



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

September 6, 2015

On Vocation
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

On Vocation

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2015 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 12, 2015

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see" (John 1:43-46).

The first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, an early Protestant summary of the Christian faith, asks "What is the chief end of man?" The answer given by the catechism is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." You and I, in short, were made for God.

I saw a little girl the other day, around three years old, wearing a T-shirt that said "It's all about me." I suppose the shirt was meant to be a joke, or at least I hope it was, but of course the sentiment is exactly wrong. We have an epidemic of narcissism these days, a large and growing number of people who really do live as though the world was all about them. On the whole they're not a very pleasant bunch to be around, not very considerate of others, and ironically, for all the focus on themselves, they're not even all that happy.

One of the great insights of faith is that we were made for God, and so we find our greatest joy when we glorify God in the way we live—which means, as Jesus says, that we love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. If we're not content to take Jesus' word for it, there's growing scientific evidence that points in the same direction. Study after study shows that people who have a deep and abiding faith in God are happier, on average, than people who don't, and people who do things for others are happier, in general, than those who

look out mostly for themselves.

All of this points to how we can tell what our vocation is in this world, what we're called to do. Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian pastor and novelist, says that our vocation lies where our deep joy meets the world's great need. When we do things that are genuinely helpful to other people, and find satisfaction in doing that, we're probably doing what we were meant to do.

Both parts of Buechner's formula are important. We might enjoy doing some things that aren't especially useful, and that's all right as far as it goes. Not everything has to be useful. Sometimes we just play. But if we're not doing anything consistently for the good of other people, that means we haven't yet found our vocation. On the other hand, if we're doing something just because we think we should, but there's no joy in it, then that hasn't become our vocation either.

This last point can be subtle. People who find themselves having to care for others—young children, or the elderly, or someone who suffers from a chronic illness, for example—may think of it mostly as a burden, and then they're tempted to resent their situation. Of course caregiving can be demanding, and caregivers need support, too, and an occasional respite from their responsibilities. But when we really are called to care for others, we often find a deeper joy beneath the burden. That's because caring for someone else can free us from preoccupation with ourselves and give our lives a greater sense of purpose and meaning. I know someone who takes care of her elderly mother and she said just the other day that, even though she's always tired, there is a sweetness in it. Looking after her mother has become a kind of unexpected gift for her.

For most of us, our vocation changes over time. Parents, for example, may spend twenty or thirty years preoccupied with raising their children, but wise parents know that part of the point of parenting is to work themselves out of a job. Part of our purpose is to raise children who can make good decisions and find their own way in the world. Hopefully, young people take on values they learned at home and in church, and they may still look to their parents for advice and support now and then. But parents who need to be needed have a hard time letting go, and unless they learn to do that, their relationships with their children often suffer.

People who retire from rewarding careers face similar challenges. They may be used to being in charge, running things the way they think they should be run, and then they retire and suddenly there's no one to give orders to any more—except perhaps the person they live with, who definitely did not sign up for being bossed around. Retired people need to find a new vocation, somewhere to use a lifetime of experience in genuinely helpful ways. Spending all your time on a golf course may not be enough to satisfy your spirit; and if it is, maybe it shouldn't be.

God gives us gifts and guides us through our vocations, and one of the ways we know God is with us is when we find joy in doing what we were meant to do. But over time our calling changes, and then we can go through a period of uncertainty when we're not sure what we're supposed to be doing. It might even seem that God is silent for a while.

I've mentioned before that we have all sorts of wildlife in our back yard at home, and some of those creatures conjure up metaphors while I sit around watching them. We

have a hummingbird feeder on the porch, which serves two great purposes: it feeds the birds and it gives us the joy of seeing these tiny beings close up.

One day not long ago Gwenn took the feeder down and had it in the kitchen longer than usual while she was refilling it. I was sitting on the porch reading when a hummingbird darted up to the spot where the feeder usually hangs, only to find that the feeder was gone. You have to look very closely to see the expression on a hummingbird's face, but this one looked completely baffled, and then her confusion gave way anxiety. She looked at the wire from one angle, then flew around and looked from the opposite side; then she rose a few inches and looked at the wire from one side and then again from the other. She dropped back a foot or two and just stared at the wire. I could tell she was thinking, "What the heck? I could have sworn this is where the feeder was. I come here all the time. What's going on? Am I losing my little mind?"

It must have been a traumatic experience because she stayed away for a while, and when she finally did come back you could see the relief on her face when the feeder was back where it belonged. Watching all of this, it occurred to me that God must see this sort of thing all the time with us human beings. We get accustomed to certain things, to drawing nourishment from the routines of our lives, counting on things to be in familiar places. And then something changes. The thing that used to feed us isn't there anymore and we're completely at a loss. We wonder what happened, and maybe we also wonder why God let us down.

What we don't know is that the one who is in charge has not abandoned us. She was only preparing something new, something else to feed us. The hummingbird reminded

me that things are not always as they seem, and what looks like loss or even abandonment may turn out to be just a transition to the next good thing.

Thomas Merton, the great Trappist monk and writer on Christian spirituality, had a prayer about this. He said, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”¹

You may not see clearly what God is calling you to do right now, but believe that God is calling you. Each of us has a vocation from God, and our vocation changes from time to time. Be open to God’s leading, and trust that God will guide you where you were meant to be. Then try some things. Volunteer. Do something that stretches you beyond your comfort zone, because every good thing in life that we enjoy now was new to us once upon a time. Maybe you’ll wind up using the gifts and skills you already have in new and different ways, or maybe you’ll discover that you have gifts and a calling you never imagined.

Pope John XXIII was a wise and humble man who felt

¹ Quoted in James Martin, SJ, *My Life with the Saints* (Chicago: Loyola, 2006), 64f.

completely unworthy when his fellow cardinals elected him to the papacy. After he had served in that role for a while, a young boy wrote to him asking for career advice, as he was trying to decide whether he wanted to be a policeman or a pope when he grew up. Pope John wrote back, suggesting that the boy become a policeman. “Anyone can be a pope,” he said; “the proof of this is that I have become one.”²

Not everyone is called to be the pope, of course, and especially if you’re Presbyterian that’s highly unlikely. But the point is that even a good pope has a healthy sense of unworthiness. Each of us is called to do something that will glorify God, and often it’s something we never thought we could do.

So pray for God’s guidance, then watch and see what happens. If you find yourself doing something that meets someone else’s need, and it brings you a deep and surprising joy, then you’re probably doing what you’re supposed to do, and God will surely be pleased.

² *Ibid.*, 196f.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org