we are, everything we can see, smell, taste, touch...it is all given to us by a God who loves us. We, then, are invited by God to be a steward to all of it, i.e., to see it and use it in ways that serve and honor our neighbor. (A steward is a person who manages, takes care of, is responsible for, things that actually belong to someone else). The Gospel lesson this week, The Parable of the Talents from Matthew 25:14-30, invites us to take stock of what God has blessed us with, and then challenges us to be grateful, generous, creative stewards with it.

So, the first step is really seeing life and everything in it – our family and friends, our time and talents, our bodies, this planet, etc. – as gifts entrusted to us by a gracious and generous God. The second step, then, is to live in ways that honor those gifts, to make decisions that are in line with what God requires of us: “...to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8).

Our first reading, theologian Miroslav Volf talks about a “flow” of these gifts from God, into us, and then through us to others. And he suggests that we only flourish when that cycle happens. It is how God intended the world to work.

The other reading, the one-page story, the poem and the prayer this week are all intended to help you: a) reflect on all that God gives you that flows through your life, b) ponder your vocation as a steward, a care-taker of all those things, and c) consider how a part of our vocations is to live with gratitude, generosity and simplicity.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 25:14-30

‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

From *Free of Charge* by Miroslav Volf

This first reading is an excerpt from Free of Charge, by Miroslav Volf. Volf is a Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School and one of “today’s most celebrated theologians.” He helps us understand our vocations as being a conduit of God’s gifts, which come through us and flow on to others.

Availability¹

God gives so that we can exist and flourish, but not only for that, God gives so that we can help others exist and flourish as well. God’s gifts aim at making us into generous givers, not just fortunate receivers. God gives so that we, in human measure, can be givers too.

Toward that end, God’s gifts call on us to make ourselves *available* to their Giver... We can’t give anything back to God, not even ourselves, since we were never our own in the first place. We live and breathe and have our being in God. The most we can do is to make ourselves available for God to be used as instruments.

Notice that, in making ourselves available, we are not doing God any favors. We give ourselves for God’s *use* to benefit creation, not to benefit God. That’s what it means to be a “living” sacrifice, which the apostle Paul urges Christians in Rome to become (Romans 12:1).

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2005), 47–48.

Participation²

Recall that when Luther described the nature of God's love, he used the metaphor of flowing. God's love does not suck out the good it finds in others, as distorted human love does. It "flows forth and bestows good." The metaphor of flowing reveals the outbound and unidirectional movement of God's gifts.

What happens to the flow when it reaches us? Does it then stop, having bestowed the gift and fulfilled its purpose? If the flow were to stop, we would be only receivers, not givers. We would then be unlike what is most divine in God. God would be a pure giver, and we would be no givers at all; we would receive from God, but instead of giving, we would only acquire through legitimate exchange or take by force. But we were created to be and to act like God. And so the flow of God's gifts shouldn't stop as soon as it reaches us. The outbound movement must continue. Indeed, in addition to making us flourish, giving to others is the very purpose for which God gave us the gifts.

We are not simply the final destinations in the flow of God's gifts. Rather, we find ourselves midstream, so to speak. The gifts flow into us, and they flow on from us. From Christ, gifts flow to us, each one of us; from us, they flow to those in need.

To express this idea, Luther used the image of the conduit: We are channels of God's gifts to our neighbors. The image is good, except that a conduit merely conveys goods and does not benefit from them. We, on the other hand, benefit from the goods, as well as bestow them on others. Which is to say that we don't just receive the gifts, but we are constituted and changed by them.

Luther believed that Christ – or rather, God in Christ – is the source of gifts and the model for human giving. He made one more crucial step in describing the relation between God's giving and ours. Christ, he believed, is also the agent of our giving. Our giving is, as it were, an echo of his. That's where the idea of the "indwelling Christ" comes in.

² Ibid., 49–52.

The apostle Paul wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:19-20). Believers’ lives are paradoxically both their own (“the life I now live”) and not their own (“it is no longer I who live”) but rather Christ’s (“it is Christ who lives in me”). It is not just that Christ sends the goods to flow *into* us; Christ makes the goods flow *from* us as well, truly indwelling, motivating, and acting through us. That’s Luther’s point when he made what seems like a strange claim, namely that a Christian is a “Christ” to others. “Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us; that is, because we believe in him and are Christs to one another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us.” The flowing of God’s gifts from us to others is the overflowing of those very gifts that Christ brought into us with his presence. The flow of gifts both in and out of us happens when we receive the one Gift of God; the Christ who dwells in us and works through us.

Luther described the way God works in us in a memorable phrase: God never works in us without us.

God’s Life in the Everyday³

The thought of God’s life flowing through us is a lofty one. When we dare to entertain it, we often think of sacred times and spaces in which we encounter God. When we are rapt in glorious music of worship, when we are deeply immersed in prayer, or when we kneel in front of the altar to receive the Eucharist – in moments such as these we feel that God is close to us, that somehow God is in us and that we are in God.

We are right, of course, to associate God’s presence with such times and places. God dwells in the praises of people (Psalm 22:3). God’s Spirit prays in us when we pray, sometimes “interced[ing] with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). And Christ is truly present as we receive his body and blood. But these are not the only times and places when we experience God’s life in us.

³ Ibid., 52–54.

Notice what happens to the flow of God's life if we think of it as limited to such sacred events. It is streaming into us, but for the most part it is not flowing through us on to others...[I]f we don't turn from facing God, so to speak, to face our neighbors, the flow of God's gifts will be arrested with us, and we will miss the purpose of the strength and renewal that come through the Eucharist. It is as we serve our neighbors – our family, friends, and acquaintances – that the dam holding the flow of gifts is lifted and the life of God continues its intended flow.

This service can happen during sacred times and in sacred spaces, when the community is gathered for worship. All members of the community are endowed with spiritual gifts to serve one another, whether through teaching, exhortation, works of mercy, or any other way God may see fit (1 Corinthians 12). Yet God's gifts flow to others above all when the community scatters, having been nourished in God's presence, when we are back home with our families or at work as carpenters, bankers, doctors, waiters, or teachers. Every word and every deed, every thought and every gesture, even the simple act of paying attention can be a gift and therefore an echo of God's life in us.

You sit on your couch, beer or soda in your hand and junk food by your side, watching TV for hours – that's ordinary. You work around the clock not because you have to feed your family, but for no other reason than to park a better car in your garage than your neighbors have – that's ordinary. You get up from the couch to play with your kids or you give your time and energy to help educate a prisoner or lend an ear to an elderly person – that's extraordinary. Why? Because you are giving. Every gift breaks the barrier between the sacred and the mundane and floods the mundane with the sacred. When a gift is given, life becomes extraordinary because God's own gift giving flows through the giver.

From *Giving to God* by Mark Powell

This section is from Mark Allen Powell's book, Giving to God. Powell is a New Testament Professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. His opening story challenges us to consider what part of our lives we don't want to "get wet," – in other words, what part of me and my stuff do I not want to let God get a hold of? Powell is a good teacher and writes clearly about how the vocation of all Christians is, in a sense, that of a steward.

Introduction: Getting Completely Wet⁴

Have you heard the story about the baptism of the Gauls? It may not be historically factual, but this is not a history book, so we won't worry too much about that.

The Gauls were a warlike people who in ancient times inhabited what is now France and Belgium. They spoke a Celtic language and were Druidic by religion. By the time of the Christian era they had been conquered by the Roman Empire and were supposedly under its control. The extent of this control varied, however, for the Gauls never did take too well to being conquered, and there were numerous Gallic uprisings.

A number of Christian missionaries ventured into Gallic territory and, over time, many of the Gauls became Christians. As the story goes, when a converted warrior was baptized in a river or stream, he would hold one arm high in the air as the missionary dunked him under the water. This seemed a peculiar custom and the missionaries soon learned the reason for it. When the next battle or skirmish broke out, the warlike Gaul could proclaim "This arm is not baptized!" grab up his club or sword or ax, and ride off to destroy his enemy in a most un-Christian manner.

As I've indicated, this story is probably not historically authentic. My guess is that it's a medieval version of what we would call an "urban legend" and I certainly do not

⁴ Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2006), xi–xvi.

intend to cast any aspersions on the Gauls or their descendants by repeating it. I just find the *image* so compelling: the picture of someone – anyone – trying to keep one part of their body, one aspect of their identity, free from the influence of baptism.

This book is about stewardship, and stewardship is about getting completely wet. It is about looking at ourselves, discovering what it is that we would like to keep dry, and then immersing whatever that is in the waters of Holy Baptism.

Stewardship is about giving to God. It is about turning total control of our lives over to God. It is about taking seriously the words that we so easily pray: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” When we pray, “Thy will be done,” we ask for what God wants to happen in our lives to take place – already, now, on earth as in heaven.

For some years now teachers in the church have been trying to get people to realize that stewardship is not *just* about money. Someone came up with the alliterative phrase “time, talents, and treasures.” There is also the whole matter of “stewardship of the earth,” taking proper care of the planet that God has given us (Genesis 1:26; Psalm 8:6): conserving water, recycling paper and aluminum, preserving wetlands and rainforests. And there is “stewardship of our bodies” (Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20): getting exercise, eating right, managing stress, flossing our teeth. Or we might speak of “stewardship of our families” (Exodus 20:12; Proverbs 22:6; Mark 7:9-13; 1 Timothy 5:8): nurturing our marriages, raising happy and healthy children, caring for elderly parents. We might even speak of “stewardship of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 4:1; 9:16-17; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; 1 Peter 4:10): preserving the life-giving message of what God has done through Jesus Christ and sharing that message with the world. In truth, stewardship may involve lots of things.

Properly speaking, stewardship is about all of life, about giving ourselves to God and using all that God has given us in grateful and appropriate ways...

A High Privilege⁵

...Theologian Douglas John Hall has explored what is implied by the symbolism of calling people *stewards*. He tells us that this “ancient piece of wisdom about the human vocation” locates us in the grand scheme of things: not divine, but divinely chosen. From one perspective we may seem mediocre and vulnerable, yet from another, how wonderful and marvelous we are – “what a piece of work,” to quote *Hamlet* (Act 2, scene 2, line 303; compare this to Psalm 139:14). We are not masters of the universe, but we are not mere robots or puppets of God either. The biblical teaching of stewardship “puts an enormous question mark over all human presumption” while simultaneously allowing that we may be more worthy of exaltation than we are prone to imagine. We own nothing, but manage everything. God trusts us in a way that we are reluctant to trust each other (or ourselves) and places confidence in us beyond anything that our record thus far would seem to warrant.

Most of us probably know that we have not excelled at being stewards of all that God has given us; at least, we realize that we could do better. Let us acknowledge this, but try to move on. The biblical teaching about stewardship is good news, for the recognition that we are *only* stewards and not owners is actually quite liberating – especially when we realize who the real owner is!

Here, then, is a basic principle of biblical stewardship: *everything we are and everything we have belongs to God*. This is an article of faith that Christians of all varieties acknowledge (as do adherents of many other religions). In many liturgical churches, the Sunday offering is presented at the altar with the following prayer:

We offer with joy and thanksgiving *what you have first given us* – ourselves, our time, and our possessions....

⁵ Ibid., 29–31.

And perhaps the best known stewardship hymn in Christendom paraphrases 1 Chronicles 29:14 to proclaim,

*We give thee but thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be;
All that we have is thine alone,
A trust, O Lord from thee.*

In a basic sense, stewardship is really just a matter of putting such faith into action, figuring out what it means to believe this, in down-to-earth, practical terms, and then living accordingly. Stewardship is an expression of faith that moves from creed to practice, from merely claiming to believe something to living out that belief in real and obvious ways.

From *Breathing Space* by Heidi Neumark

In her beautifully written book, Breathing Space, Heidi Neumark, an ELCA pastor, chronicles her ministry in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country: New York City's South Bronx. In it, she tells the story of a delightful learning experience she had while trying to raise desperately needed funds for the church building. Watch for how each person in the story is living out their vocation as steward for the good of the whole.

Walk-a-thon⁶

In the middle of our “Space for Grace” fund-raising, the roof on our present building gave out. How did I ever come up with the preposterous idea that we should have a walk-a-thon to raise money for our roof? Don't other churches have walk-a-thons?

⁶ Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 118–120.

Don't other groups have successful walk-a-thons? We needed another \$10,000, and a walk-a-thon could get us off to a good start. Planning the route was easy. It was just the right distance from Transfiguration to Immanuel Lutheran Church on Lexington Ave. and East 88th Street in Manhattan. The five miles were a challenge but not an impossible one. The good people at Immanuel were prepared to welcome us with plenty of cold drinks and the makings for a hearty lunch. And we could take the subway back home. Everything proceeded without a hitch. About fifty enthusiastic people signed up to walk, and on that day the weather was great.

Of course, the point of a walk-a-thon is to raise money. It was definitely our point. This entails signing up sponsors. Here is where we encountered our first glitch. There was Jack, a mostly-in-recovery alcoholic. He showed up bright and early, eager to walk, doing his all for the church walk-a-thon. Where was his sponsor sheet? Well, virtually all of Jack's acquaintances are men from soup-kitchen lines, people who do not tend to invest their spare change in walk-a-thons. "I didn't really sign anyone up," Jack told me, "but I'm here to walk!" His story was repeated, with variations, by about two-thirds of the walkers, who ranged in age from five to eighty-five.

Which brings up another point – the physical condition of our entourage. When eighty-five-year-old Ernestina came down the street, I wondered what she was doing. Had she come to wish us bon voyage? Of course not. "I'm here to walk, Pastor," she informed me in no uncertain terms. Ernestina sports a pacemaker and is not in the best of health. Not by a long shot. On the other hand, it didn't seem right to turn her away, an opinion with which her adult sons strongly disagreed, as I later discovered. In any case, we would have the van to drive along beside us if anyone needed a lift. The van also carried plenty of water and energizing snacks.

In spite of her age and general frailty, Ernestina was in better shape than many of our walkers, whose ranks included a number of people with AIDS, cancer, high blood pressure, and asthma. Several of the walkers had their canes. Whatever was I thinking? Surveying our group, I no longer cared about the money. I only hoped that everyone would live to complete the walk. Just as we were heading down the street, Enid called out, "Wait for me!" – Enid had a bullet lodged in her foot from a drive-by shooting. The year before, she was going to the corner store, when shooting broke

out. She described freezing in fear and then shaking off her paralysis to run. When she ran, she was hit. The doctors said it would be better to leave the bullet in, but it often hurt. Nevertheless, she spent her Saturdays for several months walking all around the community with voter-registration forms, during a voter turn-out campaign the church participated in. Instead of then putting her foot up in front of the TV and taking it easy, Enid was out and about, walking the streets, urging folks to vote – the South Bronx on its feet! And now, she'd turned up for our walk, hobbling to catch up as fast as she could.

Our route took us down Bruckner Boulevard, tramping over broken bottles and empty crack vials. We crossed into Manhattan at the Willis Avenue Bridge and went down Second Avenue passing bodegas and bakeries. Every few blocks, I suggested that Ernestina might like to get into the van. Every few blocks, I was told “no thank you.” Finally, after the fourth mile, several of the younger women with canes climbed into the van. Ernestina decided to keep them company. When we reached the last stretch, they disembarked. We trudged up the last few breathless blocks together and collapsed into the hospitality of Immanuel.

When the results were tallied, we'd raised \$196 and lost no walkers. A few days later, the total came to \$10,196. So how did this absurd walk-a-thon bring in \$10,000? A homebound, elderly member of Immanuel read about the event in her church newsletter and made out a check.

**i thank You God for most this amazing⁷
by e.e. commings**

This familiar e.e. cummings poem reminds us of all the good gifts God gives, everything to which we can say "Yes!" May our ears and eyes be awake to hear and see this week!

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

⁷ e e cummings, "i thank you God for most this amazing," from *100 Selected Poems* (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

Offertory Prayer

This prayer from our hymnal that we pray almost weekly in worship seems to be one of just a few prayers that most Westwood people can pray by memory! It would be a good one to learn and use in your personal prayer lives as well. The first sentence really sums up our whole theology of stewardship and what it means to BE a steward. We invite you to pray this each day this week at a meal or as you begin or end your day:

Merciful God, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us – ourselves, our time and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Small Group Questions

Opening Question:

Where do you have the opportunity - or the burden - to “steward” (to manage, care for and make decisions about) in your life right now? How do you see those things as a part of your vocation?

1. “*We own nothing, but manage everything*” (from the second reading for this week by Dr. Mark Powell). Is this a new way to understand your life, i.e., all that you are and all that you have? How might this notion of managing, or “stewarding,” shape how you think about and make decisions concerning your relationships, your finances, your body, our planet?...i.e., if all that we have belongs to God and we are entrusted with caring for it, what does that mean for how much gas we use, how much garbage we create, how we tend to our neighbors and neighborhoods, how involved we are in local and national politics, etc? How is all of that part of our vocation?
2. In Pastor Heidi Neumark’s story “Walk-a-thon,” where did you see the various people living out their different vocations, each person doing their part for the good of the whole?
3. In the first reading for this week by Miroslav Volf, he talks about the *flow* of God’s gifts into us and out from us. Lynne Twist, in a book entitled *The Soul of Money* uses the same metaphor. She writes, “When we see money as something that flows through our lives and through the world, we realize that it doesn’t really belong to anyone; or we could say it belongs to everyone and the opportunity we have is to allow this resource, just like water, to move through the world in a way that nurtures the most people, and the highest purpose. You feel vibrant and alive when you use what you have in a way that represents you...as an expression of who you are. When you let your resources move to things you care about, your life lights up.”

Discuss: If we really saw our resources (time, talents, finances) as something that flowed through us, what difference might that make? How might it help us see ourselves as a steward, a caretaker, a manager?

What is one thing you could do with the resources you have that would make you “light up”...something that would reflect your values and your passions?

4. This Parable of the Talents, our Gospel from last Sunday, is a story telling us what we are to do while Jesus is gone...between his death and the Second Coming. And it appears that the message is, “Go and make good use of what I have given you! Take some risks! The money you have is mine anyway...not yours. The abilities you have, I gave you. The time you have to use, I also gave you. Be wise, creative, just, compassionate, generous. Go and use all of this for God and for those around you!”

Note: *A “talent” in Jesus’ day was a sum of money that equaled about two years’ wages; so it was a valuable thing that should be put to good use. Jesus is saying here that, if our money and time and spiritual gifts are to flourish, if we really want to make the most of them, then don’t bury them or hide them under a bushel basket!*

In pairs, share: What is a “talent,” a gift you’ve been given (“ourselves, our time and our possessions” as our Offering Prayer says) that either you feel you are using as a part of your vocation to love God and neighbor?...or perhaps it’s a “talent” that you’ve been sitting on, that you’d like to consider using more fully, more generously for others?

Closing:

If you’re comfortable, in your twosome, say a sentence prayer for the other person, giving thanks for the “talent” they share or want to use more fully.

Pray the Offertory Prayer (end of this section) together as a group.

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Notes:

WEEK 5

THE MESSINESS OF VOCATION

INTRODUCTION

Throughout this intensive study on living out our vocational callings, we hope you have never heard us romanticize the vocational understanding of life. There is no guarantee or promise here that says, “If you understand your life and purpose in this way...all will be well.” That is simply not a promise any person or life-plan can make. Instead, this week in particular, we claim the promise of the cross of Jesus Christ as the foundation upon which all of our understanding, living and being stands. And the cross is anything but romantic – the cross is brutal, cruel and deadly. However, because of the unyielding love of God, the cross is also merciful, transformative and new, new, new!

Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde writes extensively on the theology of the cross of Jesus. And the theology of the cross says a lot about our lives as mortals on this earth living in response to the immortal love of God (in other words, vocation). He writes:

The cross insists on being its own story. It does not allow us to stand by and watch. It does not ask us to probe endlessly for a meaning behind or above everything that would finally awaken, enlighten, and attract the exiled, slumbering soul. The cross draws us into itself so that we become participants in the story...Thus the cross story claims us...so the question and the hope comes to us. “If we die with him shall we not also live with him?” That is the end of the story... but it is the beginning of faith.¹

¹ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 7, 9.

Our lives are many things. Sometimes they are romantic, but most often they are complicated, demanding, confusing, lacking and downright messy. So this week we read from authors who have entered the tension of being a redeemed and loved child of God who still carries grief, anger, failures and questions. We trust that God's shoulders are broad enough to carry our messiness and that the expanse of God's arms is wide enough to hold us and *all* we are. We understand this strength and mercy through the cross of Christ – the cross that should mean death is final and winning – but is made something totally new by the love of God so that the cross means transformation and life eternal with God.

Don't be afraid to get messy, this is the way of God; it is the way of the cross.

Scripture Reading

The book of Ruth tells the story of three people: Naomi, a widow from Bethlehem in Judah; Ruth, her daughter-in-law from Moab; and Boaz, a gentleman farmer from Bethlehem. Ruth, in a supreme act of devotion, follows Naomi home from Moab and there meets Boaz, Naomi's close relative. All three characters are struggling to live into their vocation as loyal, faithful family members (is there anything messier than that?). The book is a short four-chapter story that we encourage you to read from start to finish!

Within the book there are verses that tell of the pull of vocation in heartfelt and dramatic ways: read with special attention Ruth's song to her mother-in-law in Chapter 1:16-17 and Naomi's grief in chapter 1:20-21. Hear the honor of Boaz in chapter 3:6-13, and finally Naomi's redemption celebrated by her community in chapter 4:14-17.

The Book of Ruth

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons.² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years,⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food.⁷ So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.⁹ The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.¹⁰ They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.'¹¹ But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?'¹² Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons,¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.'¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.'¹⁶ But Ruth said,
 'Do not press me to leave you
 or to turn back from following you!
 Where you go, I will go;
 where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!’

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’ ²⁰ She said to them,

‘Call me no longer Naomi,
call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

²¹ I went away full,
but the LORD has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the LORD has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’

22 So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

2 Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband’s side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, ‘Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.’ She said to her, ‘Go, my daughter.’ ³ So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. ⁴ Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, ‘The LORD be with you.’ They answered, ‘The LORD bless you.’ ⁵ Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, ‘To whom does this young woman belong?’ ⁶ The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, ‘She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the

country of Moab. ⁷ She said, “Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.” So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.’

8 Then Boaz said to Ruth, ‘Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.’ ¹⁰ Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, ‘Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?’ ¹¹ But Boaz answered her, ‘All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!’ ¹³ Then she said, ‘May I continue to find favour in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.’

14 At mealtime Boaz said to her, ‘Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.’ So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. ¹⁵ When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, ‘Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶ You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.’

17 So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. ¹⁸ She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. ¹⁹ Her mother-in-law said to her, ‘Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.’ So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, ‘The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.’ ²⁰ Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’ Naomi also said to her, ‘The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.’ ²¹ Then Ruth the Moabite said, ‘He even said to me, “Stay close by my

servants, until they have finished all my harvest.”’²² Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, ‘It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.’²³ So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

3 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.² Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor.³ Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.⁴ When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.’⁵ She said to her, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’

6 So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her.⁷ When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down.⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman!⁹ He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.’¹⁰ He said, ‘May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.’¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not be afraid; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.¹² But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I.¹³ Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the LORD lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.’

14 So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, ‘It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor.’¹⁵ Then he said, ‘Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.’ So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city.¹⁶ She came to her mother-in-law, who said, ‘How did things go with you, my

daughter?’ Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷saying, ‘He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, “Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”’ ¹⁸She replied, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.’

4 No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, ‘Come over, friend; sit down here.’ And he went over and sat down. ²Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, ‘Sit down here’; so they sat down. ³He then said to the next-of-kin, ‘Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. ⁴So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.’ So he said, ‘I will redeem it.’ ⁵Then Boaz said, ‘The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.’ ⁶At this, the next-of-kin said, ‘I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.’

7 Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one party took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. ⁸So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, ‘Acquire it for yourself’, he took off his sandal. ⁹Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, ‘Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.’

¹¹Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, ‘We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; ¹²and, through the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.’

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.’ ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

18 Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, ¹⁹Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, ²⁰Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, ²¹Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, ²²Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

From *Pastrix* by Nadia-Bolz Weber

In the excerpt from Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber’s book, Pastrix, she writes of the tension between the pomp and circumstances of our contemporary Easter celebrations and the reality of the rugged cross, steeped in dirt, blood and death. Pastor Nadia tells of the resurrection truth in a very straightforward way, putting the messy cross of Christ where it belongs...at the center of our being. Our reading picks up as Pastor Nadia is preaching at an enormous, outdoor, ecumenical worship service at Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Colorado.

Dirty Fingernails²

...As I looked out over the shivering crowd, I suggested that perhaps Mary Magdalene thought the resurrected Christ was a gardener because Jesus still had the dirt from his own tomb under his nails. Of course, the depictions in churches of the risen Christ never show dirt under his nails; they make him look more like a wingless angel than a gardener. It's as if he needed to be cleaned up for Easter visitors so he looked more impressive and so no one would be offended by the truth. But then what we all end up with is a perverted idea of what resurrection looks like. My experience, however, is that the God of Easter is a God with dirt under his nails.

Resurrection never feels like being made clean and nice and pious like in those Easter pictures. I would have never agreed to work for God if I had believed God was interested in trying to make me nice or even good. Instead, what I subconsciously knew, even back then, was that God was never about making me spiffy; God was about making me new.

New doesn't always look perfect. Like the Easter story itself, new is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don't actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to not mention when I'm right. New looks like ever fresh start and every act of forgiveness and every moment of letting go of what we thought we couldn't live without and then somehow living without it anyway. New is the thing we never saw coming - never even hoped for - but ends up being what we needed all along.

"It happens to all of us," I concluded that Easter Sunday morning. "God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over."

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (Jericho Books, 2014), 173–177.

When Michael Meehan heard me preach that sermon, he was certainly not a churchgoer. He was raised Catholic but had never in his adult life felt much need for church. Yet he'd tried to end his life and had gotten it back again despite himself. So when he heard me say that God reaches into the graves we dig ourselves and loves us back to life, he knew that, in his case, this was not actually a metaphor, and the next month he showed up at House for All Sinners and Saints.

There were so many new people that first month after the *Denver Post* cover story and the Red Rocks Easter service that I barely registered seeing Michael, a nearly fifty-year-old man with a funny walk – one leg too short and a busted hip. But Catherine, a young Episcopalian architect who had been attending House for All for a while, did notice him. During the passing of the peace, a time in the liturgy when everyone shakes hands or hugs one another saying, “Peace be with you,” Michael had seen Catherine hug several of her friends who sat around her. Then she came to Michael and extended her hand.

“But you are a hugger, right?” he asked and then boldly embraced her.

Later he would describe this act as entirely outside of his nature. He also would come to say that in the months before the night he had held a razor in a cheap motel bathroom that he had very systematically disentangled himself from just about everything. His business as a book designer dwindled down to just about nothing. He had no relationship, no money, and his much-beloved dog suddenly took ill and died. So Michael gave up, sold his furniture, and dissolved all connections to his own life.

“Lack of connections is death,” he told me as we sat in Hooked on Colfax, nine months after he'd first visited HFASS. “The opposite of that is being able to hug a perfect stranger.”

Michael found community at House for All Sinners and Saints. He connected there. Appreciated. Wanted. Yet while he says he loves Jesus' friends at HFASS, he has just explained to me that he feels like a stranger to Jesus himself. (Which strikes me as weirdly opposite to when Gandhi reportedly once said: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians,” and I've tended to be with the Mahatma on that one.)

Three months after that day in the coffee shop when Michael told me he didn't feel close to Jesus, and I in turn reminded him of his own story of death and resurrection, he was again in the hospital. This time though, it was for what seemed like progressive-resurrection. Michael got a new hip.

I sat in the waterproof hospital-visitor's chair and listened to his amazement at what his life looked like now. He hadn't yet been able to build his business back up to where it was, still lived with his brother, and he wasn't yet ready to love another dog, but Michael had friends who were friends with Jesus, a place to come and pray, and a brand-new hip. And even if he doesn't feel particularly close to the dude, Michael understood death and resurrection, the basic idea of Christianity, better than most clergy I knew. And this strangely made me believe even more that this thing is real. This whole Jesus thing.

There are times when I hear my name, turn, and recognize Jesus. There are times when faith feels like a friendship with God. But there are many other times when it feels more adversarial or even vacant. Yet none of that matters in the end. How we feel about Jesus or how close we feel to God is meaningless next to how God acts upon us. How God indeed enters into our messy lives and loves us through them, whether we want God's help or not. And how, even after we've experienced some sort of resurrection, it's never perfect or impressive like an Easter bonnet, because, like Jesus, resurrected bodies are always in rough shape.

From *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry³

Wendell Berry is a writer who also lives on a small farm in Kentucky. The short passage below is from his novel Jayber Crow, which tells the story of a barber who lives in a Kentucky town. Through the protagonist, Berry writes here about the gap that often exists between the stories we hope about our lives (or even tell about them!) and the reality. Pay attention to the different kind of “paths” that are named in this brief passage. (The first sentences refer to Dante’s Divine Comedy, which begins in the “Dark Wood of Error,” and John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, which follows the “King’s Highway.”)

If you could do it, I suppose, it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line—starting, say, in the Dark Wood of Error, and proceeding by logical steps through Hell and Purgatory and into Heaven. Or you could take the King’s Highway past appropriately named dangers, toils, and snares, and finally cross the River of Death and enter the Celestial City. But that is not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circle or a doubling back. I have been in the Dark Wood of Error any number of times. I have known something of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but not always in that order. The names of many snares and dangers have been made known to me, but I have seen them only in looking back. Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I have deserved. Often my fairest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led – make of that what you will.

³ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (Washington, D.C: Counterpoint, 2000), 133.

Through Grief by Elizabeth Damico

The following is a personal reflection written by Pastor Elizabeth. In this short writing she stands at the intersection of messiness and holiness – the place where God is often at work in our lives. This was written while Elizabeth lived at Holden Village, so you will hear specific references to the worship life of that place. But in all places where we live and worship, our messy lives contain suffering and loss, and yet there is a holy presence throughout that we must claim.

My mother was my first piano teacher, and I started lessons at the age of five. So, for as long as I can remember, the piano has been my primary source of self-expression and creativity, an instrument for music and for mental and emotional processing.

It was also my mother's untimely death that introduced me to grief. This introduction came so long ago that grief, as well as music, has been a lifelong companion. From the time I was a small girl to now I have had many opportunities to look death square in the face and walk away covered in the heaviness and feeling the gaping hole that death leaves. Sometimes this companion of grief can be light and even inspirational...other times it is literally heavy on my body and clouds over my smile, my music, my hope for the future.

And in these times when the heaviness outweighs the inspiration, I find myself in seasons of doubt. It is these times of disbelief that I am more thankful than I can really express that I am a church musician. Because in these times of disbelief my mouth cannot say the words, my heart aches too much to hope, and my mind is overcrowded with questions and cynicism...yet, somehow, my hands believe. When I am playing a hymn, or song or liturgy, there are certain lines that bring a natural crescendo or explosion of sound – because the words demand great noise in the face of grief, disbelief and death.

Yesterday someone asked why is it always during the third verse of the gospel canticle that I suddenly get so loud as we sing, “God comes to guide our way to peace...that death shall reign no more?” And when rehearsing with the Sunday night band, I heard a snicker when I asked the band to drop out while we sang, “there was an empty tomb.” I do these sometimes annoying and sometimes expressive things because this

is the message I need to hit me over the head and lighten that grief cloud. I need to hear over and over again that death shall reign no more, that there is an empty tomb, that the death of young mothers and wives, of dear friends, the destroying of towns, the end of great loves, the killing of precious innocents – that these dark and pain-filled experiences will not get the last word – no, I would rather bang the hell out of the piano so my hands can remind my heart and my faith and my hope that death shall reign no more.

...sweet words from one of my favorite hymns to play:

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.*

*I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's pow'r?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.*

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
*I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.**

Small Group Questions

Opening Question:

Relationships, citizen, church goer, employee, neighbor... which realm of your daily living feels “messiest” to you, right now?

1. Recall the reading of Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. Have you experienced the gritty reality of being raised to new life in the way Michael was? He was quite literally pulled from the grave and is now living the not-so-squeaky-clean life of the resurrection – have you experienced new life? A second chance? Forgiveness? What remnants of pain or brokenness are the hardest to let go of in these situations?
2. Do you see most of your life as “wandering” or “being led?” (phrases from Wendell Berry’s *Jayber Crow*) What distinguishes the two experiences?
3. The three central figures in the book of Ruth are:
 - Naomi* – the widowed and now childless woman, despairing
 - Ruth* – the widow, foreigner, looking for direction and belonging
 - Boaz* – the helpful man, full of honor, gaining a family through grief and strife

As Christians we believe that our lives are lived at the foot of the cross, which Forde says, “Is the end of the story, but it is the beginning of faith.” Does this change how you understand the messiness (pain, brokenness, grief, complexity) of your daily living? Does this change how you understand God in your daily living?

4. Finally, (final question!) in reflecting upon your own unique “messiness” (or use another word that fits better for your context) do you feel as though God is calling you out of messiness or into it? In other words, is the whole thrust of vocation meant to get us to a “better” place or to better live into the place we currently are? Are we called to clean up all messiness or honor it as holy and as God’s work too?

Closing Ritual

We conclude our Vocation Reader with the “Holden Prayer of Good Courage.” This truth-laden prayer was written for the worshipping community at Holden Village, a remote Lutheran retreat center in the North Cascade Mountains. Nearly every day someone is arriving and someone is leaving this intentional community. These words are spoken or sung for every member of the community as they prepare to leave the mountain and re-enter the rest of their lives...

- Have one member of your group read the closing prayer once.
- Next, read it all together.
- Now, in popcorn style, speak the word or phrase that most spoke to you in this prayer.
- Close by reading the prayer together one last time.

Prayer of Good Courage

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.
 Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go,
 but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us;
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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Notes: