The concept of vocation is central to my work in the areas of discernment, clergy leadership, and career development. The opportunity for study of the classic and newer literature in the field of vocation and the theology of work has provided a broader view and a stronger foundation for my continuing exploration of these disciplines.

The intent of this 3-part article is to summarize briefly the wide range of ways that vocation has been understood and applied in the Christian tradition. In this and the next two newsletters, I will review the use of the word vocation, the insights from four major historical periods, and a more contemporary refocus from a doctrine of vocation to a theology of work. It is my hope that these articles will also provide a good foundation and a conversation piece as we promote the Life of Faith Initiative across the synod.

**Vocation, a word with many meanings**

The term vocation, which comes from the Latin vocatio, meaning calling, has had varied usage affected by language, religious intent, and historical context. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures provide accounts of individuals and communities who experienced a calling from God to go or to stay, to lead or to follow, to proclaim or to be silent, but always, to be God’s people. Some of these callings were about occupation or a particular task in God’s service, some involved family and relationships, some required a change of residence, but all required commitment. Biblically, vocation encompasses obedience to a summons from God, a conscious decision of the intellect, and the passion known to a believer’s heart.

The New Testament describes how we have been called to faith through the Gospel (2 Thess 2.11, 14) and how God calls us to a particular office or way of life (1 Cor 1.1-2, 26; 7.15-20). Here, the word call, often klesis in Koine Greek, is used to refer to the call to follow Jesus or the call to believe the gospel and to describe the way in which Christians are disciples in their everyday lives. The apostle Paul expanded the understanding of Christian calling to include the use of the spiritual gifts given by God for the building up of the church (1 Cor 12), as well as the activities of daily life done in service to Christ when he wrote, *Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters...* (Col 3.23).

In the early centuries of the Christian church, especially in times of massive growth and during the Roman era, reform movements began to speak of those who were called to a stricter righteousness – people who accepted a call to keep the Ten Commandments and all of Jesus’ teachings through a higher calling. Vocation became the word referring to the service or work of a monk, a nun, or a priest, which required taking a life-long vow of obedience, celibacy, and faithfulness to the Church (Kolden, 2002). Ordinary occupations of life were considered necessary and worldly, but not spiritual or holy.

The religious and social movement of the Reformation, particularly Martin Luther’s teaching of the priesthood of all believers taught that all Christian believers, clergy and laity, have vocations or callings that include God-given and holy responsibilities, authorities, and blessings of their own. In *God at Work*, Gene Veith, Jr. writes:

> The priesthood of all believers’ did not make everyone into church workers; rather, it turned every kind of work into a sacred calling (2002, p. 19).
Luther used the Latin and Greek terms for call, in addition to the German *Beruf*, to interpret *vocation* from a broad perspective (Wingren, 1957/2004, pp. 1-3).

For Protestant Christians since the time of the Reformation, the word *vocation* came to mean the work and relationships of life that they carried out in obedience to the call to live as disciples of Jesus. John Calvin and his followers emphasized the Christian’s vocation in the world through their work, and using the writings of the apostle Paul, added their unique contribution of the discernment of spiritual gifts in aiding a believer to make wise and faithful responses to their call (Ray, 2011). The Puritans applied the doctrine of vocation with a diligence and intensity that shaped American culture. (Veith, 2002, p. 20).

Christians with a contemplative manner have sometimes interpreted the Latin *vocatio* as the word meaning *voice*, demonstrating that one must listen for and hear the voice of God speaking internally or externally, in order to follow as an act of will. Parker Palmer writes:

> Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live – but the standards by which I cannot help but live if am living my own life...Vocation does not come from a voice “out there” calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God (Palmer, 2000, pp. 4-5, 10).

In more secular times and places, the word *vocation* has lost its theological richness and has been used synonymously with words like job, occupation, or skilled trade, as in *vocational training* or *vocational education*.

It seems as though Christians of all persuasions have struggled to find a way to define and explain *vocation* as something somewhere between *just a job* and a *miraculous voice from the heavens telling me what I should do with my life*. This indicates to me that people with faith in God and in God’s active hand in the lives of human creatures, desire a life of meaning and direction that is as unique and purposeful as the individuals God has created.

References


