

Finding Our Place in the Kingdom Story

Edgewood United Church
Jonathan Ritz, Lay Preacher

MEDITATION

“Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.” – Sigmund Freud

“Whoever loves much, does much.” – Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

SCRIPTURE

Isiah 55:8-12 (NIV)

⁸“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.

⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

¹¹so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹²You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9 (NIV)

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be

rewarded according to their own labor.⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

SERMON

Good morning.

As some of you know, our church was recently selected to be part of the Communities of Calling Initiative, a five-year project funded by the Lilly Endowment, and run through the Collegeville Institute at St John's University in Minnesota. The Initiative partners with congregations across North America to create projects that help Christians discover and deepen their sense of God's calling in their lives. As a participating church, Edgewood will receive training for a 3-person team, educational resources for the entire congregation, and a grant of \$30k for us to use as a community.

Earlier this year we held a congregational meeting to discuss whether Edgewood should apply for the Communities of Calling program. At the meeting, there was a general sense that "calling" seems an especially important concept these days, because there are so many issues that demand our attention, so many different fronts where we might serve. With a new sense of urgency, perhaps, we feel pulled to discern and follow a deeper calling, both individually and as a congregation.

You may have noticed the two quotes in the meditation section in today's bulletin. The first is from Sigmund Freud, one of the founders of psychology and intellectual architects of the modern world. The two cornerstones of our humanness, says Freud, are love and work. I like this quote, because while Freud usually focuses on illness, the signs and symptoms of mental and emotional unwellness, here he points instead to the markers of our truest health: our ability to pursue authentic love and meaningful work. From Freud, we move on to the second quote, which takes us back to the 15th century, to Thomas a Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ*. *The Imitation* is perhaps the most widely read Christian work next to the Bible and is regarded as a devotional classic. Slightly paraphrased for our purposes, Thomas tells us, "Whoever loves much, works much."

For me, moving from Freud's modern, secular perspective to Thomas a Kempis's religious one helps me consider how we might likewise shift from a secular to a sacred understanding of calling. In doing so, I certainly do not mean to suggest there is anything wrong with a secular view of calling, though I do think there are important distinctions in the way we might approach it as people of faith. It's noteworthy that both writers mention love and work together, but for Thomas, they are actually bound together, love and work creating a virtuous circle. "Whoever loves much, works much."

The concept of “calling” surrounds us in our society. Self-help books focus on seeking your path and finding your bliss. There are vocational tests aimed at guiding young people toward the right career. However, when viewed through a distinctly Christian lens, perhaps “calling” is best understood as finding our own unique role within the larger story of the coming of God’s Kingdom. Of course, this in turn raises some pretty big questions: “What is God’s kingdom?”, “When, where, and how is it arriving?” “How I am to discern my part within in it?”

These are not questions to be answered in a single sermon. Perhaps these are not questions to be answered at all, but, to borrow from the poet Rilke, they are questions to be lived into. Why? Because, as we hear from the prophet Isaiah in today’s reading, God declares, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” To me, this means God’s kingdom can never be simply distilled to a particular social, political, or economic plan—that is, to “our ways”—no matter how virtuous. Likewise, our role cannot be distilled to a particular choice we make in our professional or personal life. God’s kingdom, and our place in it, is ever emergent, ever becoming. Therefore, perhaps God’s Kingdom is best understood as a narrative, a story as wide and complex as creation itself, always in motion, and ever unfolding. Our calling is to find our role within this story.

So how do we discern this role, and once discerned, how do we enter more deeply into it? Let me humbly offer a few points here for us to consider.

First, the process of discerning our calling occurs by seeking guidance from God, scriptural and spiritual texts, and each other—therefore it occurs through prayer, study, and conversation, and calls on all our cognitive faculties, including imagination, intuition, reasoning, and reflection.

Second, discernment does not mean passively awaiting for our marching orders from heaven. In today’s reading, Paul tells us we “are co-workers in God’s service; [we] are God’s field, God’s building.” To me, this means we collaborate with God, which means we both discern and create our calling. This suggests there is not just one right path. Finding our call may result in a radical change in our life—leaving a current job to find a new one, or going back to school—but it may also include simply reorienting ourselves internally, finding ways to shift our energy and attention from one aspect of life to another.

Third, our calling will likely go well beyond the boundaries of our job or career or schooling. While I’ve put a lot of emphasis on the word “work” this morning, we should remain open to the perhaps paradoxical notion that find our calling might mean working less, or at least less busyness, and more time for prayer, reflection, fellowship, and a renewed valuing of quality over quantity.

Fourth, calling is an ongoing process throughout our lives, and it is different at different seasons of life.

Let offer me three examples of what calling may look like at different periods of adulthood. I'll begin with the period called emerging adulthood, roughly corresponding to years 18-30. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to work with a lot of people in this age range through my job as a professor and advisor. This semester I had a student in one of my classes who interned at the Women's Center of Greater Lansing, a local nonprofit that provides a variety of services at little or no cost to women in our area. Tiffany, our student, is a professional writing major and was hired to work on the Center's website. She did this and enjoyed it. Then, unexpectedly, her boss asked if she could help one of the Center's clients create her own website for an online business she was hoping to start. Tiffany agreed to help, and found this new aspect of her job intensely rewarding. In fact, she told me it was a good thing she was already close to graduating, because otherwise she might be tempted to drop out of college and work at the Center full time. That's what calling can feel like at the emerging adult stage—like we've found a part in a larger story—and one of the most powerful ways to do that is to use our gifts in service to others.

Next, let us consider middle adulthood, roughly ages 30-60. This is where I am. I'll confess I've spent my life as a sort of calling junkie, obsessed with the idea that there was some great mission I was meant to pursue, some unique purpose for my life. For the most part, that's often left me feeling that I missed some special opportunity, though I never knew exactly what it was. One small bit of wisdom I achieved at midlife, though, is to let go of this hero narrative, and to understand that my role in the Kingdom story is not meant to include anything exceptional or particularly unusual. And while I am trying some new things, including returning to school part-time to earn a masters degree in counseling, I'm trying do so without seeking any particular outcome, but just to be open to whatever new opportunities emerge.

Next, let us consider late adulthood, ages 60-80 or thereabouts. A notable societal change for this group is that many people are waiting later to retire, and following retirement may take up an encore career or take on significant volunteer projects. Anyone who's been around Edgewood knows we have many members who are models of living a fully active life during the late-career and post-career years. I could point to many examples, but one who comes to mind is Harold Mondol. Harold regularly travels to India to do charitable work and is currently arranging a trip to Haiti as well. I trust Harold plans to keep up this pace for the foreseeable future. However, recently he told me about a group of friends he plays tennis with. At 85 Harold is actually the youngster of the group, and these men have told him that once he hits 90, as they have, he should expect to slow down a bit. We'll see.

Of course, these age groups are broad and somewhat arbitrary categories, and they unfold differently for each of us; not everyone is able to pursue an active life at an advanced age, or chooses to do so. But certainly calling remains relevant at every age, including childhood and elderhood, the life stages that bookend adulthood.

As a final point, let me suggest that perhaps the truest mark of Christian calling is a sense that as our individual story becomes more deeply enfolded in the story of God's ever-emerging Kingdom, we feel a growing sense of peace. Not a peace borne out of abdicating to God our

profound responsibilities to each other; nor a peace borne out of unbridled confidence in human ingenuity alone to solve our problems. Instead, it is a peace that allows us to live—that is, to love and to work—in the tension between these two, as we find our place, our purpose, our calling, our place in the Kingdom story, moment by moment and day to day.

Amen.