



November 12, 2017

Finding Meaning In Our Work
Pastor Vern Christopherson

ROMANS 12:1-8

NRSV

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

When Jesus began his ministry, he found some fishermen along the Sea of Galilee. He called them to leave their nets and boats behind, and follow him. Folks like Peter and Andrew, James and John ended up following Jesus for upwards of three years, a journey that took them all the way to Jerusalem and the cross. After that came Easter. And then fifty days after Easter came Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was poured out, and those Galilean fishermen, and other disciples too, were sent to places like Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. That's how the good news of Jesus spread.

This morning I want you to imagine a different scenario. Imagine that Jesus had said to Peter and Andrew, James and John, "I want you to go back to Galilee, resume your old jobs, and be the best fishermen you can be. I want you to provide support for your families and food for people's tables. Find ways to live for me in your daily work. And while you're at it, I want you to find meaning in your work and a sense of fulfillment in using your skills and abilities to love and bless the world."

When we put Jesus' call like that, it can sound a bit odd, maybe even self-centered. Ever since those early days in Galilee, we've put a premium on leaving one's nets and boats behind, and serving Christ in a new way – as pastors, church workers, missionaries. But what if we

spent just as much time talking about the untold fishermen in Galilee who stayed behind, who were more cut out for fishing than for going to the ends of the earth? Was there a chance for them to serve Jesus?

In our celebration of Reformation 500, we lifted up Martin Luther's emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers." Luther was adamant: not just priests and monks and nuns have a calling from God; everyone does. That goes for homemakers, lab technicians, and people who volunteer at a drug treatment center.



I'm not convinced we believe that about ourselves, and that we see God at work in our everyday efforts. Tiffany Eire can testify to this. Tiffany teaches art at Franklin Elementary School. She has 850 students this year. That sounds like a huge challenge, but over the years there's been another challenge almost equally as daunting. Tiffany's pastor at confirmation whispered in her ear that she was destined to be a pastor. Ever since that day, Tiffany has wondered if she somehow missed a calling from God.

That's been hard. Yet along the way, she's felt pulled to be a teacher. In her daily work, Tiffany is often moved to reach out to kids who are struggling. She uses art to help them express themselves. One Sunday a month, she takes her art supplies to a women's shelter here in Rochester. She gives the moms and children a chance to create something beautiful in the midst of the chaos and anxiety in their lives.

Tiffany recently sent me an email, thanking me for talking about the priesthood of all believers. She told me about the words of her pastor at confirmation, and of the burden she's been carrying around since that time. In spite of it, however, she was able to say: "I feel God keeps putting me in places where he needs me to go, and I try to grab hold of those messages and be my best at it. I believe I'm living the life Christ wants me to live, and [now that I realize I don't have to be a pastor to do that], a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders."

Frederick Buechner once defined vocation as the place where "our deep gladness meets the world's deep needs." I've always liked that definition. We have to be careful, though. If we start with the world's deep needs, we can quickly get overwhelmed: Should we take on kids who are struggling? Gun violence? Health care? Hunger? Homelessness? Those who don't yet know the story of Jesus? Where does it end?

Rather than starting with the world's deep needs, Parker Palmer encourages us to start with our own deep gladness. In an excellent little book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Palmer reminds us that we are created in the image of God; and we are born with certain passions and gifts that are waiting to be discovered. One's vocational journey is less a goal to pursue than a calling to hear, a calling we hear by listening to our lives. *What makes time fly by for you? What brings you a deep down sense of fulfillment?* As we listen to the voice inside, we gradually

become the persons we are created to be. We might even feel like a “living sacrifice,” holy and acceptable to God.

Parker Palmer would be the first to say that the journey of self-discovery is often anything but straight. Still, we get hints along the way. After my first year in college, I got a summer job with a construction company in my hometown in South Dakota. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, even though I put “teacher” and “coach” on my college application. My job that summer was to tear down an old bank building, and make way for a new one. We didn’t have backhoes or bulldozers to help us, just wrecking bars and sledge hammers. But it was all about demolition.

After a week, I could barely get myself out of bed in the morning. I hated the work. Then one day, out of the blue, a local carpenter asked if I wanted to build a house with him. I jumped at the chance. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I learned on the job. Before long we were framing walls, installing sheetrock, and shingling the roof. The work was every bit as demanding as the work on the bank, but it was energizing to me. I was doing something positive with my life, building up instead of tearing down. That summer job provided an important clue as to who I was created to be.

As we listen to our lives, says Parker Palmer, we might bump into something that we feel like we must do.

Lyle Solem can speak to this. Lyle is long retired from his work at IBM. Now he’s part of the Sunrisers Kiwanis Club. The club relates to Bishop Elementary School. They have a special emphasis on reading. Lyle regularly shows up at a place called the Reading Oasis and listens to kids read. This past week the first graders were focused on the letter “p.”



In addition to this, once a month Lyle goes to Elton Hills Elementary School for their “Terrific Kids Program.” When students do something out of the ordinary, they get recognized for it. Lyle usually ties the award back to reading. He will point to the letter “r” on the banner and say: “‘R’ is the first letter of reading. You need to read every day.”

Recently Lyle was shopping at Hy-Vee. He felt someone tugging on his pant leg. As he looked down, he saw one of those terrific kids. She said, “Hi, do you remember me?” Lyle nodded, and then he said, “And do you remember what I asked you to do?” She replied, “Read.” He responded, “And are you?” She said yes with a great big smile on her face.

I asked Lyle why he does it, what meaning he finds in his work. He answered: “It’s great to help those kids. It’s exciting to see that little girl’s eyes as she talks about reading. It makes me feel so good that I could do it every darn day.”



As we listen to our lives, says Parker Palmer, we are often wounded healers, reaching out to those who could use a lifeline every bit as much as we could.

Back in 2014 Elva McFarlin saw an announcement in the Life at Zumbro. We were starting a prayer shawl ministry. Elva wanted to be a part of it. She had done some knitting in her life, and a little crocheting, but not much. But she was willing to dive right in.

Soon Elva was crocheting prayer shawls to her heart's content. "It keeps me out of trouble," she quips, but what it really does is connect her with people. The prayer shawls are a great way to show her love and concern. She saves the thank-you notes. This past week Elva showed me the last two notes she received.

One was from Emily Doherty, a young person here at church. Emily wrote: "Hi Ms. McFarlin, my name is Emily and I am 11 years old. I was baptized at Zumbro on September 13. I am writing you this note to say thank you for the baptism gift. It was very kind of you to do this for me."

The second note came from Peggy North who was recently diagnosed with colon cancer. Peggy wrote: "Thank you for the beautiful shawl and the prayers. I love the colors. They are so pretty and calming. It feels good to wrap the shawl around my shoulders. I plan to take it with me to my upcoming chemotherapy sessions."

Elva McFarlin turned 92 years old this past Thursday. And she just finished her 147th prayer shawl.

As we listen to our lives, says Parker Palmer, we need to be careful not to try to do too much. Self-care is not selfish. Paul Robelia is a doctor specializing in family medicine. He splits his time between his clinic office and the hospital. On a typical day he sees patients for everything from whooping cough, to pneumonia, to opioid addiction. Paul helps people begin the road to recovery. It's all about giving them choices and next steps. What kind of medicine do they need? Where can they receive the best follow-up care?

Paul finds meaning in his work by offering hope to hurting people - relief from pain, recovery from illness, a better understanding of what's been happening to them. He also finds meaning in being able to connect with people at a deeper level. He says it's especially gratifying when he sees patients a month or even a year down the road, and they're often in much better shape than they were before.



Paul adds a cautionary note, however. Burn-out in the health care profession is real. Self-care is critical. As we care for ourselves, says Paul, it's very important to practice gratitude in our lives, to take pride in our efforts to heal, and to realize that we do not do this work alone.

So now let me ask you: What meaning do you find in your daily work? Just a reminder, your daily work might be something for which you get paid, or it might be something else entirely. Does it feel like a calling from God? Is it a place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep needs? I hope so. I hope it feels like something you must do, something that offers a lifeline to someone in need, something that challenges you but doesn't wear you down.

You should have received a little blue slip as you came in the door this morning. In the next few minutes, I encourage you to jot down some aspect of your daily work that brings gladness to you. Put that slip in the offering basket when it comes by. We will pray for them at the close of worship.

Always keep in mind: Whether you feel called to go to the ends of the earth or simply to go to your little corner of the mission field here at home, God has some work for you to do. You have been made in God's image. You have passions and gifts that no one else does. As you live as the person you are created to be, you will be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Amen.