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Matt Peterson

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VOCATION: A CHAPEL HOMILY

Matt Peterson

Allow me to quote former St. Olaf professor Dr. Howard Hong. He says, "The tragedy is that we seem to have lost the full grasp of the Christian vocation, its center and its implications." Hong had it right in his 1955 book *Our Church and the World*. He had it right then, and he has it right now.

Vocation is a term students seldom hear around here. What is a vocation, and how do you get one? First, vocational schools don't have a monopoly. You don't necessarily go to a vocational school to find your vocation, just as you don't necessarily come to St. Olaf to become liberal and artsy. In fact, I know plenty of people here who have no desire to become liberal. And I know people whose art is only destined for the refrigerator.

The word vocation comes from the Latin verb *vocare*, to call or to summon. A vocation, then, is a calling or a summoning. Traditionally a Christian concept, a vocation is a calling by God answered by the individual whom God personally calls. A vocation is not a product that any trade school or liberal arts school can tout.

Centrally, vocation is a calling to enter into daily communion with God. Through my daily communion I see how far I am from total communion, and thus I understand my *being* Christian as continually becoming Christian. Centrally, then, vocation is a call into becoming. Now this becoming, of course, has its implication. The implication is that in my continually becoming Christian I *do* something that aids me in becoming. Primary is the becoming. Secondary is the doing.

Unfortunately, we say we *become* English majors, English professors, seniors, or senior citizens rather than Christians. We strike the sense of becoming Christians, or we put *becoming* Christian alongside rather than foundational to becoming a student, teacher, theologian. We deform the sense of becoming into becoming an accomplished student, musician, or artist rather than becoming a Christian. Add the power of success to the mix and vocation's tie to

becoming Christian is all but lost. Success ties closely with our labels, which makes becoming a "something" even more sought after and subdues the faith-relationship in vocation even further. A "successful" person is successful regardless of religious devotion. Success is a person's GPA, win-loss record, number of honorary degrees, or net worth.

Hong is right. "The tragedy is that we seem to have lost the full grasp of the Christian vocation, its center and its implications." God calls us into a relationship with God. Our vocation is our attempt to enter into that relationship in a daily, daylong level. Our vocation is not a title. It is a summoning to be with God as we write papers, change garbages, or file tax returns.

Anthony Bloom writes, "A prayer makes sense only if it is lived. Unless they are 'lived,' unless life and prayer become completely interwoven, prayers become a sort of polite madrigal which you offer to God at moments when you are giving time to Him." If I do not seek to know God and serve God's people through my vocation, then it is an aimless or vainly directed occupation, a *thing* that occupies me, a pile of to-dos that fills time and directs according to deadlines and bottom lines.

On some days my papers, exams, rehearsals, and practices are my living out my vocation. And some days they are a pile of to-dos. Soon enough, the to-dos will gain even greater voice--for this very reason, whether or not I treat my future job as the implication of my vocation, I will still have to do my job to pay loans, buy food, and save money.

In the same hour that many Americans finish a 60 to 80 hour work week or an even longer study week, do they, do *we* not also feel something wrong with this "come hell or high water" demand for production? Is there not something wrong with the passion we have for Friday and the dread of Monday? Is there not something wrong that many people work only so they can retire or graduate? Part is that we are simply overworked--the weekend being our

only time to relax, to have time to ourselves, to reflect, to worship, to see our family. Part is that many of us have simply picked up majors, taken classes, or chosen jobs that help fulfill no calling whatsoever. These vocationless careers and educations only afford weekend, holiday, and summer escapes--escapes from the rat race. Is there something wrong with this? We answer now with the same excitement as on Easter Sunday. The pastor says, "HE IS RISEN!" We reply (dryly), "He is risen indeed."

Today I ask us, "Is there something wrong with the productive nature of school or the busy-ness of business?"

And we respond, (dryly), "Yes, there is something wrong, something flat-line, dead-cold, gravely wrong."

"Well," asks another, "How do you know it is dead wrong?"

"Because I'm living in it."

"So what are you going to do about it? Are you going to change it or get out of it?"

"Well, eventually I will graduate, get a job with vacations, and later I will retire, if that's what you mean. But right now I am too tired. I just want to finish my work and take a nap."

There are some, however, who do something about what seems wrong with going to college only to get a degree, living only for the weekend, and working only to retire. They, we, develop philosophies, theologies, and trite maxims to smooth over the contradictions. We rationalize the contradictions.

For example, we now value work independent of its spiritual possibilities. Today, a job's major connection, often its only connection to faith is that it allows for tithing. Spiritually, work only "pays off" on Sunday. In a collegial

setting like this, many students cannot answer what their daily, collegial work affords them spiritually. I often think that our living in a "faith community" means that we take it on faith that we live in a faith community. Where in our daily work and our communal living is the vocation? Really, many of us value daily work because we value daily work. We have lost vocation's center as a calling, and so all we have left to value is vocation's implication--the doing. If I value my doing something independent of my becoming a more earnest Christian, then I live by a Godless center, no matter how much religious rhetoric I heap on.

Professor Hong says, "When religion, God, and the Christian faith are used to bolster something else, [then religion, God, and the Christian faith] become something else." He continues, "The elevation of the secular task was not to mean our accommodation to the world and the glorification of work in itself. It was to make the daily life a witness to the love of God. In a faithless inversion have we not employed the faith rather to dignify what we do, than to redeem the time and human life?"

If I work on a hog farm all day, shoveling hog-piles of waste and I say that this work is my vocation, I do not affix the title vocation to explain that my stuff don't stink even though the hogs' does. A vocation is not about making me smell good, look good, or feel good, nor is it about academic success or monetary prosperity. It's not about positive self-image. If anything, my vocation teaches me about how little I know, how much I want people to think I know, and how little I can do on my own. It reveals to me how grossly I love myself, and how I allow my ego to inflate to Michelin-man proportions. My vocation, if anything, deflates.

My daily work, being part of my vocation, means that I can live in a relationship with God. My actions in this work are prayer and discourse with God. Amen.

Matt Peterson is a student at St. Olaf College.