

“The Future: What is God Calling Me to Do?”
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Micah 6:6-8, Philemon 10-16
July 15, 2007

“Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful, both to you and to me.”
Philemon 11

Ruth was an 84-year-old United Methodist who hadn't been to church in over 50 years. I was told that while giving birth to her youngest son, the doctor used forceps to assist in the delivery. Something went horribly wrong, there was brain damage, and his mental capacity never grew much beyond that of an infant. So for the next 58 years Ruth cared for Richard John in much the same way she always had—bathing, diapering, and feeding him every single day. In that time she was not able to travel beyond the confines of her yard. Not once did she ever take a vacation. Her daughter helped as much as she could, purchasing groceries and running errands. But Ruth did most of the work. She counted her pennies and lived on her husband's Social Security check. Her relaxation consisted of devouring the daily newspaper; reading Time and Newsweek from cover to cover, and watching every television newscast she could during her son's afternoon naptime. I had the privilege of being her pastor for 6 years, and I would visit her every Tuesday afternoon to bring her the weekly Sunday School lesson, tell her who fell asleep during my sermon, and discuss politics and baseball—her two great passions. One day, towards the end of my time at that church, I got brave. Knowing how hard and how long she had cared for her son, I took a deep breath and asked, “Ruth, do you ever get tired?” I'll never forget how she sat up in her chair and straightened her back. She looked at me with some of the clearest, most piercing eyes I have ever seen and simply said, “Richard John is my son. This is not work. This is what God has called me to do.”

I thought of Ruth as I began studying for this morning's sermon. As most of you know, I have been preaching a series of sermons that I hope will generate a series of dinner table discussions. I want to address topics that I feel affect the young people of our church and community, and then have parents and grandparents use the information as a catalyst for dialogue with their children and grandchildren. Over the past four weeks we have talked about the use and abuse of alcohol, money, and sex, and looked at how stress

and depression so often touch our lives. Hopefully, those have been helpful to you and your family. Today is the last of this series, and I would like to talk about what Po Bronson calls “the most obvious and universal question on our plates as human beings:”¹ *What should I do with my life?* That question, of course, is not limited to high school juniors and seniors. We all want to know what we are “supposed” to do with the “three score and ten”² years of our lives that scripture promises. As people of faith, we often refine that question and ask, “*What is God calling me to do?*” Sometimes the answer is quite apparent and other times it is not. Often, as was the case with my friend Ruth, the answer to that question is that which you never ever expected. So I would like to spend the next few minutes offering some information that I have found, giving what I believe to be the Christian perspective, and suggesting some guidelines that might be of help. Then as it has been these last few weeks, I will be encouraging you to take home what you hear this morning, sit down, and discuss it as a family. Let’s get started.

First I would like to remind you that when we ask the question, “*What should I do with my life?*” or “*What is God calling me to do?*” we are not necessarily talking about a career, but a vocation. According to Webster, a career is “a field for or pursuit of consecutive professional achievement, especially in public, professional, or business life.” A career is often described as a course of successive situations that make up a person’s work life. Sometimes a career will last a lifetime. Sometimes people will switch careers in midstream. As a matter of fact, second careers are fast becoming the norm in our society. After retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel and a speechwriter for the Secretary for the Army, one of my best friends has embarked on a second, successful career selling tractors and trailers to Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee rednecks. He took off his dress blues, put on his blue jeans, and is having a ball! A career involves what you do. A vocation, however, is different. Linguistically, it comes from a Latin word that means, “to call.” Yet it is a concept that has been around far longer than that ancient language. When we turn to scripture, we find that long before Latin ever formed its first word, Abraham was called by God to leave his ancestral home and head for the Promised Land. There

¹ From an interview on “Morning Edition,” National Public Radio, January 3, 2003

² Psalm 90:10

God told him that he would be molded and shaped, and become the father of many nations. Abraham now had a calling, a life purpose, a vocation. Many centuries later, Moses was also called. He was to be one to go down to Egypt and fight for the freedom of God's people. By trade, he was a shepherd. But his vocation was that of a liberator. Before his call to proclaim justice and righteousness to Israel, Amos was a "dresser of sycamore trees"—whatever that was! St. Paul's career was that of a tentmaker, a profession that he continued to practice his whole life long. But we all know that his vocation, his lifework, and his one great consuming passion, was that of a disciple of Jesus Christ. The concept of vocation has its roots in those stories of individuals who were called by God to perform a special task that would usually result in the proclamation of the faith.

Now to be called implies that someone listened. For a call to be effective, it first has to be heard. If you remember anything about any of the biblical characters that I just mentioned, then you recall how each of them listened before they did anything else. Abraham heard the call while living in Haran. Moses heard the call that was coming from a burning bush. St. Paul heard the call that day on the road to Damascus. And the one common thread in all of those stories is that when the call came, those who heard it listened. A vocation, you see, is not just something that you just decide to do. Although each of the characters in the stories I mentioned had the experience that made them perfect for the job, they didn't train for what they were called to do. Moses didn't go to school to be a liberator. He simply responded to what he heard. Moses' vocation, any vocation, comes from listening. By the way, Hughes, that is "vocation," not "vacation." It has nothing to do with going to reunions or weddings.

Speaking of staff members, I want you to know that Tim has been a great addition to our church. Not only is he a great musician, but he also has the somewhat revolutionary idea that it is actually healthy to think. And he believes that it is truly healthy for this church staff to think, especially about what we are doing as leaders and as Christians. Amazing, isn't it? So we now spend a part of every staff meeting reviewing a book that just might help us understand what we do a little better. The last book we read

was about—surprise, surprise—vocation. In his book, Listening to Your Life, Parker Palmer wrote:

“Vocation does not mean a goal I pursue. It means a calling I hear. Before I can tell my life what to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truth and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.”³

That is very important to remember. God uses a variety of ways to speak to us, but we still need to listen. Burning bushes are few and far between and not all of us will be called to some great religious task. Yet that does not mean there is not a call that each of us needs to hear. That is why Martin Luther expanded the concept of vocation and referred to it as a life-task. He believed that all of us are called to some given way of life, and if we listen, we can live that life to the glory of God, whether that life involve ruling a country or milking a cow. Vocation, you see, is saying “yes” to our life’s calling. In that book Tim had us read, Parker Palmer goes on to say that, “I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.”⁴ That’s important. I had to be reminded of that truth the hard way. About six weeks before he graduated from college, I called my youngest son to see if he had lined up a job. In addition to his art classes, Charlie had been taking education classes so that he could teach art in the public schools, and he had previously told me that he had a couple of interviews lined up. So I was eager to see if any of them had paid off. But he told me that he had cancelled every single one. He was not going to teach, he was just going to paint. After I picked the phone up off the floor and counted to ten, I asked him if he could be so kind as to tell me why? I was, after all, the one who paid for his education. I’ll never forget what he said. “That’s not who I am, Dad. That’s not what I am called to do. I’ve got to paint. I know I could do it.” At the time it wasn’t a very comforting answer. Had he never heard the term “starving artist?” But now, as I watch him pick up a

³ Parker J. Palmer, Letting Your Life Speak, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. San Francisco, 2000, p. 4

⁴ Ibid. p. 4

brush, and as I let the memories of my own sense of calling fill my soul, I know and appreciate just what he was saying.

Martha Graham, one of the pioneers of modern dance, once said, “People have asked me why I chose to be a dancer. I did not choose to be a dancer. I was chosen to be a dancer, and with that you live all your life. When any young student asks me, ‘Do you think I should be a dancer?’ I always say, ‘If you ask me that question, no! Only if there is only one way to make life vivid for yourself, and for others,’”⁵ should you be a dancer.

Do you see? We can do just about anything as a career, but a vocation can never be just about anything. We could do any old task to make a living, but not really be living by simply doing any old task. Each of us has a vocation. And to find it, the most important thing we need do is listen. But there are hundreds of voices telling us what to do—parents, teachers, friends, and the like. How do we know the one voice that is true? How do we know that the voice we hear is the voice of God? I think we can find the answer to that question in this morning’s reading from the prophecy of Micah. Although he probably lived some 2700 years ago, his words are as relevant as ever. You may remember that he told the children of Israel, who had unmistakably lost their way as the people of God, “*What does to Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*” In other words, if that call you are hearing is fair and equitable for everyone—especially those who cannot fend for themselves, if that call you are hearing allows steadfast love and faithfulness to be a part of the equation in all of your relationships, and if that call you are hearing demands that you put God first in everything you do, then you can probably rest assured that the voice you hear is one that comes from God. Po Bronson sort of takes that same idea by putting it in the negative. He said in an interview with NPR that there are four wrong presumptions floating around our world that can so often lead us can lead us down the wrong path. Those wrong presumptions include the ideas:

- That money is the shortest route to freedom.
- That we can think or analyze our way to an answer.

⁵ William K. McElvaney, *The People of God in Ministry*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1981, p. 23

- That the world around us really doesn't matter.
- That we simply cannot do what we are called to do.

Now while all of those are important, it seems like the last is the one that gets us in trouble most often. We believe that we are simply not capable of doing those things to which we are called. The story of the call of Gideon comes to mind. Remember it? When God called that wheat farmer to judge and deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites, he responded by saying, "Me, my Lord? How and with what could I ever save Israel? Look at me. My clan's the weakest in Manasseh and I'm the runt of the litter!"⁶ Excuses, excuses, excuses, right? They always seem to crop up, don't they? Gideon's objections to his true calling were similar to what Po Bronson says most of us do with those two most important life questions. In that same interview he said:

"Most of us attempt to answer [them] with one eye opened, one eye closed. We let our fears govern our decisions; rather than challenging the validity of those fears, we accept the boundaries set by those fears, and end up confining our search to a narrow range of possibilities. Like the guy looking for his car keys under the streetlight because he's afraid to look in the dark."⁷

He then goes on to say that so we often hear the call, but then confine it to an area that we think acceptable to our parents or our spouse, or we restrict it to places inhabited only by "people like us," or we place too much emphasis on being respected by some imaginary audience, or we shy away from those things we think will take too much time to pay off. Whatever the case, however we limit the call, the result is always the same: we miss our vocation. And the more limits we place on our call, the more limited our lives become.

So "What should I do with my life?" "What is God calling me to do?" You are the only person who can answer those questions, but in light of all that has been said so

⁶ Judges 6:15, [The Message](#)

⁷ Morning Edition interview, op. cit.

far, let me tell you a story that might help. Once upon a time there was a runaway slave known as Onesimus who had found his way into the service of the apostle Paul. Now Paul was in a Roman prison at the time. He did not have the freedom he once enjoyed. He was limited in what he could and could not do. So Onesimus did those things for him. We do not really know what those things were. Some believe he might have been a courier for the apostle, delivering all the letters that Paul so feverishly wrote. Whatever his task was, his was not a job that would put him in the spotlight. Spotlights rarely shine in prison. Yet whatever his work, it was invaluable to Paul, and hence to the church. Now it was illegal to harbor a runaway slave in those days. Paul was breaking the law by employing Onesimus. So after a time, Paul decided that it was time for him to go back to his master. His name was Philemon, who just so happened to be a Christian and an acquaintance of the apostle. Paul wrote a letter to Philemon, a letter, as you know, that has found its way into the New Testament. In that letter, Paul wrote that Onesimus, who had formerly been useless to Philemon, has become very useful to him. We are never told why he was useless to his master; we are only told that he was useful to Paul. As a matter of fact, the whole letter is based upon a play on words, since the name “Onesimus” means “useful.” In Paul’s service Onesimus had finally become Onesimus—in other words, he had finally lived up to his name. That is interesting, I think. Could that little pun be a clue to the answering of those most important questions? Could our vocation, which will probably be different for each of you, have anything to do with being “useful?”

That is where I go back to my friend Ruth. She was certainly useful. Her vocation was not glamorous. It did not give her any prestige. It took everything she had every minute of the day. Yet her life was not any less full than mine. With justice, kindness, and a humble walk with God, and with absolutely no excuses, she became useful. I could have told you any number of similar stories this morning. Opal worked as an educator and Robin was employed at Coors Brewery. Jon was a fireman while Ernie managed an office. Don spent many years as an elementary school principle and James sold homes. Yet no matter the variety of career, income, and standing each had in the community in which they lived, they all had one thing in common. Each had listened, and because they did, each had a vocation that could be best described by the word “useful.” Do you want

to know what you should do with your life? Do you want to know what God is calling you to do? Then listen. It may come in the earthquake, wind, or fire, but more often than not it will come in the still, small voice. So be quiet, pray, observe the world around you, and listen.