

Proper 20C

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## Centered Life Series #2

In about six weeks, we are going to be asking for our members to put on their nicest smiles and sit for a few minutes to have their photo taken. It's time to produce a new edition of the St. Barnabas pictorial directory. I know that your schedules are plenty full already, but I hope you will try to make time to have your photo included because these directories do become important historical documents. They are literally a snapshot of the St. Barnabas community at a particular point in time.

Take this directory for instance. This is the very first St. Barnabas pictorial directory, taken about fourteen years ago. The congregation was much smaller then, of course. Only six pages are needed to display all the photos. The first thing I noticed was that the pastor's hair was all one color at that time. But the part of the directory I want to share with you this morning is the introductory page. This is what I wrote:

*A seminary professor was traveling by air to attend a seminar in another city and had to switch planes at one stop. During the layover he picked up the phone and called a local pastor who had been one of his students. They talked for several minutes and the professor discovered that the pastor's church building was only a few minutes from the airport. "I've got three hours before my plane leaves," said the professor. "Why don't you pick me up and drive me over to see your church?"*

*"I'd love to," said the pastor, "but three hours isn't nearly enough time to see my church. They're all over town!"*

*Most congregational pictorial directories have a picture of their church building on the front cover. This one does not, and for a good reason. St. Barnabas is not a building. St. Barnabas is the people from all over town who regularly gather in the building at 15600 Old Rockford Road to worship their God.*

*St. Barnabas is accountants, bakers, computer programmers, dieticians, electricians, financial advisors, gardeners, homemakers...an alphabet full of people who live their Christian faith seven days a week. Their faces fill the pages of this directory. It is they who are St. Barnabas Lutheran Church.*

*So take some time to look over the following pages and you will discover what St. Barnabas really looks like.*

This same understanding of church underlies the devotional materials I write and include in the *Crosswinds* newsletter. It is called "Church Begins at Home" to be a gentle reminder that it is incorrect to speak of "going to church". We may go to the church building, but we don't "go to church" because wherever we are – at home, at work, at school, on vacation – wherever we are, we are church. Church begins at home because that's where we begin. But when we get in the car or on the school bus, the church of Jesus Christ gets in the car or on the school bus. Wherever we go, there goes the church.

That's because each one of us has received a call from God. What's that? You say you don't remember getting a call from God? You know that we often speak of those who work for a church as having a call, whether it's being called as pastor or church musician or lay minister or parish assistant. But you work in the secular world. You were hired, not called. In what sense do I say that each of us has received a call from God?

The understanding of call – or the related term “vocation”, which comes from the Latin word *vocare*, “to call” – can be traced to Martin Luther back in the early 1500s. Prior to Luther's time, only priests, monk, and nuns were considered to have a divine call. These were the only people who were thought to be truly serving God. But Luther understood one's call to come at baptism, and that means we are all called to be priests – the “priesthood of all believers”. There are not gradations of status in God's eyes. The ministry of Word and Sacrament to which Pastor Chris and I have been called is a very important ministry, but no more important than the ministries of teacher, accountant, manager, nurse, programmer, parent, politician, custodian, waitress, store clerk, farmer, or any vocation we might name. All of these vocations are of equal status in God's eyes because any vocation that serves the common good is a way of serving God. What makes a vocation a “Christian” vocation is not the tasks that are done or the place where the tasks are done, but the person who does the tasks.

Luther's situation was a little different from ours. There was little social mobility in his day. If one was a baker, she was likely to be a baker her entire life. If one was a coal miner, he was likely to be a coal miner his entire life. That meant, for Luther, that one is called “in” a vocation, not “into” a vocation. Luther assumed people had a certain vocation and he helped them see that by providing a service to their neighbor, they were living out their baptismal calling to serve Christ.

In this day and age in our American culture, it is becoming more and more rare for a person to have one vocation their entire lives. Part of that is due to rapid changes in technology. When I graduated from high school, becoming a web designer was not a career option, though one could get training in the repair of 8-track tape players. Part of the change is also due to the fluidity of economics – in this last generation the terms “takeover”, “outsourcing”, and “downsizing” have become part of our vocabulary and, for some of us, have led to one or more job transitions. Another reason many of us have multiple vocations in our lifetimes is the simple fact that people live longer today. In Luther's day, the average life expectancy was probably in the early 40's. Today when people reach their early 40's, many of them start thinking about a change in vocation.

You put all those factors together and the reality for many of us is that we are not called “in” a vocation. Instead, we struggle trying to decide what vocation we are called “into”. Some people have very definite experiences where they believe God has told them to enter a certain vocation, or they have known since they were quite young that this particular vocation is what they want to do. Others have never felt a specific call and feel like they are treading water while trying to discern what God wants them to do.

The best advice I ever received about discerning God's call came on my very first day at seminary. I was sitting in a large auditorium with other new students and the speaker was the dean of students, Dan Simundson. Dr. Simundson looked out at the variety of people in front of him, both men and women, some just out of college, others in their 40s or 50s, and he said something like this: “I realize that some of you are here with a high degree of certainty that seminary is precisely where God wants you to be. I also realize that many in this room have no clue why you are here. To both groups, as you continue to discern your call, I suggest that you evaluate your talents and interests, identify where those talents can be used effectively in serving others, and consider that your calling.”

I love that definition because it applies to every one of us. In whatever stage of life you are in, evaluate your talents and interests, identify where those talents can be used effectively in serving others, and consider that your calling – the place where you serve God by serving others. You might discover that you are indeed called in the job you currently have. Or you might discern that you have talents and interests that are not being given full expression in your current job. That might lead you to explore a vocation change, or perhaps seeking a volunteer activity that allows those talents to blossom and bear fruit.

Luther's insights into the concept of Christian vocation have a very important implication for us: we serve God in our work, whatever it is. Commenting on Jesus' teaching, "Do to others as you would have them do to you", what we know as the Golden Rule, Luther writes about the vocations of his era:

*If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools—at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure—and you will read this [Golden Rule] inscribed on them. Everywhere you look, it stares at you...Indeed, there is no shortage of preaching. You have as many preachers as you have transactions, goods, tools, and other equipment in your house and home. 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 their property in their relations with you."*

One of the goals of the Centered Life initiative that we are beginning this month is to encourage each of us to see the activities we do during the week at home, work, and school to be our calling, our service to God and neighbor. In order to help us begin to see the extent of the ministries of the portion of the church that worships here at St. Barnabas, we have a favor to ask of you after the service. There is a large map of the metro area in the narthex and a set of stars. We ask that you go up to the map and take as many stars as you need to show where you are called in ministry during the week. It might be an office building or a school or a retail store. It might be your home to show your vocation as parent or spouse. It might be the place where you volunteer your time. I know that some of you need a national or even world map to show where your vocation takes you. It will be exciting to see all the places where the church goes every week.

God bless you as you discern and live out your baptismal calling.