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Isaiah 49:1-7  
John 1:29-

Vine Sermon – Relationship Series on Vocation  
Wednesday 22 January 2020

### **What Is Your Calling?**

*"The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me"*  
(Isaiah 49).

What do you do? Whether you are just starting out, or you have been retired for too many years to count, whether your primary occupation is caring for another person or you are doing finance for a technology company, whether you are just passing through or you think you have found your life calling – today, for the next half hour, I want you to step out of ordinary time to think about where you are in life, who you are and where you might want to be.

Jude asks a tough question, "How do you build a bridge to your dreams or even to your true self?" This sermon series is called "Relationship" and today we are considering what Christianity teaches about work.

The Ancient Greek or Stoic ideal was the upper class man who had leisure time dedicated to fashioning himself, shaping himself physically, intellectually and aesthetically. For them the only purpose of the vast humanity which works was to make this aristocratic existence possible.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to this, Christianity asserts that to be human necessarily means to be in relationship with others, and with God. Even God works. And the highest form of human existence is to work alongside the one who is not a stranger, but the Holy One, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Jesus takes this idea further. He teaches that in contrast to the opinion of the world, the greatest leader does not lord it over others but rather will be the "servant of all" (Mk. 9:35).

The New Testament uses the Greek word *klēsis* for calling and in nearly all cases it simply means to be called to live as a child of God in the way of Jesus. There have been historical epochs when we have strayed from this idea. In Medieval times it became more common to regard religion as something that was chiefly the business of priests and monks. They were the ones, who in the language of the time, "had a calling."

During the Reformation, Martin Luther (1483-1546) sought to correct his through a very powerful idea. He believed that all people could in effect dedicate their whole life to God in a way that was similar to how monks lived. Not everyone had to make lifetime vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, but they could still do everything for the glory of God. One could have a family and work life with God at the center.

Thomas Cranmer (1449-1586) the author of our prayerbook devised a whole system of daily prayers and readings for ordinary people based on the daily services in monasteries. At Grace Cathedral we pray in this way several times every day.

In Reformation times just about everyone worked as a farmer, with a few skilled artisans and a handful of professional people. Then the Industrial Revolution fundamentally changed our lives. Trade and specialization led to scientific and efficiency breakthroughs that have altered the face of the globe. We live in a time when many people worship “work.”

Juliet Schor points out that Americans have been adding dozens of hours at work each year and that over decades this has accumulated to the point where we work far more than recent generations.<sup>2</sup> It has gotten to the point where we are on the verge of breaking natural systems with the rationale that we are creating jobs and wealth.

The theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) points out that in our world millions do mindless, soulless work that is fundamentally dehumanizing.<sup>3</sup> He wonders if we might work in such a way that provides us with enough of a living to really live for the sake of the community of God.

In our readings the Prophet Isaiah speaks about the way that the Lord called him before he was even born. That God shaped his abilities to speak and to convince others making his “mouth... like a sharp sword.” He writes that, “God has become his strength” (Isa. 49). In Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians Paul writes that God has chosen us out of the world to be called saints or holy ones (1 Cor. 1:1-9).

The Gospel of John tells the story of how John first recognized Jesus. God speaks to us both in our hearts and in outward events. This is true of John who explains that, “the one who sent me... said to me... this is the Son of God” (Jn. 1). When Andrew and Simon with hearts full of questions feel the tug of God, Jesus says to them “Come and see” (Jn. 1).

In my twenties I worked as a management consultant. It was the perfect life. I had more money that I have ever had. I lived on the beach in Southern California. My colleagues

were fascinating people. But I began to feel a nagging dissatisfaction that arose both out of the events in my external life and what was happening my heart. As part of my research I was asked to go along with lies that other consultants had told to gain access to a company's secrets. I had other moral concerns about my work.

In my heart I also realized that life is precious. We only have one chance to be alive. I was reading about Martin Luther King Jr. and I began to ask myself what is worth dedicating your life to. I was fortunate in having church along with good friends and mentors who helped me find the path I am on now.

The theologian Karl Barth points out that the primary truth of our life is that we are limited creatures. In our time the word "limit" almost always has a negative connotation. For him though it is what makes possible our distinctiveness and achievements. We exist in time. Our life is on loan to us for a brief moment. He says it is like we are lost in a vast desert or on a tiny island.<sup>4</sup>

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) used to go to bed every night thinking about his death, that on the next day he might "cease to be." And yet he called this the key to his happiness. He had a deep faith that God had given him precisely this chance.<sup>5</sup>

Huge numbers of people have come before us but they are dead now, as we will one day be. In short, this is our time, our age, briefly given to us as a gift from God. We exist with just these technologies, in this particular social circumstance, with our race and family background and age. We have been given just this particular body, this disposition, this mind, our own unique form of creativity. The question is what are we going to make of it?

Our limitations are not a mistake, they are what makes us, us. We do not do this work alone either. God stands on the threshold of our consciousness. God reaches out a hand to help us. God meets us in the unique opportunities and places of our life. God is our partner in every good work that we undertake.

God has known you since before you were born. God calls to you now. Come and see.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4 The Doctrine of Creation*. Tr. A. T. MacKay, T. H. L. Parker, H. Knight, H. A. Kennedy, J. Marks (NY: T & T Clark, 1961) 474.

<sup>2</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (NY: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4 The Doctrine of Creation*. Tr. A. T. MacKay, T. H. L. Parker, H. Knight, H. A. Kennedy, J. Marks (NY: T & T Clark, 1961) 532.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 571.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 589.