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Your Conscience, Your Vocation, Your Self

Frederick Buechner defines vocation as the place “where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” This is a good place to begin as we think about vocation, but it is only a beginning. Today what I will present to you is one perspective on vocation that has a couple of premises.

The first conviction I bring to this discussion is that I stake my work and joy and my very life on my belief that God has created you as a unique, indispensable individual: that God loves you deeply, passionately and patiently: that God takes great joy in you that is never lessened by the struggles and mistakes that might be a part of your life: that God desires for you what God desires for each and every person and the whole universe, and that is a desire that you should have life and have it abundantly.

Our image of God has a direct bearing on how we understand our purpose and how we go about seeking to follow the leading of God. So, if we think of God as a God primarily of judgment, we seek God’s will so that we can satisfy the judgment and avoid disappointment and rejection. So on with other images of God. This is worth some thinking on your part.

My second conviction follows from the first conviction, and that is that vocation must be understood as a calling from **this** understanding of God who creates you, loves you, takes joy in you, and desires good things for you. So vocation is never about a blueprint that

you have to get right or you ruin the whole project. Vocation is never a list of specific tasks you have to complete and if you miss one, you have irretrievably ruined the plans. Vocation, or purpose and meaning and worth, are not taken away from you if you feel you have disappointed or sinned or messed up in anyway. We miss the meaning of vocation if we do not get that it is the place where our deep joy or gladness meets the world's deep need.

The simple word “meet” in Buechner’s definition helps us to unpack the theological substance of the definition, since vocation is not merely about self-actualization. Our deep gladness or joy meets the world’s deep need. Vocation is not vocation, we are not called, without service as a fundamental part of the call. Of course, service takes on many different forms. The deep joy of cooking might show up in teaching immigrants how to cook with American groceries in American kitchens, or it might show up in taking casseroles and cobblers to those who are ill or in mourning, or it might show up in the work of a 5-star chef who discovers new ways to cook and new food to put on a menu that gives people pleasurable nights out. Service is a vital element here, but service does not mean that vocation is a denial of self,. Vocation is an affirmation of self, and furthermore, it is an affirmation of self that is possible because it is founded not on your own self-assessment, but on God. Your life needs to be lived. Not the life others want you to live, and not necessarily the life you are trying to live. In the words of Parker Palmer, you have to let your life speak. Only if you live into your deep gladness and joy can you meet the world’s deep need.

Vocation and Discernment

Tuesday evening I talked about a canoodling couple: discernment and vocation. These two concepts are, I pointed out, in an intimate embrace but they are not the same concept.

They cannot handle being away from each other very long at all. Bear with me while I bring these two concepts to our attention again.

Discernment refers to figuring out what we will do in a given situation. Discernment, as we are well aware, pervades our lives in mundane and profound ways. We are in the process of discerning when we try to figure out the best arrangement for our living room furniture so that we can accommodate the guests we love to have over. And we are in the process of discerning when we try to figure out what college to go to, should I marry this guy?, how do I preach at this funeral?, is there life after 40? When we are in the midst of discerning, we weigh information, insight, intuition, values, faith, commitments to others, and available possibilities for action.

Vocation is a concept, broadly embraced in our culture now, which refers at the very least to a deep sense of purpose in the core of human beings, and at the most to the voice of God calling the beloved child to be and to become all that she was created to be.

Vocation, or calling – the word comes from the same word that gives us “voice,” – refers most specifically to purpose, meaning, and identity in life, directed toward and called forward by God. Vocation is a wonderful concept to toss around because if we are able to apply our minds and hearts to it, we are able to discern direction in our lives. We seek this direction constantly, and we know that we are not just talking about something that points us which way to go, but lets us know we are getting somewhere good to be.

Vocation signifies God’s or society’s satisfaction with our lives, but it signifies that ***we ourselves*** are satisfied.

These two things are deeply intertwined, vocation and discernment. But we will ask them to pull apart from each other so we can take a look at vocation especially, like we took a look at discernment on Tuesday evening.

The Theological Argument for Deep Gladness: Vocation and Struggle

I mentioned the canoodling couple of discernment and vocation, and truthfully, canoodling – for lack of a less corny but still not vulgar word - itself is a part of vocation. Romance does not at all make a bad segue into talking about vocation, especially for college students, since it is a big part of our lives on a college campus. Now this is not to say that everyone is canoodling. In fact, I think most college students would be surprised to learn just how much canoodling *isn't* going on. Even when there is talk about all the adventures and conquests and encounters, many of us know that men and women talk this line so that they look good to their own sex as well as the opposite sex. And why?

Because darn it, we want to be loved. We want people to think of us as sexually attractive. We want romance, we want to be smitten and we want people to be smitten with us. We want to be valued, we want our worth as a human being to be affirmed, we want to be wanted. This is a deep and basic human need and it is directly linked to vocation. It brings us to our first major point about vocation: it is about one heck of a lot more than your job.

Vocation

Vocation is about our whole selves. It is about our daily lives. Those who struggle with vocation often do so because they realize it is about much more than a job. One of the things compelling to my husband and I about getting married is that we understood that we had been called to each other. Because our freedom is now expressed in the context

of marriage to one another, our marriage is part of our vocation. I spoke with an old friend yesterday who said that he woke up in the middle of the night and heard his wife breathing and his dog breathing and he thought: he didn't know what he was supposed to be doing with his life, but he did know it had to start here.

If all we are called to is one thing, then we separate one part of our lives off from the rest. As human beings, a full and abundant life includes many things. In the book of Jeremiah God's words for the people who are in exile in Babylon is to build houses, get married, grow gardens, raise children. In other words, live well and fully.

More to the point, the call here is to live well and fully in the here and now even if here is not where you long to be and now is not soon enough. Precisely because vocation is about much more than a job – because it includes friendship and all sorts of activities, the chores of everyday life, romance, family – vocation can get quite confusing and stressful. Especially if we think of vocation as a blueprint that we cannot mess up, or if we think of vocation as one thing.

As I mentioned before, I am committed to the fact that I have been called into my marriage and that it is now an ongoing part of my life. I am also committed to the fact that I have been called into the work of chaplaincy and teaching, to writing, to preaching, to being an aunt, a friend, and so forth. In my own struggles with trying to get clarity in times of emptiness and heartache, it finally occurred to me that vocation does not help us by dictating the content of our lives. Instead, vocation helps by directing us toward God.

I love Calvin's image of calling as a sort of sentry post for us throughout our life. Calvin is well aware and mentions again and again how human nature is fickle, how circumstances around us change, sometimes tragically, how prone we are to being mired

in all sorts of available possibilities. Our calling, he thinks, is a sort of sentry post. It keeps us from wandering away from our orientation to God. Our calling also enables us to help, to be alert in our unique calling (which Calvin affirms) to being a sentry in a particular way.

I mentioned above that I think romance is a good segue into vocation because it clues us in to our very deep human need to desire and to be desired by something beyond ourselves. This human need goes way beyond sexuality and is not satisfied by sexuality alone. Our deep desire also includes seeking the blessing of good labor, of work that satisfies and makes us take joy in being productive. Our deep desire includes longing for close friendships, acceptance, for the abundant life God promises.

So we would be remiss if we did not assert that vocation also includes circumspection. Listening to the call of God in our lives requires care on our part. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us in his book *Ethics* that the will of God is not merely identical with whatever our heart may think, it is not straightforwardly identical with our gut instincts, our intuition, or our logical thought processes. In addition, the will of God which we must discern also may deeply underneath a whole range of available possibilities. So as we listen to the calling of God, we must bring our heart, mind, observation, and experience, all into collaboration. When it comes to vocation, we must be thoughtful, and not assume anything.

We do not want to give ourselves away to a cause, to a person, to a direction too easily. Proverbs 4:23 exhorts us to “Guard your heart with all vigilance, for from it springs the well of life.” Your self is a precious gift from God, you are worthwhile and valuable and needed: Isaiah 43:1-13 speaks of how beloved we are to God, that we belong to God and God calls us by name, and then just as God gathers all God’s sins and daughters from

north and south, God declares that they will be witnesses to God in the world. You must guard your heart, protect yourself, so that you are not compromised. Circumspection, with reference to vocation, means that you have to be good stewards of your self for the sake of this witness where your deep joy meets the world's deep need. Whatever the particularities of your calling, whatever your circumstances, you as an individual are called toward God in order to be God's witnesses in the world.

The more cautious we are in spending ourselves too easily, the more care we put into discernment, listening to our heart, using our mind, observing our situations and selves, and drawing on our experience and being teachable, the more we will be able to listen to God's calling in our lives.

That sort of self-protection and self-care – for lack of less trendy words – sounds great, but is not the most helpful thing when you don't know what your vocation is. In fact, the vast majority of folks in a liberal arts college do not have a clear focus that grows out of their sense of vocation. Those of your fellow students who do have that clear sense are probably worth observing. Not because you too should have such a clear focus, not at all. But because they will help you to discern the clarity that grows out of a sense of self. It is this sense of self, all your desire, gifts, talents, strengths, limits, fears, dreams that is the fertile ground of your vocation. Those who have a clear sense of purpose here have that direction I spoke of a couple of minutes ago, which helps them know which way to go – with questions as mundane as how much to drink and how much not to drink – and they have a strong sense of what they need to do to strengthen and deepen their sense of purpose.

But don't any of you be fooled: even those of us who go through college with a clear sense of purpose are sometimes doing so as a way to hold on to something that will give

us an identity. Those of us who go through college with very little purpose sometimes want to avoid the identity that is ours. Either way, the selves that you are is of the utmost importance. Your calling in life will come from no other place than from who you are. Dr. Pederson preached yesterday morning on Philippians 2:12-13: “Therefore work out your salvation in fear and trembling, for God is already at work in you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” Stewardship of yourself is vital and is not selfish, for you are all you have in the world, and it is irresponsible to waste who you are. And waste of yourself will only cause you pain in the future. And recognizing your desires and dreams in life is also vital – this is what we mean in our everyday language when we talk about listening to your heart. What you long for in this world – deeply long for – is a clue to what you have to offer to the world and what you can make happen.

Still, there is no getting around that you find yourselves at a point when vocation seems to be a very confusing thing. Yes, we want to know what to do with our lives. Yes, we want to know what we’ll do when we get out of college. Yes, we want to know who we are going to marry. But the fact that we do not know a lot of that right now leaves us in confusion, If we do not know those things, how do we know what our vocation is?

The short answer to this question is that you do not know. And this will remain an open question for you the rest of your lives. Even those folks around you – like professors and staff and so forth here at the college – who seem well set in careers and appear to us to have a strong sense of their purpose and worth – find struggles in their lives from time to time, and sometimes these vocational struggles are deep, and unbelievably painful. This is because life gets more complicated as we get older, and it doesn’t exactly start out simple.

Why does it become more complicated? Simply because life becomes richer, deeper, and

more fulfilling. Part of this happens through deepening relationships. So let's say that you are able to answer that question of who you are going to marry by finding yourself someone to marry. You get engaged, have a nice wedding, go on a honeymoon, canoodle and etc. to your hearts content, and bam! She gets a terrific job offer in another city that means you would have to move. And that's when you have a great job right here.

Or, you decide, ah forget this lucrative banking profession. What I really want to do is run my own restaurant. I want it to have a really upscale atmosphere and serve great food. I want to hone my cooking skills so that I can produce some really excellent eating. You have a dream for this: what about your wife who is already in the middle of med school, which is her dream? How do you both make both of these things come to life?

And that's why it gets more complicated and more rich and more full, and why no one on the planet gets set on a path that never changes. Vocation changes because people change. Vocation changes because commitments and responsibilities – part of the way we express who we are in the world – also change. Vocation changes because circumstances change, like getting fired or your child's accident that requires medical care. This does not mean that vocation is not a continuous path which shape and structure and purpose and meaning, but it does mean that ***vocation is not something we can control.***

To discern our vocation we need to consider some things:

Discerning Vocation

This brings me to conscience. On Tuesday evening I addressed the topic of discernment in the midst of real life, and if we are really going to be serious about vocation and

discernment, then we cannot separate them from our actual, every day life. And one of the things we have to be honest about is the fact that vocation and life are not things we can control. We in the United States think we can – it's part of our American myth – but the most we can do is work our hardest with the circumstances of our lives.

My co-chaplain puts it this way: if he's in a canoe and his place of work and circumstances of life are the river, then he knows he cannot in any way change the way the water is moving and at what speed. He can't change the water, but he can guide the canoe in the direction he wants to go by working with the water. A gardener knows the same thing: you cannot make the dirt be something it's not and you can't change the weather, but you can work with what you get to make the most out of it. Football players and musicians know the same thing: there are things you can't control about a game or a musical performance, but the one who is doing either thing well is working with what he or she gets and going with the flow in an active way.

Just because you don't get the grades you think you have to have, just because doors are not opening for you like they are for others, just because you can think of all the reasons why it won't work, do not give up. Your deep gladness, with which you were created by God, can come to fruition in any number of ways. The point is being committed to the calling of God in your life, rather than assuming that the circumstances of your life dictate God. Vocation helps us by giving us direction towards God.

Given that there is a lot we cannot control in our own lives, it makes listening to God all the more important. One of the ways in which we listen to God is by way of conscience.

We Need to Consider Conscience and Spirituality

Conscience is another face of discernment. We very often think of conscience like the

images we see in movies and sitcoms, right? Where someone has an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Conscience has, in one way or another, always been about figuring out what behavior is acceptable. There are two GRE words that are used in various thinkers when they write about conscience: obloquy and disapprobation. These refer to the fact that our conscience comes partly or even mostly from our communities, our families, churches, friends, etc., so that when we violate the expectations of these communities, we feel the weight of obloquy: we have disappointed the expectations of the people around us, of the values of our family, church, peers, or society.

It doesn't take much for us to admit that there is a certain strength in this, right? It is this obloquy, or disapprobation, disapproval, that keeps a lot of our more lethal instincts in check. Our society generally doesn't approve of people who murder, commit adultery, steal, although we can also look at society and see versions of these things that are acceptable. But you get my point: To a degree, wanting to be accepted by our society means we form our behavior in a certain way.

Al though it doesn't take much for us to admit that there are limits to this too. The vast majority of us have to deal with the fact that a large part of the reason we make decisions and choices is because we don't want to disappoint our parents or family or peers and so on. Our peers can be really deceptive, too, and this doesn't stop with high school and college. I think in a lot of ways peer pressure can get worse. In any case, peers can be deceptive. As much as we want to ally forces with our peers and distance ourselves from our parents, friends can sometime be ruthless in pressuring us to be something we're not. True, these are probably not the best of friends, but often we spend time working and hanging out with people who expect and want us to be a certain way.

We also deal with pressures and expectations from parents, and this is another thing that doesn't stop as you grow beyond college. In fact, sometimes it gets worse, because then you find all the messages you got from your parents are buried deep in your gut and it's hard to shake them.

And there are expectations from church, your home town, and the list goes on.

Expectations are a very dangerous and risky thing, because they might help us rise to new heights, but just as often expectations can be only a source of knowledge that we have disappointed someone, a choir director, a coach, a parent, a friend.

So the trick with this thing we call conscience, when we're asking the question "what should I do? Or "what should I have done?" is discernment. We have to learn how to figure out which voice, and which expectations are the ones which are going to help us be ourselves while we listen to God. Christians are called to test the spirits to see whether they are of God. The only way we can hear is as our own selves, and if you want to think through vocation you will have to come to terms with this. This discernment of conscience, if we do it carefully, helps us learn how to listen to the truth about who we are and who we need to be.

If conscience is tuning into the right thing to do and the wrong thing to avoid, then it is the right thing for **me** to do and the wrong thing that **I** need to avoid. At this point a lot of college students are asking themselves what should I do? What classes should I take? What should I major in? What should I do with my major? My life? How will my life mean something to others?

If we follow the premises I laid down at the beginning of this presentation, then our understanding of conscience should be something deeper. Yes, it is about discerning

what we should do and what we should avoid, but even more than tuning into that, it is tuning into God whose work in the world is for the Peaceable Kingdom in which no one will hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. If we affirm that God is the one who truly knows good and evil, right and wrong, and if we affirm that the living God is present, somehow in our lives and the world, then conscience means we tune into God's work and presence in the world for good. Again, in Jeremiah we hear God's promise to the people that God's plans for them are plans for a future and a hope, plans to prosper them and not to harm them.

Conscience, for Christians and for others, cannot be separated from God. In all the decisions we make – and in one sense, big and little decisions are all in a way vocational decisions – listening so that we hear the call of God will require us to be open to God.

This is why I am convinced that in Christian theology and ethics we have fallen short in our understanding of conscience if we don't resolve it and polish it off in the disciplines that help us think about our spirituality. Spirituality in many traditions is that aspect of being human that supports our openness to the purpose of the universe. For Christians, spirituality opens up our perception and reception of God.

I am reluctant to talk about spirituality for a couple of reasons, but I am so convinced that it is vital for vocation that I have to include it, and indeed, it provides us indicators for some of the practical things we can pursue in vocational discernment.

Why am I hesitant? Because an authentic spirituality has nothing to do with these little books we can buy at Barnes and Noble to help us be more spiritual. Spirituality is not something we can buy, piece by piece, book by book, dream catcher by dream catcher.

Sure, sometimes these books and icons can be a huge help, but only if they help us to articulate and understand the deep spirituality of our souls. And healthy spirituality is nothing if it does not lead us to integrity of self and to integration of our selves and souls with all that is good and true and just and beautiful in the universe. In other words, a spirituality that is just about me is just narcissism with a nicer name. For Christians, this means that spirituality is **not** just feeling good about ourselves but is fundamentally about being connected, tuned in, in touch with God's presence and work: recall Dr. Pederson's sermon yesterday – work out your salvation with fear and trembling for God is already at work in you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.

I am also hesitant to talk about spirituality because it is easy for us to pick up hints and clues and insights that open doors for us. But I have to be really careful when I read things like Abraham Heschel's *The Sabbath*. It is having a continuing influence on me and my thoughts on this matter, but I will do Heschel's thought an injustice if I rip it apart from his Jewish moorings. The various ideas we might come across always come from a context. If we want to honor truth, then we can't turn it into an object we use for our own ends. Like a human being we love, we must recognize that their characteristics make sense only in the context of the whole person that they are. So I urge caution when it comes to reading a book here and a book there, Native American Spirituality and then Benedictine. This caution is for myself as well: we must resist the temptation to use it, and instead welcome the possibility for being instructed by it.

But because our spirituality is our experience of God's presence and work in our lives, and our connection with God's presence and work in the lives of others and the whole creation it is vital to understanding vocation and the role of conscience in vocation.

We Need to Consider Ourselves

I've been blathering on far too long. We need to think about some different things to help us as we leave this conversation.

First, there is so much more to vocation than even what I am sharing with you here. For instance, we could follow any one point in any of a number of directions.

Second, you might disagree with me, and there are certainly folks who do. Do take care to think through what I say very carefully. Talk to your professors and friends, see what they think about this, and then make up your own mind.

Third, anyone here can feel free to strike up an e-mail conversation with me about these issues. I welcome the conversation because I am in the middle of this conversation. I have so much more to think and develop, and your insights and questions will be invaluable. This is very much work in process.

Fourth, let's see if we can sketch out a few things that make all this reflection and theory a bit more practical.

- A) one of the most important things about vocation is self-awareness. You need to be aware of yourself, notice yourself. This means noticing your strengths and possibilities as well as your limitations and faults. I mentioned right at the beginning that there is nothing that will lessen God's deep and passionate love for you, even if you feel the absence of that love when you are wandering or have messed things up. (Which we all do). So know yourself. Be honest about who you are. This is something you can do right now as you jot down notes. In the movie *Copland*, Ray Liotta runs out on his friend at a time when that friend needs

him more than ever. He drives out of this town in northern New Jersey and starts having a conversation with his conscience in the rear-view mirror. He tells his conscience to shut up – and who wouldn't: his conscience is telling him he is weak and cowardly and disloyal. He had to come to grips with the knowledge of his own failure and limitations in order to discern and pursue his calling at that moment. Self-awareness includes self-knowledge, and accepting what you're good at and what you're not.

- B) You need to accept what you value. Do you value God in your life? Then deal with it. Take it seriously. Attend to worship, pray. Reflect on what this means to you and your life. Do you value family? What about family? Are you treating boyfriends or girlfriends badly now, treating friends badly now even though you always say sure someday I'll have a husband/wife and kids? Do you value contentment? Then don't pursue discontent. In other words, the values you say you seek down the road will do nothing at all for you if you don't pursue them in the here and now.
- C) Recognize what you need. Are you someone who needs a lot of time by yourself in order to maintain energy, happiness, ability to be there for friends and family? Are you someone who just comes alive when you can organize events for people? Do you just yearn for physical activity and for that delicious tiredness that comes from resting after hard work? Do you need a partner in work? Do you need to be alone? Do you need to do chemistry or economics or philosophy in order to be who you are? Whatever these needs are, pay attention to them and take them seriously.
- D) Recognize what you already have as your resources for a well-lived life lived towards God. Courage, humor, fun, passion, hard work – all of these things and many others things are resources, things you've got going for you.
- E) Recognize your deep gladness: think about the particular things you do that make

you forget yourself. You know I don't mean drinking here. I mean the thing you do where you just *are*, without thinking I'm good at this or bad at this. Think about the things you do where you just are. What is it you do that you don't even care that you don't do it well yet, that you are willing to learn and be taught and you love running into an expert? What does this tell you about yourself?

- F) Recognize that there is deep need in the world. You cannot meet all the need you see. Going back to the beginning of this presentation, the need you can meet is dependent on the joy with which God has created you. Your vocation is all about you – but it is also all about God. The deep need of the world is ultimately God's responsibility, and we are called to participate with God as God calls us, and gives us, a deep, deep joy that we cannot keep to ourselves.