

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO WHEN YOU GROW UP?"

Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17

A Sermon by John Thomason

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As many of you know, over the past eight years I've frequently used cartoons from the funny pages for sermon illustrations. You didn't really think I would leave this pulpit without sneaking in at least one more cartoon, did you?!

One of my favorite comic strips is "Blondie," which features a middle-aged married couple, Blondie and Dagwood Bumstead. In a recent episode, Dagwood is engaged in a sidewalk conversation with a young neighborhood boy named Elmo. Dagwood asks him, "Do you know what you want to be when you grow up, Elmo?" The boy replies, "Rich." Dagwood says, "No, I mean what do you want to do when you're older?" "Oh," Elmo replies, "I want to buy a lot of stuff."

When I read that cartoon dialogue, I immediately thought about our church's high school and college graduates, who have undoubtedly been asked Dagwood's question many times: "What do you want to be or do when you grow up?" That's an invitation to dream big and dream wild when you're only 8 or 10 years old. But now that you're almost grown up, the questions are likely to be more specific and urgent: "What do you intend to major in when you go to college?" Or, "Now that you've finished college, what career do you plan to pursue?"

I'm guessing these questions produce anticipation and excitement in your hearts, but they may also trigger a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. Less than a century ago, most boys simply followed in the footsteps of their fathers into the family trade or business. Most girls had even narrower possibilities; they were destined to become homemakers like their mothers or choose a career from a limited range of options, like nursing or school teaching. Today, you as graduates face the opposite challenge. Both genders have full access to the working world, and your options in that world are almost limitless. Any one of you can become an accountant or an astronaut – which is wonderful in theory. But in practice, it creates another problem: for you, the members of the class of 2021, the vocational choices are so numerous that they may feel overwhelming. Here you are, no longer adolescents but not quite adults, still trying to figure out who you are, what you're interested in, and what you're good at. When you're between the ages of 18 and 21, how are you supposed to know what you want to do when you grow up?

I would never presume to offer you glib advice, but I can share with you some of my observations and personal experience. As I approach retirement from full-time professional ministry, I've been reflecting on how I got into this line of work to begin with. When I was your age, I sifted through dozens of vocational options and finally decided to become a pastor in the local church. How did that happen? And, perhaps more important: how much of my decision had to do with exercising my own will, and how much of it reflected my desire to be obedient to God's will?

I'll start with something I discovered early on that was extremely helpful to me. I learned that there is a difference between a career and a calling. Your career starts out with a job, which you hope to extend into a lasting, fruitful occupation. Your career often grows out of a natural talent you possess, which you fine-tune through education and training. Let's say you have skills on the computer, so you major in computer programming, take a job creating computer software, and your job develops into a career which includes nice promotions and greater responsibility.

But this is where things really get interesting – and complicated! Your career in the working world may or may not be the same thing as your calling in life. Your calling is a voice you hear – perhaps “a still, small voice,” perhaps a loud, clamoring voice. In any case, it’s a voice that comes to you from two possible sources. The voice comes either from the inside or the outside, or it may come from both.

On the one hand, you may hear a calling from the inside. Your calling is your own heart’s desire; it’s what you feel born to do, what you love to do. Most of you can identify a task you perform that requires effort, and yet feels almost effortless because you enjoy doing it so much. But here’s what makes things tricky: the activity that gives you the sense of being fully alive may not be the source of your livelihood.

Back in my home state of Texas, I have a friend who is now retired. He worked for decades as a technician in a manufacturing company. That was job, which became his career; but his calling, if you can believe this, was to fish! He went fishing every day, rain or shine, hot or cold. Fishing was the activity he was most obsessed with. He worked five days a week in a job that could be repetitive and boring, which he only tolerated a lot of the time. Why? So he could earn enough income during his working hours to enjoy fishing during his leisure hours. And this is a perfectly acceptable way to balance a career and a calling when they are not one and the same thing. Your job is “just a job”; your passion is something else.

On the other hand, I’ve known plenty of individuals whose career and calling coincide. A voice on the inside says, “I want to make good money, but I’m also a ‘people person’; I’d like to provide products and services that are helpful to others; so, I will become a salesperson.” For these individuals, their calling becomes their career. They typically enjoy their work because it matches their personalities and priorities in life. When they’re on the job, they’re doing what they feel passionate about doing. Sure, it’s work, but it doesn’t feel like work because it brings them so much joy.

Either way – whether your calling in life is your part-time hobby or your full-time job – your calling may originate in a voice from the inside that says, “This is who I am and what I love to do.”

However, your calling may come from a different source – a voice from the outside that says, “This is what you must do, because it must be done.” You become aware of a need in the world around you – perhaps the inequity of income and health care in our country, or the scourge of racial injustice, or the isolation of older people during a pandemic. Whatever it is, that need calls out to you: “Come! Use your talent and passion to meet this need.” And you choose to answer that calling, either in a full-time job or as a part-time volunteer.

Notice that a calling from the inside allows you to remain within your comfort zone, but a calling from the outside may pull you out of your comfort zone. You may be called to do something that doesn’t come naturally to you, that is challenging and difficult.

This is what happens to Isaiah in today’s Old Testament lesson. The incident occurs at a time when Israel is in political and spiritual crisis and needs someone to exercise prophetic leadership. The young Isaiah has a glorious vision of God in the Jerusalem temple. He feels unworthy to receive such a revelation and feels even more unworthy to be a messenger of that revelation to others. Isaiah isn’t called by a voice from the inside; he doesn’t say to himself, “I would love to be a prophet, and I’d make a great prophet.” No, the voice comes from the outside – in this case, from God – calling Isaiah to do something risky for which he feels inadequate and ill-prepared, calling him to serve the needs of his troubled nation. And make no mistake: hearing this outside voice makes Isaiah very uncomfort-

able. But the divine call is persistent: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Somehow Isaiah musters the courage to respond, “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

Isaiah’s calling to be a prophet reminds me, of course, of my own calling to pastoral ministry. When I was growing up, I thought about a number of possible careers – my family real estate business, or landscape architecture, or television production, or teaching, or politics, or my dream job – becoming a play-by-play announcer for a major league baseball team! At this point, I was listening primarily to the voice on the inside: “John, do something that really interests you, that you enjoy doing.”

Well, it so happened that one of the things that most interested me was my Christian faith, and one of the things I most enjoyed doing was talking about my faith to others. I admired the preachers I knew and could actually see myself doing what they do. I could imagine a career in ministry. But again, this was only my inside voice speaking: “John, ministry is right up your alley. Go for it!” At the same time, I heard another inside voice, a voice like the one Isaiah heard, a voice that said, “John, you’re only deluding yourself; you’re not good enough to be a minister.” I heard these two inside voices, and they had conflicting messages. I was stuck in this inner conflict, because I had not yet heard a voice from the outside, a voice aimed directly at me saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

I eventually heard that outside voice, and it came from a variety of places. During my teenage years, people in my home church affirmed my gifts for ministry and gently encouraged me in that direction. I went off to college in the late 1960’s, when American society was in a state of turmoil and rapid change, and I felt called to be an agent of positive change. This outside voice said, “John, don’t just make a better place for yourself in the world; make the world a better place.”

My college years were also a time of ferment and activism in the Church. Some of my friends dismissed the institutional Church as out of touch, irrelevant, and passive, with its head in the sand in relation to the big events of the day. In their view, religion was only about “God and me,” while the world went to hell in a handbasket. But the congregation to which I belonged did not simply focus on private spirituality; it was also fully engaged in social action, trying to meet human needs and change the unjust structures of society. Amazingly enough, I perceived the Church to be “where the action is,” and I felt called to be a part of the action.

And then, above all, as a college student I was on a spiritual journey, at times struggling to make sense of God and experience God in my own life. I felt called to pursue a theological education, not just to dodge the Vietnam draft or indulge my intellectual curiosity, but as a way of developing a more authentic personal faith.

When all of these outside voices spoke in unison, I concluded that I was hearing the unmistakable voice of God: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I was ready to respond, “Here am I, send me.” I was called to the ordained ministry. Looking back, I realize I was fortunate that my calling came from both an inside voice and an outside voice. I had an inner assurance that I possessed at least some of the gifts necessary to be a minister. I had an inner desire to help others develop a relationship with God and become better persons in a better society. But I also acknowledged an outer claim on my life, a call from beyond myself, a call that I knew would stretch me beyond my natural abilities and my comfort zone, a call that could only be from God.

In sum, when I was in college, I found my vocation in life. Which leads me to say to our high school and college graduates, please don’t get tripped up on that word “vocation.” When you and I think of a vocation, we tend to think of an occupation that we choose, like selling insurance or building houses. But the word “vocation” comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” Your

vocation is the work you are called to by God. However, we may also think that the only people God calls are professional ministers. You know, ordinary people just decide on their own what they want to be or do, but God calls special people to ministry. Only ministers have true vocations.

I'm here to tell you that this is pure rubbish! We can credit Martin Luther with two great insights about vocation which set the record straight. First, any job can be a vocation under God – provided it is work that helps humanity and serves the divine purpose. That's right, God can call anyone to any job – be it garbage collector or Wall Street broker – and that job is no less honorable to God than the job of professional ministry. And second, in the deepest sense all Christians have the same vocation – to be part of a universal priesthood, to be servants of Christ. In today's Epistle lesson, Paul declares “all who are led by the Spirit are children of God . . . and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:14, 17). In other words, all Christians share in Christ's servant ministry, not just those who wear a robe and a stole.

This brings us back to the question Dagwood Bumstead poses to young Elmo, and which I also want to pose to our graduates: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I hope you have a better answer than Elmo had. I hope you want to be something more than “rich.” When you grow up, I hope you will embrace your identity as children of God and heirs of Christ's work in the world. Notice that Dagwood asks the same question in a different way: “What do you want to do when you get older?” Again, I hope you want to do something more than “buy a lot of stuff.” The psychiatrist, William Claire Menninger, once said that the key to personal happiness is to “find a mission in life and take it seriously.” I hope you will find a mission that makes you happy and also brings joy to the heart of God – whether it's fishing for fish or fishing for people.

In his insightful book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner writes about how Christians discover their life's vocation. He describes the process in a way that sums up what I've been trying to say in this sermon:

“There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, or the Super-ego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.” Buechner then concludes with these words: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

May God help each of our graduates – and, indeed, all of us – to find that place of meeting.