

“Illuminating Identity: What You Do”

A sermon preached on Luke 5:1-11 by Emily Hull McGee
on February 10, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

If ever you find yourself in a group of people and are forced to make small talk — either by your own free will or not! — inevitably the question will come up. You know the one I’m talking about. You may travel first through conversation about the weather or conversation about the little hors d’oeuvres you’re being served. You may compliment each other on your outfit, or do some people-watching with those all around you. You may remark about the event you’re attending or comment on the things you’ve seen or heard that night. But inevitably the question will come up: “So *what do you do?*”

It’s a loaded question, isn’t it? For some people, it means ‘*what is your job?*’. For others, it means ‘*how do you fill your days?*’ Some are wondering ‘*how do you make your money,*’ and others are curious about ‘*how you make a living*’ — occasionally those questions overlap. Some are simply inquiring about the things you like, what fills your time, what sparks your imagination. And yet this is a question we often turn to as we’re learning more about each other, for it does illuminate much about our identity, doesn’t it? “*what do you do.*” And yet somewhere as we explore these Epiphany texts and understand the revelation of Jesus that grows with each passing day, I wonder if the question *what do you do* can reveal to us something about Jesus and something about us.

II.

Today's gospel reading is rich with possibility, revealing much about vocation, and calling, and job, and work. For at once, it can be claimed as a miracle story (from no fish to so many they nearly caused the boat to sink!) or a resurrection story (like that in the Gospel of John after Jesus's death and resurrection when a similar empty-net-turned-full experience revealed Jesus to his disciples). It is filled with small details that add richness to the account: Jesus teaching from the boats because he felt hemmed in by the crowds, the invitation to leave the metaphorical shallow water for the deep, the name change of Simon to Simon Peter as the story progressed. But in my readings this week, it feels most fully to me like a story of calling, of vocation, of aligning one's gifts and skills of this life with God's work of love in the world to answer again the question: *what do you do?*

Unlike the stories in Matthew and Mark of calling, where Jesus issues an explicit invitation to those fishermen with their nets – “Come, follow me!” – Luke is more subtle And unlike Matthew and Mark, where the disciples followed Jesus without any prior knowledge of him or his ministry, Luke sets this account with Simon (later called Simon Peter) who already knew Jesus. He had heard Jesus teach, Jesus had stayed in Simon's house, Jesus had even healed Simon's mother-in-law from an illness.¹ There's a relationship there. So when we hear Luke use the name Simon Peter for the first time, when abundance begins to fill the boats such that they start to sink, when like Isaiah before him we hear Simon Peter echo like Isaiah called before him a word of unworthiness before Jesus in this exchange, when they left

¹ Luke 4:38-39

everything and followed Jesus, we have to wonder: what does this passage have to teach us, not just about their calling as disciples, but about *our* calling as disciples?

III.

A few months ago, I was generously invited to write my own story of calling to the ministry as part of a collection of call stories among folks in Baptist churches like ours assembled by the publishing house Nurturing Faith. I was so honored by the invitation, partly because I would be one of a few multi-generational stories of call within the same family — my grandfather, my mom, my dad, and I will all have our stories shared within.

I accepted the invitation and then proceeded to put off the writing... perhaps because I had other things to fill the time, or maybe because I was procrastinating, or most likely, I wondered as I finally finished it up the day before it was due, because of fear of the weight of such a legacy to speak into. What might I have to say that someone far more eloquent than I — even multiple members of my own family! — hasn't already said?

But as I got to the writing, I found myself so grateful to be doing so in Epiphany, particularly in this sermon series about how our identities are illuminated by the light of Christ. I realized while finding the words to articulate something so personal to me, that I was not too unlike Simon Peter, James, and John. For God called me right in the midst of another job, another calling, another vocational path. I was singing, living in the big city and trying to make it as a professional musician.

But the gift of hindsight allowed me to see that in my call, God wasn't asking me to give up everything I've known, studied, prepared for, and

practiced. Rather, God was gently but persistently asking me to reexamine what I was already doing. Because for me, the very best part of being a musician was participating in the vibrant artistic community. Don't get me wrong — there is a certain thrill to nailing a high note alone on a stage that sends chills up my spine even now just thinking about it. But as I thought back, my favorite times of music-making were not the ones that unfolded alone but rather those experienced with others, when that craft afforded me deep and transformative relationships with some of the most authentic, creative, vibrant, spiritually wounded-yet-hungry people I've ever known.

And it was right smack in the middle of a fervent season of musical work that I felt the dawning of my sense of call and vocation. For it's as if God saw me returning again and again to the waters of musical creation, trying to hone my craft to further my career and coming up with a handful of fish here and nothing there — and instead of telling me to hang up my nets and go take up another craft, God used what I knew, what gifts I had, what I had experienced, where I had come alive, and asked me to cast them again — but this time into the deep waters of people. No longer would I be fishing for the next audition, the flashy gig, the good review.

So when I felt then and still occasionally feel now inadequate to the task of ministry, like I'm a shadow of the ministerial giants who have come before me or one who doesn't know enough, do enough, believe enough, or have faith enough for this certain vocation, I hold fast to the words of Jesus who calls us right in the midst of our work and said "Do not be afraid! From now on you will be catching people."

III.

Fortunately for the sake of the world, it's not just ministers and 'religious professionals' who are called by God to the work of Love. In fact, if there's any witness we can draw from scripture, it's that God's call falls indiscriminately on God's people here on earth, most often using those who couldn't imagine that they would be ones chosen for such a vocation. So no matter who we are, how do we understand our God-given vocation?

I wonder if there's a clue there, in this word 'vocation' we get from the Latin 'vocare,' which literally means a 'call' or 'summons.' But notice that the word 'vocation' doesn't mean 'job,' or 'thing that earns you your biweekly paycheck.' Rather 'vocation' can mean 'the specific call one answers, doing what one is meant to do,' participating in God's work of Love in the world.²

Martin Luther said all people have a vocation; for "vocation is the calling of every Christian to be the servant of Christ whatever our specific 'work' in society."³ For in the spirit of Luther – some might be called to change dirty diapers, others to change air filters, some to change systems and industries, others to change people's minds. Even though they are different, all are as important a calling from another. But no matter one's calling, every Christian, every one of us baptized into who and whose we are, is to live out that calling within a deeper sense of vocation, of being subject and servant to Christ in whatever form of work shapes our days.

Barbara Brown Taylor once told a story about a woman in her church who wrestled with her sense of vocation. You see, this woman's plate was full

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Vocation," *The Preaching Life*, p27.

³ As quoted by Dr. Bill Leonard in his address, "Vocation: Claiming and Being Claimed," *Can I Get a Witness?*, p52-58.

— she had a full time job, a family, responsibilities with her community and neighborhood, a committee assignment in the church’s governing structure, and even managed to eke out a few volunteer opportunities every now and again. Where was there room for one more thing?, she wondered often. So when her priest, Barbara, preached about the priesthood of all believers, about the ministry of the baptized laity being God’s great hope for the world, she responded with equal parts exhaustion and frustration: “I’m sorry,” she said to Barbara, “but I don’t want to be that important.”

In her reflection on that encounter, Rev. Brown Taylor said this: “like many of those who sit beside her at church, she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to *do* more — to lead the every member canvass, or cook supper for the homeless, or teach vacation church school. Or she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to *be* more — to be more generous, more loving, more religious. No one has ever introduced her to the idea that her ministry might involve being just who she already is and doing just what she already does, with one difference: namely, that she understand herself to be God’s person in and for the world.”⁴

If living into our God-given vocation is as accessible as being who we already are and doing what we already do with the understanding that we are God’s in and for the world, then how do we make that shift? What series of lessons or circumstances are needed to help each person discover his or her God-given vocation?

For years, I resonated so strongly with Frederick Buechner’s definition of vocation. You know the one: “the place God calls you to is the place where

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Vocation,” *The Preaching Life*, p28.

your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Yes, I'd think to myself! That's exactly where we all should work, right, investing our time and best energies of our lives in that very place.

But with each passing day all around the world, we learn more and more about the way that people's labor is exploited, or unfairly compensated, or diminished, or outsourced. We know that nearly 10% of the world's population – nearly 750 million people – live on less than \$2 a day.⁵ We know the crushing weight of debt that increases with every passing generation, dictating the working lives of so many who get jobs first to pay off what they owe, not to use and save and give away what they make.⁶ What a privilege it is to align work and calling, to be able to make a living with your loving. By that definition, is vocation merely reserved for the privileged?

We should notice that Jesus's call to discipleship here in the Gospel of Luke didn't come first to the privileged, or when things were just so. The call didn't happen when the disciples were in their last semester of school, ripe and ready for their first job. The call wasn't issued once they had perfected the art of fishing, or thoroughly tidied up their houses, or paid off the credit card debt, or when the kids had finally settled down, or when the retirement fund reached its peak. Rather the call to discipleship came on the job they had, at the end of a back-breaking third shift that yielded nothing for their labor, with the directive to keep going.⁷ A call to a deeper vocational identity

⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>

⁶ See anything John Thornton has ever written! He's a prophet when it comes to debt, Millennials, and the church.

⁷ Peter Eaton's apt ending to his commentary on Luke 5:1-11 was just right and influenced my whole read on this passage for today's sermon. Peter Eaton, "Luke 5:1-11," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p337.

came for those first disciples precisely when they were being who they already were and doing what they already did. Drop the nets again, Jesus said. You know those nets, you know how to hoist them up and send them plunging into the waters. You know what you're capable of, you know these boats and this sea, you are fishermen! "Do not be afraid! From now on you will be catching people."

IV.

I wonder today how many of us stand paralyzed there by Jesus, weary and bone-tired from the labor of this world. Whether we're just getting started or long since retired, we know what we've given up for these nets, we know the sacrifice these boats have demanded of us. We think to ourselves: I'm too old to change, I've got too much invested to switch, I'm terrified of what I may be asked to do now, I'm too burdened by all the bridges I've burned to get where I am, I can't give up this dream, this addiction, these possessions that anchor me to my sense of self. And day after day, we cast our nets in that same shallow water.⁸

Until the moment when we hear again the call for the deep, the summons to follow, the invitation that will at once make the familiar foreign and the extraordinary common. The beckoning can sound like the buzz of a saw, the waves lapping the boat, the click and clack of the keyboard, the ding of an adding machine, the wail of a baby, the thwack of erasers on a chalkboard, the hum of a crowd in the restaurant, the hotel, the game. You might hear the noises of the job you know. Or you might catch the words of

⁸ With gratitude to Alan Sherouse for a beautiful rendering of this text from a sermon on January 21, 2018 called "Nets."

our Lord, deep calling to deep with these words: “Do not be afraid! From now on you will be catching people.”

And you might be surprised to hear yourself whisper back, “here I am! Send me!”

Let those with ears, hear! And may it be so.

Amen!