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# Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road? : a Homily on Liminality and Vocation

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# Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road? A Homily on Liminality and Vocation



Sometimes homilies are like sitcoms. They both start with a funny story, they highlight a problem or dilemma of some sort, and they resolve that same problem neatly and quickly (in 22 minutes—commercials don't count—on TV and 5 to 10 or maybe 15 minutes from the pulpit). To do so, they use a

platitude or passage from scripture that is, ultimately, a word of support for the present and hope for the future.

I have used this formula myself. Many times. The funny story usually is at the expense of the privacy of one of my kids and has, in the past, included tales of throwing up, swearing, and licking the toilet. Today I *really* wanted to tell you the story about driving home from my night class two weeks ago with a frog in my car, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find a pertinent or pithy theological point to the story. Maybe some day I will figure out what it means and whether or not it connects thematically to another story of mine from a couple of summers ago about catching a chicken—with the help of my middle son and while wearing a swimsuit (with shorts, I might add)—on a very busy street in Maplewood, Minnesota, and quite literally, pondering the question, “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

But I think the very reason I am not up to that formulaic challenge today is buried in that very familiar and very *existential* question. The distance between “Why did the chicken cross the road?” and “Who am I?” and “What am I to do with my life?” or “What is my vocation?” is not so great.

Vocation. We talk about that term a lot. We try to make it easy, or, at least, accessible. We talk about a sense of calling and a caller, maybe God, calling. We talk about the self and those skills, strengths, and passions that make us who we are. We talk about the neighbor and the community and the world. We talk about their needs. We believe we are called to serve our neighbor. The intersection of that calling, those passions and needs—that is vocation. But it is not that simple.

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Some of my students, right now, are reading *The Other Wes Moore*, by Wes Moore. It is a story about two boys growing up in the same rough neighborhood of

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Baltimore at the same time, with—coincidentally—the same name. Both smart, driven, charismatic, capable. They did not hear the voice of God; they did not have *that* sense of calling. They navigated the neighborhood, day to day. The calls they heard were familial—one Wes Moore heard and, ultimately, heeded the voice of his mother. She removed him from the neighborhood, and sent him away to school. The other Wes Moore heard the voice of his brother, emulated his street-savvy business practices, sold drugs, robbed stores. The first Wes Moore went to college, became an officer in the military, got a Rhodes Scholarship. The other Wes Moore shot a police officer and has a life sentence without parole.

Other students of mine are reading *Outcasts United*, by Warren St. John. It is a story about a town on the outer perimeter of the Atlanta metropolitan area where thousands of refugees from all over the world have been placed. It is a story about a Smith College-educated, Jordanian woman, Luma Mufleh, who starts a soccer program for refugee boys. It is a story about long-standing racism and resistance to change. It is a story about adaptation and acceptance. It is a story about conflict and war around the world. It is a story about hope for a better life in a safe place. It is a story about high expectations and accountability. It is not a religious story, but it is a story of vocation. Luma has a vocation that is tied up with service and education. But I don't think she would call it that. But it is also a story that highlights “liminality.”

Liminality is a state of being between two worlds, in which a person “becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification,” according to anthropologist Victor Turner (Turner 232). Adolescence itself is a stage of liminality; refugees and immigrant teenagers possess a “double liminal status” and truly struggle with issues of individual identity.

This idea of “being between” needs to be part of our conversations about vocation. Starting college is a liminal experience. Literally, the word means threshold. Leaving high school and starting college is exactly like crossing a threshold. How long do students stand with one foot on each side? Increasingly, we have students who have this “double liminal status.” We have Hmong students, Muslim students, Latinx students, particularly those who are immigrants or the children of immigrants, all of whom are continually pulled between cultures, languages, and expectations. Our LGBTQ+ students, maybe coming out for the first time, experience liminality as do our students in Augsburg's StepUP recovery program. Our non-traditional students find themselves in liminal spaces, too: torn between their identity as student and professional, student and parent; they are balancing work and school while simultaneously caring for children and aging parents. This list is not exhaustive and these experiences are not limited to students. Those of us on the faculty and the staff also can list the ways we find ourselves *between*, between two worlds, with different pulls and competing priorities.

Are these considerations part of our reflections on vocation? Maybe they have been all along—and I am the one who has missed it or misunderstood. For a long time, I thought Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on vocation stood as a corrective to some of the seemingly cursory discussions of vocation (particularly conversations that lead people to believe that vocation is some one thing they have to find). Bonhoeffer writes of vocation as responsibility and claims that “vocation is the whole response of the whole person to the whole of reality.” (This is a paraphrase of his work in *Discipleship*.) I still stand by this idea. I think it functions as a hermeneutic, giving us a way to see vocation related to the whole of our lives, and to think

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about vocation as the way we live in the world, in relationship with others, how we make decisions and choose our actions and reactions. But I have started to worry that this idea of vocation as responsibility puts those who live in liminal spaces in an even more difficult position. If one is already torn between competing claims on one's identity, might not the idea that one must respond to those claims with the whole of one's life simply render decision-making and prioritizing impossible? It stretches them even more tightly and thinly across the divide.

Perhaps Bonhoeffer himself is the best one to address this concern because he lived the end of his life in prison, on the threshold between two worlds and two ways of understanding himself: as the one others saw, poised and confident, and the one he knew himself to be, unsure and weary. His famous poem, "Who Am I?" gives voice to his own state of liminality. The poem begins by asking

Who am I? They often tell me  
I step out from my cell  
calm and cheerful and poised,  
like a squire from his manor.

Later in the poem Bonhoeffer gives his own assessment:

Am I really what others say of me?  
Or am I only what I know of myself?  
Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,  
Struggling for life breath, as if I were being strangled...

The poem ends with this:

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions  
of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest me; O God, I am thine.  
(*Letters and Papers* 459-60)

Bonhoeffer's poem does not resolve his internal disruption but points us to the possibility that the surrender to the divine is one way through it. In that way, we can begin to glimpse the liminal as a place of transformation. The African-American slaves, and as slaves, the very embodiment of liminality, chose to enter the liminal space offered by song and prayer to "go down to the river to pray" as a way to transcend their liminal condition.

Honestly, I am still not clear on the relationship between liminality and vocation—how selves torn between identities can listen for the call that requires their authentic self to show up. But maybe there is power in the experience of liminality. And maybe there is choice, like Ruth's choice, in Ruth 1:15-18, to return to the land of Judah with Naomi. And maybe the real answer to the question, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" is something like "to make a new life on the other side."

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