

Reformation Sunday. The scripture text is taken from John 8:31-36

Since this is the month and the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, today, I want to talk about Martin Luther, not about what he did to reform the Church, we have all heard that story, but rather, let's look at his perspective on "vocation". Which is something that is not talked about very often.

The Reformation contributed three major teachings that would characterize Protestantism in all of its diversity. First, "Justification by faith", Second, "The Authority of Scripture", and Third, the doctrine of "Vocation".

Now the first two still have relevance, despite recent criticisms. Even the Roman Catholic Church today, adheres to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. However, the concept of vocation has been gradually lost.

So let's talk about vocation. First, vocation was turned into a "work-ethic", then vocation was turned into a pious attitude, empty of specific content: then vocation was reduced to just another synonym for a "job".

Yet, in the Reformation, vocation was nothing less than the doctrine of the Christian life. Vocation was the locus for other important teachings, such as the priesthood of all believers, good works, and sanctification.

The doctrine of vocation shows Christians how to live out their faith in the world. It has to do with God's presence in the world and how he works through human beings for His purposes.

For Christians, vocation discloses the spirituality of everyday life. However, today, many Christians compartmentalize their lives, conforming to a consumer and material oriented culture, while pursuing transcendent spiritual experiences that have little, or nothing to do with their everyday lives.

Christians today, are variously, and sometimes simultaneously, waging culture wars, by withdrawing from the world, and/or conforming to it.

So what is this thing called, "vocation?" The word, "vocation", is simply the Latin term, for "calling". The best biblical formulation of the concept of vocation is from I Corinthians chapter 7, verse 17, where the Apostle Paul writes: "However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God has called you."

Other biblical texts, describe God's calling people, to His service and then giving them specific gifts and enable them to carry out that service.

God does this for kings, for paupers and for everybody in between, from the artist to the zoo-keeper.

Thus, God assigns different kinds of life and work for each Christian and then calls each Christian to that assignment.

So we must first understand, that vocation is God's work. For Luther, vocation is like justification, it is a function of God's grace.

In vocation (whatever that vocation maybe) God works through human beings to care for His creation and to distribute His gifts.

For instance, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, (to use one of Luther's illustrations), we ask God to give us our daily bread, and He does.

The way He gives us our daily bread, is through the vocations of the farmer, the miller, and the baker. We might also add, the truck drivers, the factory workers, the bankers, the warehouse attendants, the food service workers, and the ones who run the bakery and/or the grocery store.

Virtually, every step of our whole economic system contributes to that bagel, that piece of toast, or that pastry that you or I had for breakfast this morning.

Thus, we thank God for our food before we eat it, and we are right to do so, since God lovingly provides our food, and He does so, by means of vocation; that is, ordinary people just doing their jobs, with no hype or fan-fare.

To use another example from Luther, God could have chosen to create new human-beings out of the dust of the earth to populate the world, as he did with the first man, Adam.

Instead, He chose to create new life, which, however commonplace, is no less miraculous, by means of mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, through the vocations of marriage and the family.

To continue the point, God protects us through the vocations of earthly government, as detailed in the Book of Romans, chapter 13.

God proclaims His Holy Word by means of human pastors. God teaches by means of teachers. God creates works of beauty and meaning through human artists to whom God has given to them, particular talents, whether they be musicians, painters, sculptures, writers and so forth.

When someone we care about is hospitalized, we pray for healing. God uses the vocations; of doctors, nurses, anesthesiologist, and other health care workers to deliver that healing.

God's normal way of working in the world, and through the world is by natural means. God can heal with a miracle, just as He once provided the children of Israel with their daily bread, the manna in the wilderness, without farmers, millers and bakers.

However, God's normal way of operating is through human-beings. This is because God desires for us, to serve each other.

According to Luther, vocation is a, "Mask of God". God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid.

God is hidden in vocation. We see the milkmaid, or the farmer, or the pastor, or the policeman, or the soldier, or the artist, or the zookeeper.

However, looming behind this human mask, God is genuinely present and active in what they do for us.

Similarly, as we carry out our various vocations, we too, are masks of God. Evangelical Christians often talk about what God is doing, "in their lives".

Vocation encourages reflection on what God is doing, "through" our lives. Just as God is working through the vocation of others to bless us.

In our vocations, we work side by side with God, as it were, taking part in His ceaseless activity and laboring with Him as He providentially cares for His creation.

So what is the purpose of our vocation? The Bible is clear. The Apostle Paul tells us in the Book of Galatians, chapter 5, verse 6: "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

According to the Reformation doctrine of vocation, the purpose of every vocation is to love and serve our neighbors.

Luther said, "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does." Our relationship with God is based completely on His work for us, in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Justification by grace through faith, completely excludes any kind of dependence on our good works for salvation.

We come before God, clothed not in our own works or merits, but solely in the works and merits of Christ, that are imparted to us.

Having been justified by grace through faith, God then sends us out into the world, in our vocation, to love and to serve our neighbor.

-We are to serve our neighbors, the actual people, whom God has brought into our lives as we carry out our daily callings.

To the monastics, who insisted that they were saved, at least in part by their good works, in other words the prayers, the devotions, and other acts of piety, they do in the cloister, Luther asked, in what sense, these are even good works. Who are they helping?

Luther criticized monasticism for valuing not only separation from the world, but also (in the case of the most honored monastics) of separation from their neighbors.

For Luther, good works must not be directed toward God; rather, they, must be directed to the neighbor, which happens in one's vocation.

Thus is fulfilled, "all the law and the prophets, " first to love God, (not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us and has come to us, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord).

And second, to love the neighbor, which is also the working of faith. Every vocation has its particular neighbors. For instance, in the Church, pastors are to love and serve the members of their congregation, and the members of the congregation are to love and serve their pastor and each other.

An example, the family, is a network, of mutual love and service. The vocation of marriage entails only one neighbor.

Husbands are to love and serve their wives, and wives are to love and serve their husbands. Parents are to love and serve their children, who in turn are to love and serve their parents.

In the vocations of the State, the leaders, are to love and serve those under them, and those under them are to love and serve those in office and each other.

Employees are to love and serve their customers and employers are to love and serve their employees.

Luther said that changing a baby's diaper is "holy work". A child doing his or her chores are out performing the monks in works of holiness."

By extension in the 21st Century, we can see office desk, the factory machinery, the computer screen, the classroom podium, likewise, the voting booth, the dining room table, as alters on which we exercise our royal priesthood. Luther goes on to say, how ordinary tools are the sacred means of loving and serving our neighbor.

As I close out the message for today, this comes from Luther in one of his greatest works, called, *The Freedom of the Christian*:

“A Christian should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor. Hence as our heavenly Father has in Christ, freely come to our aid, we also ought to freely help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were, a Christ to the other, that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, this is, that we may be truly Christians.” Amen.’

Let us pray:

Lord God, Heavenly Father, You have called each of us, to our given vocations in life. Let us use our work, our time, our talents, and the gifts You have so graciously given us, so that we may serve others, our neighbors, as Christ, has served us. Let us be imitators of Christ through our vocation, so that others may see our faith in Christ, and come to the knowledge of the saving grace that is found in the person of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. All these things we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.