

The Language of Vocation

“Vocation” comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

--Frederick Beuchner in *Wishful Thinking*

What is Vocation?

“Vocation” means calling. It can mean what calls to you—either things that are so compelling that they draw you toward them, or things that are so broken that they lead you to want to engage to make them better. For many people, vocation implies work—and it includes work, but is more than just what we do from 8-5. Christians believe that our vocations are callings from God, linking our giftedness and our “deep gladness” to those places in the world where we can have the most impact. Vocations are also not just “religious work” but can happen in any realm of life, in any profession or avenue of service. In fact, we have many callings in addition to our particular work and service—callings to be children, siblings, friends, citizens, advocates. Even if you don’t believe that God is involved, figuring out what “calls to you” and orienting your life around that is an extremely fulfilling way to live.

When you think of “vocation” what words come to mind? How have you understood it?

What is Discernment?

“Discernment” also comes from Latin; the prefix “dis” means off or away, and the root word “cernere” means to sift or strain. So discernment is to “sift away.” Imagine making a pan of mac and cheese. You boil the water, add the noodles, and cook them until they are done. But if you dump in milk, butter, and powdered cheese without straining the noodles, you get a great big mess. The water, which was essential in a particular stage, needs to be let go of so that the next stage of mac and cheese can continue. In the context of vocation, discernment means to sift through all the options before us in life, all the various voices and pressures influencing us, and creating space to listen to our own deepest self and to God, so that we can get clear about what our callings are. It’s a process, and one that is never ending—and is best done in community.

How do you sift through all the options in your life? Which voices or pressures are the loudest?

Practice: The Language of Vocation

As a group or with a partner, take turns reading the following statements about vocation out loud.

After each statement, pause and silently reflect for 1 minute on what you just heard.

Then spend 1 minute in dialogue with a partner about what came up for you in the listening.

Repeat for all 8 statements, then discuss as a group (or with your partner) the following question:

How has my understanding of vocation changed in this exercise?

1. **Christians believe everyone is called by God and has a vocation—in fact many vocations.** There is an abundance of rich and diverse gifts within the body of Christ waiting to be discovered. Communities committed to caring for vocation foster a culture of noticing, naming and nurturing all the gifts people bring.
2. **Finding your vocation is not a process to find your one and only true calling.** Instead it an ongoing process of discernment of how best to use your gifts here and now—through work, family, hobbies, service, and all other aspects of your life. Vocations shift and change over time.
3. **The care for vocation is a communal and intergenerational practice.** The consistent witness of Scripture and our own experiences tell us that the discernment of call and care for vocation is done in the company of adults and young people within the community of faith. In every generation, we have a shared responsibility to care for vocation in all people.
4. **God’s call is an inward/outward invitation to anticipate, listen and respond.** We are continuously invited to listen deeply to one another and together for God’s call—and to support one another in faithful action to serve the common good and do God’s healing work in the world.
5. **Change is created one room at a time.** When we convene people in intimate small groups, ask powerful questions and listen deeply to each other, we create the possibility to fulfill the church’s mission in the world.
6. **A choice toward the future is distinct from the past.** When you get clear about your story, you are given the opportunity to write the next chapters of your story in a new way. Vocational discernment is a call to action that inspires us to make choices that say “yes” to a hopeful future. When communities care for vocation, particularly among young people, they plant seeds for a renewed, hopeful future and witness to God’s reign.
7. **Storytelling is a process for discerning vocation.** Within each person there are many stories longing to be shared and heard. We use a story process as the primary means to discern, discover and clarify a sense of vocation or call—what people really love or care about—and what inspires them to act on behalf of other people finding their own vocation or sense of call.
8. **Our stories give us clues about our vocations.** As we learn to tell and listen to stories, we can notice themes and key moments where we made choices to go one direction or another. Moments of struggle and pain can be keys to unlocking our deepest passions—and can help us connect those passions to the deep needs of the world.

Discussion/Journal Questions

How did you understand “vocation” previously? Has that understanding changed?

What are those things in the world that call to you? Both positive things you feel drawn to participate in and negative things you feel drawn to change.

Where do you find your deep gladness meeting the world's deep hunger?

Who do you know that is clear about their vocation or calling? How do you know that they are living out their vocation?

Who have been the key people in your life that have helped you discern your calling or make other important decisions? What about them allowed you the space to do that work?

What are the next steps for you in discerning your vocation?