**Upholding Gottesdienst: Preaching Vocation in Luther's Day and Ours**

**by Michael Bennethum**

See also Michael Bennethum's [One Vocation, Multiple Shapes](https://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Lutheran-Partners/Complete-Issue/090910/090910_07.aspx)

*Preachers today carry forward Luther's encouraging message that each Christian serves the neighbor through her or his varied and particular roles and in varied and particular contexts. All the baptized are called to the vocation of being Christ's presence in the world.*

Preaching on the feast day of St. John the Baptist in 1522, Martin Luther reminded his listeners, "As now no one is without some commission and calling, so no one is without some kind of work, if he or she desires to do right. All, therefore, are to take heed to continue in their calling, look to themselves, do faithfully what they are commanded and serve God, keeping the commandments."1  
  
  
  
In a 1525 sermon on 1 Peter 4:8-11, Luther commented, "The apostle Peter wants to remind everyone in particular to attend to his occupation or office and, in discharging it, faithfully to do and perform what is entrusted to, and demanded of, him. For, as scripture teaches in many places, no work is nobler than obedience in the calling and work God has assigned to each one: that he should be satisfied with serving his neighbor faithfully."2  
  
On the Fifth Sunday after Trinity in 1534, Luther encouraged those assembled for worship with these words:

See to it first of all that you believe in Christ and are baptized. Afterward concern yourself with your vocation. I am called to be a pastor. Now when I preach I perform a holy work that is pleasing to God. If you are a father or mother, believe in Jesus Christ and so you will be a holy father and a holy mother. Take watch over the early years of your children, let them pray, and discipline and spank them. Oversee the running of the household and the preparation of meals. Such things are nothing other than holy works, for you have been called to do them. That means they are your holy life and are a part of God's Word and your calling.3

Martin Luther's teaching regarding the vocation — or calling — of all God's people to respond to God's grace by serving their neighbors within their own particular places in society is a key element of our heritage as Lutheran Christians. This was a career-long emphasis of the reformer, one that was especially evident in his prolific preaching. And it made an impact! Louis T. Almen writes, "Luther's teaching on 'the calling' was liberating, giving new stature to the laity and providing new motivation, guidance and significance to daily occupations. The Reformation was not simply a rejection of the papacy and the medieval formulations of the Catholic faith; it was a response to the positive, life-fulfilling teachings of the Reformers."4 This response was so significant that Jürgen Moltmann asserts, "Next to Word and Sacrament, the recognition of the divine vocation of every Christian in his or her worldly occupation is the third great insight of the Lutheran Reformation."5  
  
**Divine Vocations**  
What did Luther have to say in his preaching that so engaged his listeners? First, he declared that all the baptized have a vocation, not just those who work in or for the church. Indeed, all have the same vocation, to live as people claimed by God, renewed by God's grace, and therefore freed to attend to their neighbors' needs rather than focus on their own. Second, the way God's people attend to their neighbors' needs looks different for everyone, since all have their own particular places and roles in society. Third, God values all that people do to attend to the needs of their neighbors, no matter how menial their labors.

God values all that people do to attend to the needs of their neighbors.

In 1532, Luther proclaimed, "If only everyone would regard their service to their neighbors as service to God, the whole world would be filled with godly service [*Gottesdienst*, the German word for "worship"]. A servant in the stable, a maid in the kitchen, a child in school — these are merely God's workers and God's servants, if they with diligence do what their father and mother, or the lord and lady of the household gives them to do. Thus would every house be filled with *Gottesdienst*, indeed every house would be a true church in which nothing other than pure *Gottesdienst* was practiced."6  
  
**A Compelling Preacher**  
Luther's preaching on vocation made an impact because he stressed the theme often throughout the church year. He illustrated his points by speaking in everyday language with which his listeners could identify. And, for the most part, his tone was positive and upbeat, one of encouragement that gave his listeners the sense that God was not imposing yet another duty on them, Rather, his words strived to affirm their ability to glorify their Lord simply by going about their ordinary daily activities, in their present contexts, using their God-given skills and strengths.

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| |  | | --- | | **Further Resources** *Books*   * Bennethum, D. Michael. *Listen! God Is Calling! Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work*. Augsburg Fortress, 2003. * Diehl, William E. *Ministry in Daily Life: A Practical Guide for Congregations*. The Alban Institute, 1996. * Dozier, Verna J., ed. *The Calling of the Laity: Verna Dozier's Anthology*. The Alban Institute, 1988. * Kim L. Beckmann. *Prepare a Road! Preaching Vocation, Community Voice, Marketplace Vision*. Cowley Publications, 2002. * Greene, Mark. S*upporting Christians at Work: A Practical Guide for Busy Clergy*. The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2003. * Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation*. Muhlenberg Press, 1957.   *Web Sites*   * [InterVarsity Urbana.org](http://www.urbana.org/whole-life-stewardship). The ministry in daily life Web site of InterVarsity. | |

In a sermon on Romans 12, Luther said, "Paul speaks of the temporal affairs of men, teaching likewise mutual appreciation of one another's calling and character, offices and works, and that none is to esteem himself better than another because of these. The shoemaker's apprentice has the same Christ with the prince or the king; the woman, the same Christ the man has. While there are various occupations and external distinctions among men, there is but one faith and one Spirit."7Or, consider how Luther connects with ordinary people in his "Sermon on Keeping Children in School":

If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools — at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardsticks or measure — and you will read this statement inscribed on them... . "Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you."8

**Preaching Vocation Today**  
In my sermons through the years, I have endeavored to remember Luther's emphasis on the vocation of all the baptized and to learn from the powerful way he proclaimed it. From Luther I have learned to pay attention: I am careful not to inadvertently give the impression that serving God is something one can only do through the church's ministries. Rather, I ask: Does my preaching help people connect their faith to their everyday activities, responsibilities, and routines?  
  
Luther has taught me that I need to know what the people to whom I preach do in their daily lives — what moves them; what challenges them; what are their joys, their fears, their frustrations, their questions about life and its meaning — so that I can speak to them in ways that connect. Some pastors seem to know little about what engages people's attentions when they are not at church.  
  
Finally, Luther has taught me to point out the positive, the wonder of a God who chooses to work in the world through us and our activities. Does my preaching affirm the possibilities for *Gottesdienst*, godly service, when I speak about daily life and work, or does it emphasize only the ungodly characteristics of life in a postmodern world?  
  
No less than was true in the sixteenth century, our preaching today can have a transformative effect on people and the communities in which they live — if we, like Luther, continue to look for ways to proclaim the good news that God's call to a new life in Christ includes sending out those who gather to hear God's word equipped to put their faith to work for the sake of the world!  
  
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**Endnotes**

1. *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (WA), *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 10.1, 1:308, Weimar, 1883.
2. *WA* 21:410.
3. *WA* 37:480.
4. Louis T. Almen, "Vocation in a Post-Vocational Age," *Word & World* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 131.
5. Jürgen Moltmann, "Reformation and Revolution," in *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind*, ed. Manfred Hoffmann, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 22 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 186.
6. *WA* 36:339–40.
7. *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 47.
8. *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Concordia: St. Louis, 1956), 21:237.

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