Living is *Enough*

A Pastor's Perspective on Christian Vocation



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“Our real trouble is not doubt about the way upon which we have set out, but our failure to be patient, to keep quiet. We still cannot imagine today that God does not want anything new from us, but simply to prove us in the old way. That is too petty, too monotonous, too undemanding for us. And we simply cannot be content with the fact that God's cause is not always the successful one, that we really could be 'unsuccessful' and yet be on the right road. But this is where we find out whether we have begun in faith or in a burst of enthusiasm."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - Advent Letter - November 20, 1938

“For we are not made for fleeing human company, but for living in society and sharing good and evil.”

Martin Luther

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All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

Introduction

The quotation by Dietrich Bonhoeffer that opens this book describes the life of many Christian people. The actual business of daily living seems "too petty, too monotonous, too undemanding." And of course, it seems that way because it often is! There is widespread belief that Christian living should be more than simply being returned to the mundane business of daily life. Doesn't God want me to transcend myself and victoriously rise above the troublesome world? There is no shortage of voices encouraging the Christian in that direction. If I do all that is expected of me, read the Bible enough, pray enough, do enough, go to church enough, I will experience peace, rest, and victory in this life. Frankly, that sounds pretty good. Who couldn't use a little peace, rest, and victory?

So, full of enthusiasm, I might be tempted to head out on 'the pathway to victory' for Chistian living. 'Try harder, be better, do more!' Up the spiritual ladder I go, constantly checking my spiritual pulse. Isn't the whole idea of the Christian faith about getting closer to God, working on the spiritual life, polishing moral improvement to a high gloss, climbing the ladder of spiritual formation, becoming holier, rising in spiritual glory and victory above it all?

Eventually I may become aware of an undeniable fact; the old self in me seems to have no trouble trying as hard to be a sinner as the new self in me is trying hard to be a saint! As I look through the Bible for help in overcoming my stubborn, old self, a verse from Romans just might get my attention. For there we discover that the Apostle Paul struggled with the same dilemma. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15)

When we come to Romans 7:15 we arrive at a crossroads. And when we arrive at this crossroads, we arrive at some fundamental questions. What does a Christian life look like? Will I ever overcome sin? What if I can't? Is there a causal pathway to authentic Christian living? Do I simply floor the pedal and

accelerate down that ‘pathway to victory’ and ‘try even harder, to be even better, and do even more’? Or is there another way?

In this book I am advocating that there is another way, a far better way. The Apostle Paul called it “…a more excellent way.” I write this as a pastor who served many years in the crucible of parish ministry. Delivering the one, irreplaceable word of forgiveness and ministering to folks as we have ridden the roller coaster of the real world together has been my life's vocation.

The path forward into authentic Christian vocation that I have preached, taught, and confessed begins and ends with the cross. Which is simply another way of saying, with your baptism. Any other route, however sparkly and spiritual it may appear, only falsifies our orientation to God, our neighbor, and the world, and, frankly, to ourselves. Baptism makes an end of all our spiritual aspirations, our potential to overcome sin and death. At the same time, baptism ushers us into the way forward. Baptism frees us for our vocations in and for the world and the neighbor by setting us on the way of life. And that way, that life, is not a program but a person, Jesus Christ, who alone is the “way, the truth and the life.”

Pastor Mark Anderson

Vocation: Martin Luther and the View from Below

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin, ‘Vocatio’ (think, ‘vocal’.) The Latin word, in turn, was a translation of the Greek word, ‘kaleo’ (think, ‘call’) a word commonly used in the Greek New Testament. From the beginning the Church has used these terms to describe Christian vocation, God’s “calling” of the Christian to faith and service. And because Latin was the language of the Western church for the first fifteen hundred years, ‘vocatio’ became the common term to describe the Christian calling. This is the origin of our word vocation.

In the time of Martin Luther (the 16th century) “vocation” was what we might think of as a technical term. ‘Vocatio’ could refer to secular callings, much as we might think of vocation today as referring to our job or career path. But the primary understanding of the term in Luther’s time referred to specifically spiritual, religious callings or vocations. Priests, friars, monks, and nuns were pursuing these religious vocations, higher callings. To pursue religious callings was to take Christian faith and life with ultimate seriousness. The “religious” (as they were and still are called,) were climbing the spiritual ladders away from everyday life toward a holier, more sanctified life. These were the callings, the vocations that mattered most within the Christian community. These were the folks who were in what some have called “full time Christian service.” These were the ‘next level’ Christians.

The basic vocational program pursued by the religious was based on what was known as the “counsels of perfection,” poverty, celibacy, and obedience. If you think the pursuit of these aspirational ideals sounds exhausting, it was! Luther was also ‘called’ to the vocation of monastic life. By all reports, Martin became an overachiever at working the monastic program. As one person has quipped, “Martin out-monked the monks!”

But the prescriptions for spiritual advancement and sanctification did not bring Luther peace, rest, or victory. In fact, the more rigorously he applied himself to the “counsels of perfection,” to pursuing the religious life and climbing the spiritual ladder, the more conscious he became of how inadequate he was. Trying to overcome sin in his life was like trying to build sandcastles in a hurricane!

Then after years of struggle, Luther was appointed a teacher of the Bible (a move I am sure the Roman Catholic church has regretted ever since.) This was a good fit for Luther. He had been a law student before entering the monastery and had an excellent mind. Luther took up the study of Holy Scripture with the same single-minded passion with which he had pursued law and now that elusive, holy, sanctified life.

As Martin grappled with Scripture there was a breakthrough. He heard the promise of the Gospel. We are justified, made right with God *apart from* the demands of the law, for Christ's sake by grace through faith alone, and not through our efforts, works or sincerity in cooperation with God. Christ alone is our righteousness, holiness, sanctification, everything! Our confidence and assurance are in Christ alone. There would be no unringing of the bell for Martin Luther! The way was open.

`Up until then Martin's Christian life had been focused on his self-conscious preoccupation with monastic spirituality. The focus, the direction of his life was inward on self-examination. In the freedom of this new, living faith Luther was turned outward back into an open engagement with the world; marriage, children, community responsibilities, and the struggle of reform. And what is significant for our purposes in this book is this; it was Martin's embracing of these very down-to-earth attachments that angered his critics, and even some of his friends, as much as anything else. Martin still knew the importance of vocation, but it now moved in an entirely new direction. Pay attention to that because the matter of direction is crucial.

Martin had learned from his Roman Catholic faith that in every moment of life and in all life's activities we stand in relation to God. But that awareness created anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear. All Luther could see was the beetle-browed, unblinking stare of an angry God taking stock of every stumble and misstep! When faith came, fear was replaced by a fearless, joyful daring. Luther's Christian faith now began and ended in the cross. The forgiveness of sins, the finished work of the cross, sent Luther back into life in the freedom of a down-to-earth faith. Luther ran from the God of anger and wrath into the embrace of the God of the cross, Jesus, who loved him and gave his life for him. In the crucified Christ Luther received the freedom of a living faith.

Before faith came, Martin had been too preoccupied with his own spiritualty to really see and receive the gift of creation. The freedom of faith gave creation back to Luther and gave Luther back to creation! And he was determined to make the most of it! Until the end of his life, Martin's work aimed to clarify the

relationship between God and man in these new down-to-earth terms. He never backed away from describing God's relationship to humanity in terms of actual life. Vocation was now reoriented into the service of the neighbor and the creation.

One of the greatest gifts I have received from brother Martin (who received the same gift from the Apostle Paul) is the knowledge that the unconditional gift of God's forgiveness in Christ, allows me to be realistic, lucid, and sober about myself. For I know that the person made righteous in Christ is the actual person I am. In baptism's promise, I have been taken off my own hands by Christ, who now takes complete charge of my life and future. In that confidence I am returned to daily life to take up the mostly mundane, often challenging, and occasionally exhilarating business of living. I have been set free from religion and the sanctification project to live solely by faith alone and be what I was created to be – human.

An example of Luther's practical expression of this new, very human down to earth understanding of Chistian living can be seen in this quote concerning duties associated with marriage and family.

"What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says, "O God, because I am certain that you have created me as a man and have from my body begotten this child, I also know for certain that it meets with your perfect pleasure. I confess to you that I am not worthy to rock this little babe or wash its diapers. Or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving your creature and your most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in your sight."

“God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling, not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.” Martin Luther, The Estate of Marriage, LW, Volume 45, 1522.

This view of Christian vocation from below wants to say (and I would say changing diapers qualifies as ‘below’!) is that when life’s energies and resources are placed in the service of others and the creation, that work is as relevant to faith as much as the most religious of activities, even more so!

Vocation: A Lesson from the Vineyard

“I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

My wife, Linda, and I spent a delightful week driving through the Tuscan countryside visiting happy vineyards along the way. At one stop, near the graceful hilltop town of Montepulciano, we watched as a vine dresser carefully pruned the ancient vines that would produce the vintage bearing that famous name.

The vine dresser worked carefully with consummate skill and wisdom, the result of years of experience. The branches he so carefully handled were the survivors after younger, less promising branches had been pruned and discarded. The vine dresser’s practiced eye anticipated the hanging fruit and could see the hidden parasite that would devastate and destroy. He would not allow the branches to bear the strain of the unnecessary and harmful. Those branches were important and precious. They were dependent on the care of the vinedresser. And they had one job; bear good fruit!

The image of the vine and the branches will serve as a theme as we move along. Jesus knew this imagery well and He applied the lessons to faith’s vineyard. If the branch is to fulfill its purpose it cannot be allowed to bear the strains of either too little growth or an excess of growth. But the main point to

make here, and the point the Lord wanted to make, is that life flows *from* the vine *through* the branches. Branches do not have life in themselves. Apart from the vine, the branches are worthless. The life of the vine must flow through them and outward. It is the direction that matters. The result? Good fruit that nourishes and gives life.

As Christian people, whatever our callings or vocations in life may be, you and I are branches on the True Vine who is Christ Jesus. Our problem with being branches, however, is straightforward. Even as Christians, we tend to be wild wandering branches. As a result, we stubbornly want to reverse the direction of spiritual life in the name of 'spiritual growth.' I want the life that flows from the vine to remain with the branch, with me, to assist my aspirational pretensions! We may not be medieval monks or nuns but the impulse in us to selfishly pursue a religious life and climb the spiritual ladder is in all of us.

What this means for Christian vocation, for Christian living, is that time, life in this world, is more important than space, spiritual ladder climbing. We are not spiritual "Trekkies" boldly climbing cosmic ladders to places where no one has gone before. As much as we may want the Good Lord to "beam us up", our business is to live deep in the flesh, in the world, investing ourselves in its problems and relishing its joys. The Christian recognizes that all things, material and spiritual, in heaven and earth, space and time, have been reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. The Gospel, therefore, is not a summons to become more spiritual. It is not the old Gnostic move from the vice of the material to the virtue of the spiritual. The Gospel summons us to be human, to enjoy and care for the creation, to be comfortable in our skins.

Vocation, Sin and Creation

Before we explore the implications of the direction of Christian vocation, we need to look at sin. For it is sin which turns us in on ourselves, throwing us off the track of our purpose as creatures in God's world. Sin distorts our creaturely life and our religious life.

For many people sin is an idea that has been left far behind. They would say, ‘Good riddance!’ But let’s think again. For when we do not take sin with real seriousness, from the perspective of the Bible, we misread ourselves and the world. We end up with the wrong anthropology.

There is no arguing with the fact that sin is a troubling word. Part of the reason so many have a knee jerk reaction to the word is the way sin has been turned into a caricature. And this should not be surprising. A doctrine as important as the doctrine of sin is bound to be misused and mishandled not only theologically but also socially and psychologically. And one of these misuses is seen in the common view that sin means people are awful, totally bad, wretched, and terrible. Certainly, it is possible to view human life and behavior from this perspective and draw this conclusion. The absurdities, violence and general brokenness of life can support such a view. Sometimes, people who have experienced serious trauma in life can slip into a cycle of negativity, for example, and have difficulty seeing the good in anything.

Not all of life is dysfunctional or runs into the ditch. More often than we perhaps want to see, life works reasonably well. People can be helpful, generous, cooperative, and loving on behalf of others. There is good to be found. This has led some to turn the wheel hard over in favor of an overly positive view of human life, thinking that any talk of sin is negative, counterproductive. The appeal of positive thinking and prosperity religion, so popular in America, falls into this category. These are not the only alternatives. The Apostle Paul does clearly tell us that “All have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.” Everyone is in the same boat where sin is concerned. An overly negative or an overly positive view of human life in relation to sin tends to miss the mark. Which brings me to an important Greek word which helps us get closer to what the New Testament wants to say about sin.

A common word used by the New Testament, which we translate as “sin,” is “hamartia.” Hamartia describes the action of an archer who misses the bullseye, misses the mark. The word “hamartia” means to say that, like the misspent arrow, we have an unerring tendency to fall short, to miss the mark. The Greeks

used this term in their dramatic literature to describe an inevitable fatal flaw in their tragic heroes. These heroes began well, until they flamed out! Our lives seem to bear this out. I know mine does. We fall short in all kinds of ways. We stumble at critical moments. It is not that there is no attempt at the good or that nothing is achieved. That can be a more useful and realistic way to think about sin. Again, this is the word Paul uses, "For all have sinned and *fallen short*". (Romans 3:23)

We want to be careful here. To suggest that sin is falling short and that there is good to be found in human life is not to suggest that all we need is a boost into the saddle to become so much better! There is no divine, spiritual spark in us just waiting to become a bonfire! Falling short and missing the mark have deeper implications. The Lutheran Confessions, for example, are not overly pessimistic about human nature. At the same time, they also do not shrink from claiming that every aspect of human nature is tainted by sin. The troubling paradox remains.

Imagine a drop of ink in a glass of water. The water seems clear enough. You cannot see the ink. But it permeates every drop. This is not to say that we cannot see our thoughts, words, and actions as in some sense 'good.' But that is, finally, an illusion. The water does appear to be clear enough, but it is not pure. Or, to use a good biblical word, the water is not 'righteous.' The water is completely water. The ink is completely ink. Both are present. But because the ink is in the water, however pure it appears to be, the water is, in fact, unrighteous.

To view sin in this way means that we cannot make absolute claims for goodness, spiritual or otherwise, on behalf of our thoughts, words, or actions. Sin, like the ink in the water, is present in us so that every thought, word, and action, no matter how good they seem to be, are tainted with unrighteousness. It is impossible for us to make a final distinction between good and evil.

When we speak of sin we must also speak of God's continually active role in creation. We will misunderstand sin if we think woodenly of God's good creation coming first, to be followed by sin. If we think in these terms the good

and active role of God in creation tends to fade into the past. When this happens, we may see the world and all creation as utterly mired in sin. Redemption then becomes an excuse to escape from creation or downplay the goodness of life. But sin does not erase God's ongoing creative work. Far from it! The incarnation of Jesus, along with the entire Biblical story, reveals a God who is very much invested in creation! The Bible's witness to creation and sin hold several important things together for us now, in the present. (1) we are God's creatures, (2) being a creature of God is good, despite sin, (3) our role as both part of the creation and stewards of creation remains firmly in place, (4) our limited understanding of God makes us vulnerable to both temptation and rebellion. As a result of this last point we want to rise above our creaturely role and reject trust in God's creative word.

Sin and Unbelief

When St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," he was declaring that the dark shadow of sin is cast over life in every dimension. We cannot and will not escape sin in this life. And the deepest truth, and the hardest truth is this; we do not want to! When we recognize this hard truth, we come to the root of sin which is unbelief. Unbelief is that ink in the water that permeates all our thoughts, words, and deeds. Unbelief, the refusal to trust God in all things, points to the essentially relational character of sin.

When we use words like broken, estranged, wrongdoing and so forth, we are actually speaking of sin in relation to our experience in life and with others. To get to the heart of sin, however, we must go beyond our ambiguous relationships with others and the created world. The primary relationship which should ultimately concern us is the relationship with God. Therefore, what God has to say about sin is of final importance.

On the basis of our self-assessments, as we look at our own lives and the lives of others, we can be uncertain about our sinfulness. In fact, out of pride we are quite adept at justifying our thoughts, words, and actions in order to avoid

seeing them as expressions of unbelief. As someone once said, ‘There is no more righteous place on earth than the place where I am standing!’

It is for this reason that sin is something we ‘confess.’ I am not referring here to confessing ‘sins’ (though that is to be recommended!) but to confessing ‘sin’ as something in which I believe. I make this confession because, with Paul, I agree with God’s assessment of my condition. When I agree with God’s Word regarding sin, I am recognizing that the heart of sin is unbelief, the stubborn refusal to love God with all my heart, mind, and strength. Sins are the tangible symptoms of this central sin; unbelief is my unerring tendency to miss the mark by refusing to trust God in all things.

Now we can return to our earlier point. Since sin, like the ink in the water glass, is in all our thoughts, words, and actions, it is not possible for us to finally label or judge even what we would call our best works as righteous or good in any ultimate sense. The Apostle Paul is speaking to this in 1 Corinthians when he writes,

“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.” (1 Corinthians 4:2-3)

Notice Paul can say that on the one hand he is not aware of anything that can be held against him. Paul is not wallowing in guilt, obsessed with his sin! But he fully understands that he has no right to judge himself. He simply does not see things clearly enough to give himself an acquittal. Paul is very much aware of his unbelief!

At times in my pastoral ministry, I counseled with Christian people who were far too judgmental of themselves. They believed in their faults and stumbles more than their Savior. Paul helps us here. Because the baptized Christian lives in the forgiveness of sins all throughout life, we may live with the assurance that God has decided for us and in the affirmative! Your sinful self died on the cross with Christ. Your sins now belong to Jesus. What Jesus does with them is

of final importance. So, remember, the one who judges you is the one who died for you! Jesus forgives sin.

So, as baptized children of God, on the one hand we are branches on the Vine of Christ. At the same time sin, unbelief, is at work in us. If we do not take sin with real seriousness, we may end up with a naive or overly optimistic view of human nature. Or, if we do not appreciate human goodness, and our fundamental role as stewards in this world, we may tend toward cynicism and neglect seeing the value in doing what we can to improve life. So we pray, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

The Cross and the Paradox of the Old and New

We have seen that sin has an uncanny ability of sneaking into our lives like a raccoon raiding a garbage can! A common move that Christians have made is to say that with spiritual effort, aided by God's grace, we can tip the balance away from sin and toward righteousness. Grace will help us keep the lid on! The ancient and influential Christian, Pelagius, for example, encouraged this view.

Luther saw things differently. What Luther wanted to say was that there can be no gradual improvement of the inner nature of the person toward holiness. Trying to avoid sin would be about as successful as avoiding raindrops in a thunderstorm! We won't dive into all the details of this but the important point for Luther was that sin is embedded in what we call our "free will". We want to believe that free will is the main tool in our box when it comes to avoiding sin, building righteousness, "doing the right thing." For Luther, nothing could be further from the truth. Free will was not the solution because there is no free will! Why did Luther insist on the central importance of this challenging idea?

Luther saw that sin is expressed even in what we might call our spiritual or higher nature. There is simply no escaping it. Not only can our so-called 'free

will' not help us improve, but our will, like everything else about us, is bound in sin, in unbelief. Even our best, sincerest efforts are tainted with self-interest, just like the ink in the water. What Luther saw is that even after faith comes as God's gift to us in Christ, by which we are made totally righteous, the reality of sin remains deep and personal. Unbelief is like a dark hand that moves against us even when we want to choose the good. Our old nature continues to assert itself. We sense how envious we can be, how jealously can overwhelm us, how powerful addictions form, how we manipulate people and situations, how we judge others and ourselves. I could go on! We unerringly trend toward sin. Remember Romans 7:15? We are not partially righteous and partially sinful, though reason may suggest that this is a more practical analysis. Sin and righteousness are total states of being within the Christian.

Since reason does suggest that we are partially sinful and with a little help we can trend toward holiness, the awareness of the totality of both sin and righteousness, as mentioned earlier, must be revealed to us by God. And this is where the cross of Cross of Christ became central for Luther. For the cross reveals both the enormity of sin and the all-sufficient righteousness and forgiveness of God. God reveals the gravity of sin to us that He might be total righteousness for us. It is only in the crucified Jesus that we see this clearly.

Luther was not only trying to adjust wobbly theology. He had a deep pastoral concern. Luther wanted Christian people to know that investing themselves in the projects of pious, spiritual improvement was unnecessary, unhelpful. He knew that preoccupation with the spiritual can result in our taking our eyes off the Cross where everything necessary for our salvation had already been accomplished. Martin Luther was so completely assured and convinced of the sufficiency of Christ's death for sin that he would famously write, "The cross alone is our theology."

Two Important Words

The prevailing view in Luther's time was that God's righteousness, was *infused* into the Christian, making it possible for the Christian to cooperate with God in the pursuit of righteousness. Think of someone boosting you up in the saddle! Infused righteousness was supposed to assist in resolving the troubling paradox in favor of spiritual improvement. Luther's great opponent, Erasmus of Rotterdam, pushed back against Luther's sober assessment of the human will with this teaching. Erasmus argued that the will is free but very, very weak, too weak to accept God's salvation in Christ or to pursue righteousness effectively. So, God infuses grace into the will to push it over the finish line. Think of it as adding a shot of spiritual espresso to your otherwise lackluster spiritual life! This *infused* righteousness, so the Church taught, enables the Christian, with God's help, to begin the process of climbing the ladder of sanctification, drive out sin and increase in holiness and virtue.

While the medieval church wanted to say that God *helps* us to become righteous through the *infusion* of the Holy Spirit, Luther wanted to follow Paul and say that God *declares* us to be righteous by the *imputation* of the Christ's righteousness, full and complete. Luther pointed out that if the will is so weakened by sin that it could not choose God, as Erasmus was arguing, then for all practical purposes the will is in bondage. God's intervention with the gospel Word is not a partial solution, an add-on to human willing or good intentions. God's intervention in the gospel is an *election*. God does for us what we are unable to do for ourselves.

Think of imputed righteousness as akin to declaring someone deep in debt to have a clean credit score! With a word, the debt is wiped out! God is not negotiating! The righteousness of Christ is 'imputed' to us, given to us, bestowed upon us (Romans 3:22) in the proclaimed word of forgiveness and the sacraments. Luther recognized that this gift of imputed righteousness is what Paul wanted to make clear. God views us through the grace of Christ *as if*

we are totally righteousness, unblemished, without sin. The following text from Romans 8 spells this out.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:1-4).

God has done in Jesus what we could never do. God blows right by our feeble attempts at self-justification in the law and our wobbly wills with the word of the Gospel and simply wipes out sin as if it had never been there!

Imputed righteousness does not make us righteous in ourselves. God is stingy with this righteousness and wants to be sure it remains with the rightful owner, Jesus! So, if Christ’s righteousness is going to be ours, we will need to become one with Him. That is precisely what happens in baptism. Justifying righteousness is something which always lives and stays in the Person of Christ alone. As long as the Christian lives, our old self remains in sin, but "in Christ" we are declared totally righteous for Jesus’ sake. Christ Jesus guards His righteousness jealously, for our sake, so that we will be justified, sanctified, made righteous by Him. We add nothing. There is nothing left for us to do. “It is finished,” as the Lord declared from the cross. As the late Gerhard Forde famously wrote, “Sanctification is getting used to our justification.” Or we could say, God’s love for you is not conditional upon anything! So, settle back, relax, and enjoy your forgiveness!

Vocation and the Law: Taking Up Your Cross

When we turn to the gospels, we can see how Jesus spoke of what we are calling vocation. “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) The Lord speaks here of taking up the cross. He was obviously not referring to the Cross He was uniquely fated to carry on Good Friday. Nor was He saying that His disciples would also literally face death by crucifixion, though for some like the Apostle Peter, crucifixion was their fate. So, what could Jesus have meant? Jesus was saying that we, too, will bear the burden of an instrument that will lead to our deaths. And that instrument, the cross we bear, is our vocation under the law. The obligations, responsibilities and demands of this life are laid upon us from birth until death as we live our lives outwardly, for others. The vocation of sinners is to be poured out for the sake of the world and then to die.

Of first importance is the Cross Jesus carried to His death. That death has made an end of the law. “Christ is the end of the law.”) Romans 10:4) What this means is that Jesus has freed us! The law’s power to condemn is behind us. We do not take it up in order to establish our righteousness before God. Christ, and Christ alone is our righteousness!

I had a friend who was an experienced mountain climber. He spent many nights sleeping on the sheer face of the famous ‘Half Dome’ in Yosemite National Park. To scale such a sheer cliff face, he needed specialized equipment that would enable him to reach the top. It took skill and tremendous effort.

This is a good example of what Christian life and vocation are *not*. The law is not the tool the Christian uses to scale the heights of righteousness. This is what the New Testament wants to make crystal clear when it says that Jesus took upon Himself, for our sakes, the constant demand of the law. He became sin, accused by the law, and as a result Jesus is now the end of the law for faith, for you. What does this have to do with our vocations? Just this. Faith does not see

the law as an instrument to be used for spiritual achievement, for climbing the spiritual ladder, for gradually improving in the sanctified life. Nor do we take up our creaturely life as nothing more than drudgery. Nor do I use the law in a self-serving project to get all I can at the expense of others. The law is not our ladder to God. The law is not a tool for self-advancement at the expense of others. The law is the burden of life as we live it in this world. That is our cross.

In baptism, God has saved us, made us new persons, new creatures in Christ. Christ's righteousness has been bestowed upon us as a gift. In exchange, Jesus takes our sin. "He [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21) The forgiveness of sins in Jesus has freed us by grace through faith. As a result, faith takes up what the law intends spontaneously and willingly in the complete freedom that is in Christ. Faith sees the sin the law exposes and knows that the law is meant to turn us again to the forgiveness and freedom in Christ. Luther wrote exuberantly about this freeing faith.

"Faith is a divine work in us. It changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It kills the old Adam and makes altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and powers, and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. And so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them."

Sounds good, right? Not so fast.

The fact is that the old Adam and Eve in us are terrified of the freedom of faith. Why? Because life in Christ means death to me! So, my sinful self resists this freedom. This is why we use religion to play defense when it comes to the law. Defensiveness in the law means self-protection, self-preservation. Staying safely behind the prescribed fences of the law, we are not unlike those good, religious folks who walked by the poor fellow in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The traveler had been badly beaten and left for dead. The men who passed him by did so for perfectly acceptable legal reasons. They were free to help him, but they would not! And no one would have faulted them. To have touched this man would have made them ritually unclean. In pressing His point Jesus tells His disciples that a Samaritan (the Jews and Samaritans hated each other) was also passing by, saw the injured man and freely had compassion on him. Jesus then asked, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man that fell among the robbers?" The answer was painfully obvious!

The despised Samaritan did not keep the law, he freely fulfilled the law ("Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:10) He bore good fruit for his neighbor. He played offense, not defense. Faith actively seeks the welfare, the good of the neighbor. Faith lives way beyond the law in the realm of love and grace, the realm of mercy, without any kind of pride, where there is nothing to fear. Suddenly, being a law-abiding citizen doesn't have quite the same ring to it, does it! And, of course, what this also reveals is that tension between faith ("the good that I would do") and self-preservation in the law ("the evil that I actually do"). The troubling paradox of Romans 7 is always there.

We have already seen how you and I live out our Christian vocations in the world under the power and influence of the law. Let's examine this more closely. And as we do it is important to remember that the law expresses God's will for the created world. That means that the law, in all its forms, guidelines, prohibitions, punishments and demands, is always working within our vocations, our daily lives. As long as we are in this life, the law is in effect. God has arranged it that way to keep the sinful world in some kind of order. As Jesus said, He did not come to abolish the law.

Another important matter regarding the law and vocation is this: idealistic notions of love, forgiveness and hope are not the driving forces in vocation under the law. What are? Reason and realism. Since the world is the realm of sin and death, reason, and realism (tools of the law) must be the primary tools God uses in our earthly vocations. This is not to suggest that Christian people

do not demonstrate love, forgiveness, and hope in this midst of life's vocations. Far from it! The Holy Spirit is very much at work through faith. For the Christian, reason and realism are always informed by 'faith active in love,' to use a famous phrase.

To live under the law means that in all our earthly work, God uses the law to restrain chaos and evil and to benefit and support what is good and useful for the neighbor and the creation. Again, the direction, against our sinful nature, is outward. This means that our use of the law is functional, not absolute. There is no one-size-fits all legal scheme. We are free to make, abandon, or remake laws as they serve the welfare of the neighbor and the creation.

God uses the law actively and functionally through our vocations to make use of us until we have become, well, useless. As we take up the business of vocation under the law, God keeps us in faith, producing good fruit through us, all the while keeping us in the hopeful promise that once the old self has finally died, He will raise us up, a new person in Jesus Christ! Faith learns, therefore, to trust the Divine vine dresser who wields the blade, to see the patient, divine wisdom of God's love and mercy in the steady and relentless pruning hand of grace. God, alone, knows how to bring the good fruit out of us. We, frankly, do not. This is what faith dares to trust as we use the law in the business of living.

Vocation, Culture, and Justice

Now, let's turn our attention to culture. For it is within the crucible of culture that the 'rubber hits the road' in the social dimension of vocation. We all know that justice is important, even crucial. Working to repair and set right the ongoing dilapidated human condition is something in which we all have a stake, beginning in our homes. At the same time, there is nothing uniquely Christian about being concerned with justice. Justice is a tool of the law and not of the gospel. Jesus did not have to die on the cross for us to see the human self-interest inherent in matters of justice. No religious sensibility, Christian or otherwise, is necessary to have these concerns. They are housekeeping matters within every human community, from the smallest tribal group to the most complex civilization.

But you have probably noticed something about the world's pursuit of justice. It tends toward unrest, mayhem, violence, and disorder. The more the world demands justice, the more those demands lead to blaming, bitterness and resentment. For our secular neighbors, for whom this world is all there is or ever will be, justice in the law is the only tool in the box for repairing the broken world. The frustration, resentment, bitterness, and existential panic we see and hear all around us in the name of justice go directly to this point. Individuals, families, whole communities, nations are set on edge.

Those whose only hopeful horizon is in *this world* would rather tear out the wounds of injustice than heal them. Quite paradoxically, this strident quest for justice, which remains so elusive, becomes the cause of more unrest, prejudice, and injustice. And this is simply because, to use Luther's words, "The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done." The world collectively, just like each of us individually, is trapped in the vicious cycle of the law's demands and there is no way out, no way forward. The world and all its works and all its ways remain under the shadow and judgment of the Cross.

It is important for our lives as Christians in this world to make the distinction between justice in the law and the Gospel. The justice established in the Gospel

stands in opposition to the world's pursuit of justice in the law. This is not because justice in the law is unimportant. As creatures in this world, we uphold the law. Our Lord said as much and so did Paul after him. The Christian, along with every other person living in this world, has a role in keeping society working on as even a keel as possible. We want to see just relations among family, friends, business associates, neighbors, and the wider society. In so far as it depends on us, the imbalances of the world should be set right, where possible. And as we work in this way with others different avenues will suggest themselves. But justice in the law is not aiming for what the gospel creates apart from law.

Christian vocation is not associated with any particular legal scheme, political, social, or moral order or ideology. This is hard to recommend in our currently supercharged political environment. The alliance of either right or left-wing politics with the Christian faith in the name of justice illustrates how easily we can interweave sinful self-interest with religion. When Jesus told Pilate that His kingdom was not of this world, he, in effect was refusing to ally the cause of God with our political commitments. God's platform of justice was about to be revealed, only hours away, when Jesus hung dying on the bloody cross. Jesus did not come to bring justice in the law. Jesus came to bring mercy.

An important implication here is that God's creative work in the world does not mean to imply progress according to one political scheme or another. History is not redemptive in any terms we might apply. What we do see in time is change. And change does not lead to automatic progress. It may lead, in fact, to catastrophe. But this should not lead us to assume the worst! What this does mean is that caring for the neighbor and creation will require both conservative action as well as liberalizing action. Static notions deny the fundamental truth about the God who works in and through creation, making all things new.

This is hard for many Christians to accept, no matter where they are on the political spectrum. Why? Because they have, in fact, allied their Chistian faith to a particular view of the law. So you hear comments like, 'If you are a Christian, this must be your politics or morality.' But the use of the law for

Christians is not absolute but functional. Our Christian freedom means that we are free to take up whatever legal or political remedies we think best. There is no absolute law to which we all must bend.

Recognizing that we are at the same time totally righteous and totally sinful can keep us from explicitly identifying our vocations under the law, including our politics, with something purely Christian. As a Christian you are free to live out vocation under the law through a variety of political and legal expressions. At the same time, Christians will strongly disagree on the best course of action. No political or legal expression, however, is synonymous with the Christian faith because law and politics are tools meant for this world. The Cross makes an end of every attempt to resolve the crisis of the sinful world in the terms of law. The crisis of sin has been resolved once for all on the Cross in the body of Jesus.

Vocation, Baptism, and the Gospel

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3-4)

To “die daily” is language often tied to baptism and can be understood metaphorically. In this way it is usually understood in relation to being repented, dying to sin. It has a very spiritual, religious ring to it. No doubt there is a place for such language. But to “die daily” also refers, and I would say *primarily* refers, to life as we live it under the law in our vocations. In the rough and tumble of life lived out among family, friends, business associates and neighbors, our lives are literally spent, squeezed out, used up to the point of being emptied out as we live under the law’s demands for the good of our neighbor and the creation.

“We were buried with Him…”

Baptism's dying is not an abstraction. When Jesus referred to his own baptism, he was pointing ahead to his death. His baptism affirmed his unique vocation as the Lamb of God who, in his death on the cross, would take away the sin of the world. So it is in our baptism. To die and be buried in baptism is to also to enter a life of dying, but a dying "…with Him…" as Paul states. This is huge!

There is no question that talk of entering a life of dying does not square with the glory and success emphasis that tends to be popular in our culture and in many churches. But this is where we do not want to stumble but hear what Jesus is telling us about carrying our cross. It is not that our vocations in this world cannot be life-giving. Many of us love and appreciate our vocations. I loved serving as a pastor – most of the time! At the same time God's judgment is also worked out in and through our vocations.

Paul wrote something that helps us in his first letter to the Corinthians. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22) Insofar as we are "in Adam" the old self in us fears death. The old Adam and Eve angle and scheme to hang on to this old life. Insofar as we are "in Christ" God helps us to let go of this life primarily through our vocations. That is the cross God places upon us. Just as the Old Adam fears death, the new person in Christ welcomes death. You probably don't think this way too often, but, again, Paul is helpful.

"If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." (Philippians 1:21-23)

Paul is torn between continuing in his vocation here and contributing "fruitful labor" and going to his completion in Christ. So, how do we understand this? Vocation has two dimensions.

On the one hand, vocation has a fruitful, creative purpose. Our lives are used to serve God and creation. The One who has baptized us, set us free, called us into vocation and grafted us onto the Vine of Christ, is also the One who promises to attend to us and care for us and make use of us. When the branch is well

cultivated, fertilized, pruned, and stripped of its superfluous leaves, it produces good fruit. That is the Holy Spirit's work in us. Nearly everything the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit revolves around creating and sustaining life.

At the same time, vocation has a redemptive purpose. God uses vocation to discipline us in the law. As we live out our creaturely life in this world (as branches on the vine of Christ) the branch needs to be attended to by the dresser who will not allow the branch to simply grow wildly or wither and become useless. The new person in Christ dives into life, helping spontaneously and willingly. The old sinner in me, however, needs the law's demands to keep me in line! This struck me that day in Tuscany when I watched those pruned clippings fall to the ground. Little bits of those branches were "dying daily" even as they were being prepared to produce good fruit.

So, we can see that the dying direction of baptism is not upward, or inward, but outward. Our lives in Jesus Christ are lived and spent just as His was in the real world of loss, suffering, hardship, sorrow, and death. Baptism begins our life-long participation in this life with Christ. We may not feel it or see it. We may rebel against this life but that will not stop baptism's promise! That will not stop Christ from wielding the vinedresser's blade and making us fit for bearing good fruit as we are prepared to finally be with Christ. The love of Christ will not let us go!

"…that we too might walk in newness of life."

Baptism takes us with Christ where He wants us to go. And where Christ wants to go is into the midst of living. During your lifetime you will have many vocations. You will wear many vocational hats! Each stage in life places us in personal, communal, and historical relationships where we live and work under the constant demand of life's obligations and responsibilities, our neighbor's needs. And when Christ takes us there, the dying begins. You know that dying and so do I. This describes the role of the branch on the vine. It is in and through our vocations in this life that the relentless pruning of the vinedresser makes us useful despite ourselves!

When you go to school, establish a career, work long hours, struggle to manage your family, pay the bills, fight your political battles, raise the kids, share the burden of your neighbor's problems, you are not being distracted from living a victorious Christian life! You are right in the middle of the Christian life! As the baptismal liturgy proclaims, when you receive the sign of the Cross, you are sharing in the fellowship of His suffering and the power of his resurrection. "… that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,…" (Philippians 3:10)

You are where branches belong; grafted on to the Vine of Christ producing the fruit that Christ makes in us in the midst of life. You have been set free through the Gospel. The person who has been justified by grace through faith alone, the person who is both sinner and saint, is the actual person God uses! Through the very ordinary stuff of living, in and through the actual person you are, whether you are buffeted by the storms, or sail on the breezes, the Good Lord is bestowing His goodness and mercy on His creation through you, even as He prunes you, the branch, until your usefulness in this world comes to an end.

Vocation Within the Christian Community

Luther helped to send vocation out the church door and into the world as a gift for the neighbor and creation. But we have a call to the church as well. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27) The Christian is baptized into Christ and therefore into the body of Christ, the church. We are a "priesthood of all believers." This phrase became an important teaching of the Reformation. It did not mean to eliminate the necessary role of pastors or other church leaders but to qualify the top-down, clerical dominance that characterized the church in Luther's time. Luther found the basis for this teaching in texts from the Bible, especially this verse from 1 Peter.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Through the shared ministries of worship, witness, learning, and service, the “royal priesthood” which is the body of Christ, gives expression to the faith that holds us in Jesus Christ. In his book, ‘Life Together,’ Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes;

“Strong and weak, wise, and foolish, gifted, or ungifted, pious, or impious, the diverse individuals in the community, are no longer incentives for talking and judging and condemning, and thus for self-justification. They are cause for rejoicing in one another and serving one another. Each member of the community is given a particular place, but this is no longer the place in which he can most successfully assert himself, but the place where he can be of service.”

When we gather in worship, the regular hearing of God’s word replaces other words, which the world is more than ready to provide, those words that tempt us toward the self-assertion of which Bonhoeffer wrote. Preoccupation with the self leads to the denial, or at least the diminishing of our role as caretakers of God's world and of one another. When life begins and continues in God's Word, the vocation of creaturely life in and for this world becomes the priority of living. No task is too small or unimportant.

In a world that sees little value in selfless service, every Christian community is a vocational lab where new ways of sharing and new kinds of caring may be explored and facilitated in the joy and freedom of faith. In serving and caring for one another within the Christian community we model for our children and grandchildren the shape and character of Christian living. Christian communities can provide shelter from the storms of life, solace, and guidance during times of upheaval and uncertainty, and consolation in times of suffering and grief. The quiet, unassuming influence of Christian people as they disperse into daily life is that “salt” and “light” through which God bestows his love and care in midst of the indifferent and discordant world.

“Go Home”

In Mark’s gospel Jesus healed a man whose life had been ravaged by numerous demons. The town folks chained him up in the graveyard like an animal, but he broke the chains and ran wild. He had been isolated, estranged from everyone and everything that could give him life and comfort. His life had been grafted onto a vine that produced evil fruit and that evil flowed through him, poisoning him and others.

Jesus healed him, returned him to life, and filled him with hope. He was now grafted onto the True Vine and the life of God flowed through him. As a result the man, full of enthusiasm, wanted to follow Jesus. But the Lord refused his request. “Go home,” Jesus said. “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” (Mark 5:19)

As Christians, our hope does not lie in this world. At the same time, we do not use our faith to turn our backs on the world and its needs. We can understand the enthusiastic desire of our now demon-free brother in Christ to want to join Jesus on the way. But what we have seen in this excursion through Christian vocation is that while being in Christ Jesus will bring us to heaven’s gate, there will be many stops at our stations of the cross along the way. Our lives are lived in creation and under the demands of law just like everyone else. We need our neighbors, and they need us. For now, the great opportunity and vocation of living is what is in our hands. Apart from Word and Sacrament, there will be no heaven ahead of time!

Through the power and freedom of the Gospel, as a new person in Christ, you are returned to creation. God makes a gift of your life to the neighbor. This is in fact one of the greatest contributions the Christian faith makes to the life of the world. You are a caretaker of this world. This is your vocation. This is your purpose. It always was. Our view of Christian vocation lays claim to a higher and more appealing truth than the exploitive and pragmatic use of creation and the neighbor that operates in the sinful world. Our generous, patient advocacy

of God’s mercy and love in Christ Jesus is seen precisely in our lives as they are lived out on behalf of God’s fragmented world. Our goal is to build others up, not tear them down. Such advocacy, found at the heart of Christian vocation, is the hard, practical, blessed work of faith’s freedom, our freedom as a Christians. There is no area of life where this advocacy is not needed. The letters of Paul and the pastoral letters of the New Testament are filled with the language of this advocacy. As Christian people, this “faith active in love” is our business.

So, dear reader, let us end this look at Christian vocation with the word of the Cross, the word that makes all things possible, the word that reconciles us to God and to one another, the word that gives the creation back to us and gives us back to the creation! Your sin is forgiven! You are a baptized child of God! God has made an end of you on the Cross in Jesus Christ that he might be life for you in Jesus Christ. There are no spiritual ladders to climb. There is nothing you can think, say, or do to improve on what Jesus Christ has done, is doing and will do for you. You have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. You are free, really free!

Therefore, in the name of your Lord, and for the sake of your neighbor and God’s good creation, “Go home.” Go home in faith to that mundane, everyday life that is on your hands and is the real business of your Chistian living. Go home to that life that seems "too petty, too monotonous, too undemanding.” Go home to the people who need you, to the world that needs you. Go home and tell others of what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. Go home to that life-long paradox of being both a saint and sinner. Yes, there is crucifixion struggle there. You are dying with Christ. There is resurrection joy too! You are alive with Christ! Go home to that congregation full of fellow sinners and saints, where the Word and Sacraments create a bond of faith, hope, love and fellowship the world neither knows nor gives.

By grace through faith alone, you are now His workmanship created to be a fruitful branch, grafted on that glorious True Vine who is Jesus Christ. The Lord faithfully cares for his vineyard. You are loved and forgiven! You belong

to him! Amid all that life will bring, He will tend to you, watch over you, and through you pour out the glorious vintage of His amazing grace. Then, one day when your work on earth is done, He will bring you to rest upon that distant shore and into the greater light of His eternal love.

“Go home”, child of God. Living is enough.

Living Is Enough

A Pastor's Perspective on Christian Vocation

What does it mean to live a Christian life?

Is it a quest for holiness? Is the Christian life all about deepening our spiritual relationship with God? Does a Christian life take us above the messy, difficult world where all our projects and plans are fulfilled if we only have enough faith? Or is this life all about following Jesus' teachings, becoming a better at the law, becoming a more spiritual person in order to attain salvation?

In this brief exploration of Christian vocation, Pastor Mark Anderson presents a clear and concise discussion of the nature and purpose of Christian living. Pastor Mark suggests that the Christian faith is not about fixating on perfection, success, or spiritual achievement. Instead, in the confidence and assurance of a living faith, the baptized Christian is set free to embrace the inherent value, the gift, of life itself.

About the Author

During his 46 years in the parish ministry, Mark Anderson served both rural and urban congregations in Minnesota, Montana, and California. He also served for a time as an Air National Guard chaplain, with tours at Buckley Air Force Base, Denver, Colorado, and March Air Force Base, Riverside, California.

In retirement, Mark is engaged in an online ministry in partnership with the 1521Foundation LLC, Corona del Mar, California, and Luther House of Study, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. You can learn more about Mark's work and these organizations at: www.pastormarkanderson.org.

Mark and his wife Linda (his constant support, advocate, best friend, and by far the better half!) reside in Coto de Caza, California. They have enjoyed many travel adventures together with a definite preference for Italy! They have three children, Erik, Geoff (married to the adorable Jenn), and Kristin.