

May the words of my mouth
 And the meditations of each heart
 Be acceptable to you, O Lord,
 Our strength and our redeemer. Amen.
 “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor
 With the Lord and with the people.”
 “And Jesus increased in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favor.”
 These are the final lines of the Old Testament and Gospel readings for today.
 As I prepared for this sermon I felt drawn toward these final statements.
 Maybe they're just there as transition statements
 The biblical equivalent of the wavy fade out with the words
 “20 years later” at the bottom of the screen.
 But there's something about these words that strikes me as very tender and very true.
 Like Samuel and Jesus, we grow up not only in physical stature, but in wisdom
 And that growth is supported by our relationships with God and with God's people.
 These relationships are at the heart of the Christian idea of vocation.
 Vocation is kind of a hot topic right now ...
 I know this because Oprah's magazine, O, recently had a huge feature on the topic.
 The cover reads: “Who are you meant to be?
 A step-by-step guide to finding (and fulfilling)
 your life's purpose.”
 When I saw that I thought: “Oooh! What a great illustration for my sermon.
 I can use this to talk about the difference between how Lutherans understand vocation
 And how secular, popular-culture uses those ideas.”
 <Big beat.>
 Well, yes and no.
 As often happens with magazines,
 what's actually inside isn't really what's advertised on the cover.
 In this case, it's a good thing,
 Because instead of an overly-simplistic, step-by-step guide
 to finding your true vocation in thirty days or your money back,
 The magazine has a pretty good series of reflections on work, calling, searching and being.
 Including an article by the writer Anne LaMott.
 In her reflection she concludes
 That you already are the person you are meant to be: a beloved child of God.
 If you only take away one thing from this sermon I hope it is that amazing truth,
 And I'll say it again: You are who you are meant to be, a beloved child of God.
 It's an idea worth repeating,
 Because it's a way of looking at vocation that can easily get lost
 In all the history and cultural baggage we bring to that term.
 In the middle ages the term “vocation” was mainly applied to religious orders: priests, monks and nuns.
 Martin Luther broadened the definition of vocation
 To embrace *all* the ways that Christians serve God and neighbor.
 By Luther's definition, his own vocation included teaching, preaching, writing
 And changing diapers.
 Luther wrote that changing his son's diaper was as great and important a part of his vocation
 As anything else he did.

These days, by any definition, *vocation* is loaded word.
 It carries the burden of high expectations,
 The idea that my work is more than work, it's a calling.
 Our understanding of vocation can feed the tendency we have to define ourselves by what we *do*.
 So when that definition of ourselves changes,
 When jobs are lost or changed
 When relationships are lost or changed
 Our sense of who we are is shaken,
 Sometimes shaken to the very core.
 Before I went to seminary I was a high school English teacher.
 All I could think about during my last weeks as a teacher was how great it was going to be
 To be a student again.
 To have that time and luxury of really focusing on my own learning.
 I was unprepared for how deeply I would feel the loss of my professional identity,
 I didn't expect how shaken up I was
 And all the doubt I would feel as I tried to figure out my new role,
 And the sadness that came and went, sometimes inexplicably
 Sometimes triggered by little reminders of my old life,
 Like an email from Office Depot reminding me that my Star Teacher rewards card had expired
 Or pictures of students and school events posted online by my former colleagues.
 Several transitions later, I'm no longer surprised when these changes,
 Even joyful changes,
 Bring sadness with them.
 I'm not surprised by the loss, but that doesn't seem to lessen the loss.
 Earlier I gave the example of Martin Luther, and how changing diapers was a part of his vocation
 As a Dad.
 When the day came that little Hans Luther no longer needed Dad to change his diapers,
 There was probably celebration at the transition,
 But maybe also a sense of loss—a foretaste of all the expected changes in their father-son relationship.
 Expected, but still a loss.
 And then there are the unexpected losses:
 I think of Martin Luther's daughter, Magdalena, who died at age 13.
 It was an unexpected loss that shook Luther to his very core.
 I think of the patients and families I've met as a chaplain at Lutheran General,
 Especially the families who gather to watch and wait as their loved one is dying.
 It's the loss of possibility, the loss of the future tense.
 And it's also the loss (*gesture*) of her role as caretaker
 and his role as vigil-keeper.
 The family's shape and definition of themselves shifts, shakes and changes
 Right under their feet.
What happens to our vocation when what we've done
 to serve God and neighbor
 to work and be in relationship and define ourselves changes?
 What happens to our vocation when what we've done
 in the past is no longer possible?
 When what we are capable of doing is not sufficient
 And when we don't know what to do next?

Can we find a way to define ourselves and our vocation
 That is less about what we do
 And more about what God has done
 And what God is doing?
 After the final words of our Gospel lesson today,
 After, "Jesus increased in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favor."
 The next time Luke introduces us to Jesus is as a 30 year old man in serious transition
 About to shake things up and start his public ministry
 Jesus prepares for that vocation through baptism.
 Jesus is baptized and God says:
 "You are my son, the Beloved,
 with you I am well pleased."
 Who you are meant to be is who you already are:
 A beloved child of God.
 Nothing, no core-shaking loss and nothing you do
 Can change that.
 Nothing can take away the vocation you received at your baptism.
 In the midst of your ever-changing work, roles and relationships
 You have an identity that is unchanging.
 Our unchanging identity as children of God informs the changing ways we live that out in the world.
 I know that, in the life of this congregation
 And in my own family,
 There have been some real losses this year.
 For me, hope has come in the conviction that
 Even if you lose your job,
 Even if you lose anything that has come to define you and sustain you,
 you cannot lose your vocation.
 You cannot lose the love and (*gesture*) the family of God.
 Your vocation is affirmed every time we have a baptism,
 Or an affirmation of baptism, or a remembrance of baptism.
 You are a beloved child of God,
 Connected to God and to God's people by the promises of baptism:
 At your baptism the people of God promised to teach you, to support you and to pray for you.
 At every baptism you've attended, you've promised to do the same thing for others.
 God promises to love you, forgive you, and welcome you into ever-closer relationship
 Throughout your life and beyond your death.
 Reminders of your vocation can come in many unexpected ways,
 And in unexpected places.
 It can come from the wisdom of children like Samuel, Jesus, (write names here)
 The reminder of your vocation can come as you hold the hand of a grieving friend,
 Or as you clean up your desk and pack up your memories at work.
 I admit it: that reminder of your vocation as child of God can even come from Oprah.
 Best of all,
 The reminder and the assurance of our vocation comes to us
 Every time we welcome a new member into the family of God with these words:
 We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share:
 Join us in giving thanks and praise to God

And bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we give thanks for the birth—and the childhood—of Jesus. We give thanks for your constant love and presence with him as he navigated transitions, losses, and even death itself. When we are shaken to the core, when we are lost or afraid, give us the assurance of your love, and the love of your big family, the whole people of God. Guide us as we seek to live out our vocation as your beloved children, as we grow in stature and in wisdom, as we serve you and our neighbors in Christ. Amen.



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