

Dr. David Henderson

Some Thoughts on Calling

Thank you for this opportunity; calling is an important idea - the root - the Greek root for the word "beauty" is related to the word for "calling," to "kalon" and "kalein."

The Bible is full of stories of calling - Abraham, Moses, Gideon, David, Jesus, the Apostles - stories of God inviting us to cross over into a new way of doing which led to a new way of being; I love Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation - same root word as voice - of calling to - that place where what brings you great joy meets a great need in the world. So calling is rooted in beauty and finding voice I think. Is there anything more beautiful than watching someone doing who they are at the deepest level - their vocation is an expression of their being.

Share a story of my own calling - LeRoy Miller - barbed wire fence building - I was 25 - maybe 26 - teaching - to medical school - on and on - He responded, "I've always thought it didn't matter so much what you did as long as when you got there you loved the people." That moment has stayed with me now these almost 40 yrs. It has remained my vocation through a variety of careers.

I'd like to share another story of calling from Richard Rohr's book, *Falling Upward*, actually from *The Odyssey* - Odysseus - we all have some familiarity with his adventures as a younger man - establishing himself as this great warrior, hero, sailor - when he returned home, he continues that role but then Tiresias, the blind prophet, instructs him to take an oar - a symbol of his greatness as a sailor and hero - go inland until he finds someone who doesn't know what it is (therefore, doesn't know of his greatness) and there bury it - he finally does find someone although they think they know what it is - they tell him it's a winnowing tool - a threshing tool for separating the grain from the chaff - the important from the unimportant; only as he was willing to travel inward, did he discover the threshold to what is important and what isn't. That word threshold - perhaps calling is always about crossing a threshold - a place where we discover what is important and what is not - a thin place - a liminal place between the internal and the external - a place where the soul or the heart and the mind meet.

Native American elder speaking to a room full of MSU PhDs - the longest journey any of you will make is the 16 inches from here (pointing to his head) to here (pointing to his heart). This sort of undividedness is so critical to our soul's health and our overall well-being. But it requires a crossing over.

For me, calling has always been about my willingness to cross these liminal thresholds between what may appear important on the outside into deeply important places on the inside; just as important, am I willing also to allow what is deeply important inside to cross over into what is important outside - in other words, am I willing to allow my soul to show up in what I do? Thresholds - liminal places - become places of great vulnerability; they are crossing over places from appearance to deep beingness. David Brooks' NY Times Oped on our resume virtues which we carry into the marketplace as opposed to what he calls our eulogy virtues - those qualities for which we hoped to be remembered. Is it possible to bring all these virtues into our careers transforming them into callings?

When we choose to hear calling we choose to become vulnerable and to explore the deepest places within us and in so doing we discover gifts and limitations, light and shadows, things we are that we want others to see and things we hope no one ever sees - we discover what Parker Palmer calls our

“broken wholeness” - it’s here too that we discover what real compassion is otherwise we would go mad, or worst, cynical - we discover how to hold our own broken wholeness with gentleness and grace which helps us express our gifts in humility.

I share with my students my distinction between a scholar and an academic - both have attained a mastery of their discipline but there is a difference - a scholar has been humbled by the beauty and complexity of her discipline and must profess it with a sense of wonder and humility; an academic too has mastery but professes their mastery in arrogance with only a sense of conquest. Perhaps you’ve experienced both types of professors?

Some final thoughts - as we learn to hold our own broken wholeness with grace, why is community so important? I’ll offer two reasons: 1. We need others to help us be honest with ourselves because we are adept at lying to ourselves - a walk in the woods is wonderful for soul-searching but we need the insight and honesty of others to help us with our self-deceit. 2. But also we need others to hold our discovered broken wholeness with compassion and love and integrity when we struggle to do so; when another sees our brokenness and holds it in love, we know God in that relationship.

Of course, since every community - every organization - every collective is made up of individuals who know their broken wholeness (whether they admit that or not), every community will have its own broken wholeness but that’s where the church becomes incredibly relevant - we become the model for holding collective broken wholeness in grace and love and integrity if we are willing to do so. I worry for our national collective and are we willing to examine our broken wholeness with integrity and love - with critical thinking and critical love.

So, when LeRoy Miller said to me, “It doesn’t matter so much what you do as long as when you get there you love the people” I think he meant all the people there - the together and not so together, the successful and not so successful - all of which we are - basically anyone with broken wholeness including ourselves - I’m one of the people there - I need to love my own broken wholeness as I do what it is I do and in so doing, my soul might show up better and my compassion for the broken wholeness of those around me in all my communities might be more evident.

As you travel this “calling” journey this year, I hope you hold each other’s broken wholeness with love and that in doing so you deepen your collective holding of 1st Presbyterian’s beautiful broken wholeness. I think Jesus always called us to bring our full selves - our broken wholeness - into the world so we live undivided. Of course, this implies receiving ourselves and each other without judgment - perhaps that’s another talk. We need communities of faith now as much as ever. Thank you.

Dr. David Henderson currently teaches Educational Leadership at Montana State University in Bozeman, MT, and facilitates Courage to Teach, Courage to Lead and Circles of Trust retreats. He has been involved in pre-K-12 education for over 20 years. He continues to study and research the intersection of the inner life of leaders with their practice of leadership grounded in a heart striving for integrity and authenticity.