

## ***Life Overflowing: Vocation***

*Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Colossians 3:17

*The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.* Frederick Buechner

God's abundance meets us in the Word—incarnated in Jesus, proclaimed in preaching, falling from the pages of the transforming Book. This same abundance washes over us in Baptism and gets down deep inside us in the Supper. And God's amazing abundance also flows *through* us, into the life of the world, primarily through the gift of **vocation**.

“Vocation” includes our work or profession, but only as one small part of a larger whole. In truth, God calls (*vocare* is the Latin term) us in all sorts of ways, roles and “stations” in life. This all-encompassing understanding of vocation was one of Martin Luther's great gifts to the world. And yet it often seems like a hidden treasure, right under our noses—one of the gems we Lutheran disciples have silently squirreled away in our treasure chest. It's time to bring vocation out into the light of day—to appreciate the multitude of ways it, too, is a means whereby Christ's life overflows through our down-to-earth callings.



Martin Luther (1483-1546) re-introduced the church to the fullness of “vocation” in the life of every baptized believer.

### **Comes With the Territory**

The first thing to be said about our vocation is that it's a given—not an accomplishment. Like all good things, it is God's doing. The background of vocation has to do with how God has put together the whole creation. In the words of a favorite confirmation textbook, “God has designed the creation in such a way that we all wind up [helping and] trading with other people.”<sup>1</sup> Even if we don't want to have anything to do with others, life leaves us little choice in the matter. Just by going about our business, we will inevitably help out others.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard O. Forde and James A. Nestingen, *Free To Be*, p. 48.

When we are baptized into Christ Jesus, however, this way the creation is structured comes back to us as a beautiful gift. It's not just that circumstances compel us to help others—but God calls us to this good work, in whatever ways we do it.

In the Middle Ages, the word “vocation” was reserved for persons set-apart for the religious life: priests, monks, and nuns. But Martin Luther, as he rediscovered the goodness of the gospel, boldly spoke of the vocations of all the baptized: “*Whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop and pope.*”<sup>2</sup>

### **Everywhere We Look**

Not only are we all called to service in our baptism, but this call of God keeps getting repeated in our lives, whichever way we turn. If you think you maybe got missed when God came calling—guess again! “*Just look at your tools—at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure,*” write Luther. “*All this is continually crying out to you: ‘Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.’*”<sup>3</sup>

Our vocation in Christ encompasses all our roles and relationships—those that are public and those that are more private. Again, in the words of Martin Luther: “*How is it possible that you are not called? You have...always been a husband or a wife, a boy or a girl, or servant...Are you a husband, and you think you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics, and property so that all may be obedient to God and you do no one any harm? Yea, if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for your task, so that you would never dare to think of making a pilgrimage or doing any kind of saintly work.*”<sup>4</sup>

### **Infiltrating the World**

You have to hand it to God: our down-to-earth vocation is a great way for God to do vital business in the world! We could even say that through our vocations we Christians “infiltrate” the world around us. That’s why Luther sometimes spoke of our vocations as one of the “masks” God wears to fulfill his purposes. Or, even more colorfully, “*God milks the cows through the vocation of the milk maids.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *To the Christian Nobility* (1520) LW 44:129.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Gritsch, *The Wit of Martin Luther*, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Sermon on the Day of St. John the Evangelist*

<sup>5</sup> LW 21:237



"God milks the cows through the vocation of the milkmaids."

All of this is true, even when a Christian doesn't breathe a word to his or her neighbor about Jesus. But imagine what happens when, in the natural connections and relationships of life, we employ our baptismal vocation to "name the name" of our hope, in Jesus!

When Joy and I traveled in India, visiting our companion synod last autumn we met not only some wonderful church workers, but also some inspiring laity who fulfilled their vocations by serving God in daily life. I think of our local tour guide, Dr. Patta Deva Raj, a teacher and school principal who now is offering his retirement to the work of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church—like many other ordinary Christians we encountered.



Bishop Suneel Bhanu Busi (left) and Dr. Patta Deva Raj (right) greet Bishop Larry at the airport in Vishakapatnam, India

In recent years lots of people have taken to wearing WWJD bracelets, standing for “What would Jesus do?” Unfortunately, that’s the wrong question! To ask, “What would Jesus do?” implies that Jesus is a figure of the past—“Good old Jesus. He was a great guy. I wonder what he’d do if he were here?”

But Jesus is here. Jesus isn’t gone or forgotten. He is alive, right now, very present among us. In fact, Jesus lives in us and through us. The more exciting question is: “What will Jesus (in you, through me) do?” Jesus lives and acts in our world, through the callings we carry out as sisters and brothers of our Lord. This reality is what’s behind our wonderful ELCA tagline: *God’s work. Our hands.*

### **The Bitter With the Sweet**

All of this makes the notion of vocation sound mighty appealing. But there is a downside in this—Luther called it the “cross” in our vocations. As we are faithful to all the roles, relationships and stations we occupy we will inevitably run into obstacles and suffer in some way, at some time. This is true even for the vocation of being a parent, as Luther observed: *“Alas, must I rock the baby, wash its diapers, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and sores, and on top of that care for my wife, provide for her, labor at my trade, take care of this and take care of that, do this and do that, endure this and endure that, and whatever else of bitterness and drudgery married life involves? What, should I make such a prisoner of myself?”*<sup>6</sup>

When we find that our callings bring drudgery or boredom with them, we wonder whether they’re worth it. This too, is God’s work in us—reducing our pride, cutting us down to the right size, opening us up to look to God (not ourselves!) for all good things. And then our vocations return to us as the gifts they were always meant to be. Once again, in Luther’s colorful way of saying it: *“O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in thy sight.”*<sup>7</sup>

### **Monday Through Saturday**

Whenever I preach in one of the congregations of our synod, I begin by greeting the worshippers on behalf of all their synodical sisters and brothers in Christ. And I thank them for their partnership—starting with all the ways they bear the light of Christ into the world in their Monday through Saturday lives. That is my way of saying something about our vocation, through which God is always coming up with new ways to embrace the world in his care, mercy and overflowing life.

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*God’s work. Our hands.*

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage* (1522)

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage* (1522)

For further reflection or discussion:

1. Playing off the Frederick Buechner quote at the beginning of the article, what's one place in your life where your deep gladness and the world's deep need have come together?
2. What are some ways your congregation **already** is helping people realize that God is at work in their daily lives, infiltrating the world with his grace and favor?
3. How could your congregation help disciples of the Lord Jesus **expand** their understanding and appreciation of their baptismal vocations?

This is the third of twelve articles on the theme *Life Overflowing*—an ongoing exercise in missional theology for the disciples and congregations of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod during the year 2010. These articles may be used for personal reflection; they may also serve as background study or a devotional resource for congregation councils and other parish leadership groups.