



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School  
Watertown, WI

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

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Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 1, 2013

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## **“The High Calling of Your Work”**

*(Jeremiah 1:4-5)*

Rev. David K. Groth

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*“Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’ (Jer. 1:4-5).*

## **Collect of the Day**

O Lord of grace and mercy, teach us by Your Holy Spirit to follow the example of Your Son in true humility, that we may withstand the temptations of the devil and with pure hearts and minds avoid ungodly pride; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

How do you know what you are supposed to do with your life? It's an important question, regardless of where you happen to be on the journey. Some of our members are trying to figure out what major to declare at the university. Some are working hard at your job and continuing to wonder whether it's the right one. Some are approaching retirement, when the work that has occupied you and, in some ways, defined who you are, is coming to an end and you're wondering what to do with the next two/three decades of your life.

It's an important matter, and the Bible actually has a lot to say about it. One example is our text from the first chapter Jeremiah. The year is 627 BC. Jeremiah is young. He's not a wild-eyed religious fanatic nor a self-appointed rabble rouser. He's a boy, the son of a priest, and in this instance God makes very clear what he wants Jeremiah to do.

"Before I formed you . . . I knew you, . . . I consecrated you and appointed you to be a prophet to the nations." And then comes young Jeremiah's wonderfully human response: "Thanks, but no thanks. You see, I don't know the first thing about public speaking; crowds make me nervous. And besides, I'm just a boy."

It's a familiar pattern in the Bible. God calls, and the one called resists. When God came to Moses and told him his job was to go to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and lead the people to freedom, Moses says, in effect, "Who me? I'm just a shepherd, a working man. I'm not eloquent. I stutter. Besides I'm happy right here, tending these goats. Ask someone else."

And who can forget Jonah, who when called to preach to those in Nineveh took off in the other direction.

In the Bible, God calls; the one called resists; God persists – won't take no for an answer – and then makes a promise: "You're not in this alone. I'll be with you every step of the way."

"Don't say you're only a boy," God tells young Jeremiah. "You shall go to those to whom I send you and say what I want to say. Do not be afraid of them; I will be with you" (v.7).

We believe that as God used Jeremiah in his vocation as a prophet, God uses us all in our vocations. That truth is deep within our tradition. Already in the story of creation, after everything is finished, and he's declared it all "very good", then God does the most remarkable thing. He steps back and hands his precious creation over to us. He says in effect, "Here, take care of it. It's for you to use. Don't ruin it. Keep it. Protect it. Help it to flourish."

Most of the artwork shows Adam and Eve with their fig leaves looking alternately at each other and the forbidden fruit. It ought to show them at work, pruning, planting, harvesting. The wonderful garden will provide for their needs – one of which, apparently, is the need to do something productive – the need to work. That is, paradise, at least in part, is having meaningful work to do. Have we forgotten that?

It seems a new tradition has emerged, one that strives to avoid doing work. The ideal in this tradition is not meaningful, productive work – but leisure, idleness. The goal in this tradition is not doing all things well in service of others. The goal is not to *have* to do anything; not to *have* to serve anyone.

We believe God equips and calls each of us to serve our neighbors in our vocations and in that service there is full, rich and meaning life. For some, it's farming. For others, it's in medicine. Repairing cars, making loans, teaching children . . . whatever your vocation God can use it in service of others.

I remember asking my dad what he liked most about the insurance industry. He said it wasn't so much selling a large, new, expensive policy. What he enjoyed most was taking very good care of people when their home suffered a fire, or when their business was flooded. That's when he found his work to be most meaningful and rewarding.

When we take up our vocations, our neighbors are served, and we receive the satisfaction of doing what God wants done. Therefore, it can all be important work. Luther said somewhere that diapering an infant is just as high a calling as preaching a sermon.

For some fortunate people, their vocation is made abundantly clear early on. For Jeremiah, it was being God's spokesman, a prophet. For Yo-Yo Ma, it's playing a cello; you can hardly imagine him doing anything else. For Aaron Rodgers, it's throwing a football, long and accurate and – please, God – for lots of touchdowns. For Georgia O'Keefe, painting bold, beautiful, irresistible flowers. For some, it's running for political office. For some, it's writing out speeding tickets and racing to a crisis. For some it's simply doing what they were clearly gifted to do. Others . . . they have to wrestle with it, and it's a source of stress, anguish even. How do you know what God is calling you to do?

Often pastors are asked, "How did you decide to be a minister?" The assumption is that God spoke dramatically and clearly in the middle of the night, in the resonating baritone voice of James Earl Jones. For me, it didn't work out that way at all. It was grandma's voice. I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She said, "Dave, you should be a pastor." And that was it. No lightning. No thunder bolt. Just an idea quietly planted, one that grew and became harder to ignore.

How do you decide what your vocation is? I've always liked what Frederick Buechner has to say about it. Your calling is where your interests and joys and loves intersect with the needs of the world. That is, identify what makes you feel happy and fulfilled, and ask how might the world need that?

Scott Neeson was the president of Twentieth Century

Fox (a big time job with a big time salary). He was living a charmed life in Hollywood and known for taking exotic and interesting vacations. Once he was backpacking in Cambodia when he came across street children trolling a dump, looking for anything to sell – or to eat. It got to him . . . deeply. He organized the Cambodia Children’s Fund, built an orphanage and a school, started to raise money from his friends, and began traveling back and forth between Phnom Penh and Hollywood. He describes what happened one day:

The phone rang. An actor who was on tour was having a serious meltdown because the private jet didn’t have the right amenities for him . . . [The actors staff told me] that life wasn’t meant to be this difficult . . . And I thought, I don’t want this to be my world. Here we’ve got the jet sitting on the tarmac and I’m sitting with these dying children and I just wanted to scream into the phone, “Come down here for a day and see what it’s all about.” He reflects, “I sort of enjoyed [the perks of my job], but I wasn’t happy.” So, he quit. He “climbed down the corporate ladder,” works full-time for the Cambodian Children’s Fund, and says, “I’ve never been happier in my life . . . I get up in the morning and I can’t wait to get to work.” (*Neeson, “The Life of Meaning”, 390-392*).

Not everyone can do that, obviously. But I do know people in this congregation who could be making much more money doing something else, but they know their calling is to work with people with developmental and intellectual disabilities. Even on their days off they sometimes go in to say “hi” and see how their people are doing. That’s vocation. Similarly, I know I had classmates who left very prestigious jobs to come to the seminary. One was an engineer at NASA, another was a corporate attorney working for a large Chicago law firm. They were doing very well by

most measures, but they weren't happy. So they left their jobs and began training for their vocations.

What do you enjoy doing? What are you good at? Where does that intersect with the needs of the world? Some blessed souls, and I count myself among them, get paid to do what they most love doing. And some must earn their living in order to do what most makes them happy. And some work all their lives and are never sure what they are doing amounts to anything or makes any difference at all. That's the case for a lot of good people. Perhaps you're one of them. But let's think about that for a moment.

God uses what we do for his own purposes. God takes up the work of our hands, whatever it is – building buildings, growing soybeans, birthing and nurturing the children, teaching the class, designing office space, healing the sick, sitting with the lonely – God takes all of it and weaves it into the care of his creation, and uses us in all those ways to serve others, and has promised that lives lived like that are lives that are full and deeply happy. Conversely, when we're focused only on the pursuit of happiness, ironically it makes us not at all happy.

Think about it. Like Adam and Eve, we all want to be like God. Even super wealthy celebrities are often not yet happy because there's still this immeasurable gap between who they are and who God is. That actor who was throwing a tantrum on the tarmac: I suspect the first time he flew in a private jet was pretty heady stuff for him. He loved it. The thirtieth time . . . maybe not so much anymore. He had grown accustomed to it. We are like drug addicts in that way: we grow a tolerance and soon need a higher dose of something else to get the same thrill. The most enslaved and miserable people are those who are chained to the pursuit of happiness. But God has ordered the world in such a way that true joy is found in serving others through our God-given vocations . . . giving life and resources away, making a difference in the lives of those around us.

In that way, there's work for all to do, high callings given us by God. All work, however lowly in the eyes of

the world, is good and important and dignified if done for the glory of God and in service of our neighbors.

It is the most important decision you and I can make.

It is a decision you and I make every day.

It is a decision that can make us desperately unhappy or deeply satisfied.

It is a decision we can change.

In the end, I think it's a theological decision.

It is a decision made thousands of years ago when a young boy named Jeremiah ultimately said "yes" to God's call.

It's a decision made by the second person of the Trinity who said "Yes" and was born in Bethlehem, and walked among us, teaching, preaching and healing. But he came to do more than just that. He came to give his life as a ransom. On a cross outside of Jerusalem, that's where his great love for you intersected with your highest needs. That was his vocation, his office, to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Your work too is where your joys and deep love intersect with the needs of the world. Amen.

BUSINESS NAME  
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