

Finding Our Calling

Muriel was a bright and thoughtful teenager who had a special way of caring for those who were sick, like her dad and her brother when they had the flu. One day she told her mother, “I want to be a nurse.” “You know that nursing is a hard and demanding profession,” her mom cautioned. “But that’s what I think I’m called to do.” Over the course of her high school years, Muriel made sure that she took all the required courses to enter the nursing program upon graduation. She was determined to learn how to care for many others.

Jesus also drew people to him for the purpose of learning to be leaders in spreading the Good News. Our gospel text tells us about it, “One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers – Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew – throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, ‘Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!’ And they left their nets at once and followed him.” (Matthew 4:18-20) Their immediate response showed that they had great interest in what Jesus was calling them to do.

The same is true for us. The discovery of who we are in God’s sight and what we’re called to do in God’s service forms the first part of a deeper look at discipleship. Today we’ll investigate five basic concepts that prepare us for seeing how they’re put to use in part 2.

1. Identity. Our *creational identity* is what we were designed to be. “So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) God created us to be loved by him and to love him in return. But the human proclivity to want their own way requires a *redemptive identity* to deal with the damage of human brokenness. “The Savior – yes, the Messiah, the Lord – has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!” (Luke 2:11) Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our

adoptive identity can be secured. Theologian J.I. Packer wrote, “In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship – he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship.” This is the identity we carry as Christians.

2. Talents, gifts and personality. Knowing what we’re good at is a product of our talents, our natural strengths and skills that come from inherent abilities or developed through training, practice or discipline. To these God adds spiritual gifts that often enhance and overlap our talents. “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.” (1 Cor. 12: 4,7,11) Examples include hospitality, wise counsel, teaching and merciful caring.

But our use of these depends on our personality – the combination of characteristics and qualities that make us unique, a product of our biology, upbringing, environment and experiences. Indeed, David marveled before God at the implication of this, “Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous – how well I know it.” (Psalm 139:14) The task before us is allowing God who equipped us to build others up in love.

3. Virtuous values. We navigate life with our values, that which is important and worthwhile to us, not just influencing how we think, but also the quality of how we live. Values can be *aspirational* like those we desire to attain, or *actual* - those that really come out in everyday life. The problem is that many values reflect the culture that we live in or grew up in, and these may not be aligned with God’s values.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasted virtuous values with those of the people he was teaching, “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But

I say love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In this way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” (Matthew 5:43-45) Jesus is calling his followers to a higher level of virtues that reflect the character of God who loves all. Virtuous people are firm, stable, and consistent because their lives are anchored not in values of their own choosing, but in God’s universal standard of righteousness.

4. Roles. A *role* is a unique way of being in the world and relating to a person or group. We all have many roles we pass in and out of each day, prioritizing one or more at one time and downplaying others. For example, we can be an employee, a friend, a spouse, a parent, a board member. Each role carries its own set of expectations, behaviors and values. But all of them together shape us into the unique beings we are. The apostle Paul advised the Romans, “Here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.”

(Romans 12:1 MSG)

The problem is the tension each role creates for the others, and how all of them together relate to what God desires - our life to be offered wholly to him. As people with many roles and limited time, energy, and capacity, we constantly face decisions about which hat we’re wearing – is it the one that truly reflects God’s will at the moment? Sometimes we strike a healthy balance, and yet other times we seem oblivious to how we say one thing yet live another way. Take these issues to God who can help us reflect his love in each of our roles to our people and place.

5. Vocation. Vocation is our uniquely lived-out identity. It refers to the way God works in and through us, using the gifts given, in all the roles and settings we’ve been placed. Author Steven Garber puts it this way, “The word vocation is a rich one, having to address the wholeness of

life, the range of relationships and responsibilities. Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally – all of this and more is seen as vocation, that to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the efface of God.” Vocation is multi-layered, even though it’s a singular call from God.

Creational vocation is the call to pursue the flourishing of people and the world.

However, we sometimes contribute to the world’s dysfunction, not to its betterment because of our own inability to always act in the ways of love. That’s why we need a *redemptive vocation*, the call to follow Jesus, “A little farther up the shore [Jesus] saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And he called them to come, too. They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind.” (Matthew 4:21-22) This leads us to our *missional vocation*. Simply stated, it’s God’s love on the move, as the final verse of our gospel passage indicates, “Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness.” (v.23)

Our missional vocation is joining God as we make Jesus known through our words and actions. The exact nature and location may change as we go through life, but we’re always to be salt and light in the midst of a watching world (Matt.5:13-16). Henri Nouwen said, “My deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch.” God is alive and at work in our world. We’re to embody this “good news of great joy” as we share our experiences in the faith with others and invite them into the movement of God’s love in Christ. We’re to shine brightly in a dark world, “Dear friends, work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” (Philippians 2:12-13)

The youth group at St. Mark's church were completing arrangements for their first mission trip to distribute winter clothing to needy and vulnerable homeless people. Boxes of woolen mitts, scarves and toques, parkas and boots were loaded into the SUVs. The young people started out with a great desire to reflect the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine. For you...will lift the heavy burden from their shoulders." (Isa.9:2, 4)

Our missional vocations are lived out in the midst of the joys and challenges of what it means to be human. Sometimes there are difficulties, requiring resilience and endurance. The group's first experience was encountered on their trip into the city. A sudden storm forced them to seek shelter in a small community that opened its doors with a place to stay and a hot meal. When it was safe to continue the next morning, they found their way to their destination only to be told that they would have to personally distribute the clothing as they met each person coming into the shelter. It turned out to be a wonderful and unexpected blessing to give each item to a variety of needy people, a gift of appreciation of God's love being shown by young people willing to allow the Spirit to work in and through them.

David wrote in our Psalm, "Hear me as I pray, O Lord. Be merciful and answer me! My heart has heard you say, 'Come and talk with me.' And my heart responds, 'Lord, I am coming.'" Those are the words of a disciple who has an identity in God, who has discovered talents, gifts and personality, who has values in tune with God's virtues, who has prioritized roles that emphasize God's will, and uses mission to be the hands and feet of Christ. What better way than to conclude with these words, "Teach me how to live, O Lord. Lead me along the right path. Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord." (Psalm 27:11, 14) Amen.