

# Called Through Relationship

BY ELIZABETH NEWMAN

**Our vocation is a gift, not something we decide after assessing our skills and talents. To discover our vocation, then, we must learn to receive the abundant life God desires to give us. We respond to God in our lives by acquiring the practices of and accepting wisdom from a new community that includes “saints” across time and culture.**

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**W**hat should we do with our lives? Should we go to this college? Major in that subject? Marry this person? Take that job? Send our child to this school? Retire here rather than there? The stakes can be high and we're haunted with uncertainty over *deciding* what to do.

While these questions are understandable, they are not the first ones we should ask when we consider our vocation, and this for two reasons. First, vocation for Christians is not something we choose or decide. We can no more decide our vocation than we decided to be born. It's not that our lives are predetermined, that we have no real freedom. Rather, just as our birth into this world, our unique creation, was an incredible gift from God, so also is our vocation *as Christians* not a decision but a gift. Indeed, our freedom becomes constrained when we assume the burden of deciding “what to do” with our lives. Genuine freedom, the freedom to become who God created and desires us to be, flows rather from *receiving* our lives from the gracious hand of God. Though we might have to make decisions in the particular circumstances of our lives, we nonetheless misrepresent our vocation if we see it fundamentally as our choice rather than God's gift to us.

Second, our primary calling is to *be* a people who live in communion

with our triune God. Only in community with God and others do we begin to discover, occasionally like a flash of lightning, but more often haltingly and by fits and starts, what we are called to *do* in our lives.

### **VOCATION AS GIFT**

Paul urges us to lead lives “worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3). Yet, in any community—in our family, university dorm, or church—the stresses of daily life, the conflict of personalities, and the minor disagreements can add up to make Paul’s admonition seem unattainable. We don’t like bearing with those who rub us the wrong way, and making every effort to maintain unity looks like more trouble than it is worth. Even so, most of us desire to lead lives “worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

Significantly, Paul goes on to say, “but each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (4:7). He does not say, contrary to our expectation, that we are given grace by the measure of *our* gifts. But what is the “measure of Christ’s gift”? In fact, Christ’s gift cannot *be* measured, for we are “blessed in Christ with *every* spiritual blessing” (1:3); Paul prays that we may know what are “the *riches* of [God’s] glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the *immeasurable* greatness of his power for us who believe” (1:18-19). The abundance of God’s grace available to us in Christ is inexhaustible and endlessly generative. If we root our understanding of vocation in God’s own abundance, then we see what a mistake it is to think about vocation simply as finding our talents and figuring out what to do with them. Rather and more fully, it is discovering and living out of the infinite and gratuitous abundance of God.

The story of Moses’ call to confront Pharaoh reminds us that calling may not match up with our talents. Initially Moses resists God, complaining, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me” (Exodus 4:1). God then gives him power to perform certain signs, but Moses continues to argue: “Oh my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:10). In other words, Moses tells God, “I have no talent for getting up in front of people and talking!” Though God promises, “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak,” Moses still objects, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else” (4:13). God grows angry, but nonetheless allows Moses the freedom to resist. In the end, they reach a solution: God sends Aaron to be Moses’ spokesman. But Moses, we might notice, is not off the hook; he accepts God’s call to lead the people of Israel, despite his own perception that he does not have the necessary talent to do this.

Moses does not invent or determine his vocation, he receives it from

God. In Scripture and Christian tradition, the word “vocation” (from the Latin for “call”) indicates that someone else is calling. “Vocation” differs from “career” in this regard; while “career” (related to a Medieval Latin word for “race track”) refers primarily to human effort (as in “What do *you do* for a living?”), vocation points in another direction. The initiative resides not with us, but with the One who calls and invites.

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Listening for God’s call begins with seeing our lives as gifts. Like Moses, most of us cannot initially do this. At first Moses finds his calling to be as terrifying as the burning bush and even more intimidating in its demands, yet at the *end* of his life, he can say of God, “The Rock, his work is perfect; and all his ways are just” (Deuteronomy 32:4). As Moses looks out over the land that the Lord has sworn to Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob, he recognizes that the promises of the Lord are being fulfilled in his own life and in the world. He ends his days singing not about his own talents, but about a God who is ever faithful, even when God’s own people are not.

But “we are not like Moses,” you may be thinking, for no clear and dramatic experience enables us to know our particular calling. Does God even work like this in the lives of ordinary people? We do know from countless disciples across generations that God continues to be present in individual’s lives in odd and dramatic ways. Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila, John Wesley, and, more recently, Millard Fuller (founder of Habitat for Humanity) and even some ordinary church folk describe extraordinary moments in their lives when they sense and “hear” the voice of God. Such moments are unpredictable and mysterious, and based, I think, on what God knows that each of us needs.

In any case, as Teresa of Avila reminds us, these experiences should not be given undue weight. At times she wished God would leave her alone as far as her unusual “spiritual” experiences were concerned. Teresa says that what matters more than having “special experiences” is living daily in faithful response to God through community with others. This involves learning to be “at home” with God so that we graciously, humbly, and without fear can receive what God desires to give. Such receiving, we dis-

cover, enables our fullest giving. According to Teresa, at the moment we reside in “the seventh mansion,” the most interior region of the soul, we will be most fully in service to others. We will be both Mary and Martha. By this she does not mean we will be “superwomen” (or men) by doing it all, but that our service to others (like Martha’s) and communion with God (like Mary’s) will be deeply connected. From this perspective, success is not measured by how much we accomplish or how well-known we become. “The Lord does not look so much at the *magnitude* of anything we do as at the *love* with which we do it,” Teresa concludes. “If we accomplish what we can, His majesty will see to it that we become able to do more each day.”<sup>1</sup>

### **DISCOVERING OUR VOCATION THROUGH AND FOR THE BODY OF CHRIST**

Let’s stop worrying then about *deciding* on a vocation, but gratefully *receive* our calling as a gift that is grounded in communion with God. However, more “existential” questions may haunt us: Where is God calling *me*? How do *I* discover my particular vocation?

While I will not dismiss these questions, let me draw attention to the fact that we tend to ask them as individuals. It seems “natural” to think about ourselves as “individual units” first, and then to wonder how we might connect with a community and ultimately with God. But this way of thinking about ourselves hampers us at the outset. Throughout Scripture we see that God desires and calls *a people*. True, the calling of God to Israel begins with a single individual, Abraham; but the purpose is for the whole people of Israel and for the world.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with Israel and continuing in the church, God calls a people to be His body in and for the world. I emphasize this not to deny that God calls each of us in unique ways, but to remind us of a point we easily forget: our vocation is not ultimately about us as individuals but about what God is accomplishing in the world in and through a whole people. Even Jesus’ twelve disciples “were not made the center of Israel because they were holier or more perfect than the others; they were not a bit better than anyone else,” Gerhard Lohfink notes. “The issue was never them as special individuals, but always and only the whole people of God, to whom they were sent.”<sup>3</sup> God gives us our particular calling and gifts always for the sake of the whole, in ways perhaps that we cannot fully understand.

Our calling both *comes through* community and *is oriented toward* community. Now this raises a number of new questions: Do I let a particular community “tell me what to do”? What if that community is spiritually benighted or blind? What about becoming independent and finding myself? If our family is the community to whom we turn, we worry that parents may fail to truly perceive the calling of their child. The example of St. Francis comes to mind. His wealthy father was horrified when Francis

started a monastery and abandoned the plans his father had made for his life. If calling comes through community, should Francis have listened to his father? It matters, of course, which community we pay attention to and Christians believe that the community called “church” takes precedence over our natural family (see, for example, Mark 3:32-35). “Church” here refers not only to a particular local congregation, but also the whole communion of saints, those who have gone before us and those outside the walls of our particular denomination.

The interesting thing about Francis is that his calling did come through the Body of Christ, broadly understood: he absorbed in a new and creative way the gospel that he had been given by those who lived before him. Also, as Francis recounts, his encounter with a leper marked his life for good, for it led him to grasp both the humility of the incarnation and the passion of Christ. Francis became convinced that living in brotherhood and sisterhood is “constitutive of life according to the form of the holy gospel, and at the same time a condition for the correct understanding of the word of the gospel.”<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, it has been the church, the “communion of saints” down through the ages, which has perceived and interpreted the life of Francis in ways that even he could not have foreseen. Francis provides us with one of many examples of how our particular callings come both through and for the community that God calls us to be.

### **DISCOVERING OUR VOCATION THROUGH CHRISTIAN PRACTICES**

In the wealth of wisdom the “communion of saints” has given us, we find this recurring theme about discerning our vocation: we cannot simply *think* our way into living out our calling more fully. Rather, the fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life sustained and nourished by Christian practices such as prayer, Sabbath-keeping, meditating on God’s Word, fasting, hospitality, and spiritual direction. We misunderstand these practices if we construe them as “hoops” to jump through to achieve a goal or get an answer from God. Rather, since the Christian vocation involves a way of life, these practices sustain us in that way. They also strengthen us to resist ways of thinking and living that would diminish our sense of vocation.

As I describe how these practices form us to discover and live more fully our vocation, keep in mind that it is always God’s grace that enables such discovery and living. These practices open us to receive God’s grace and to perceive, with Augustine, a “Beauty at once so ancient and so new!”<sup>5</sup>

*Hospitality*, the practice of welcoming another person—even a stranger—into our lives, trains us to be open to surprise. The Lord “put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him,” St. Athanasius reminds us, “to be manifested according as they could bear it, not vitiating the value of

the Divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.”<sup>6</sup> We trust that God continues to come to us in ways not exceeding our capacity to receive Him. But hospitality also enlarges this capacity and changes us in surprising ways. Recall that Saint Francis’s hospitality toward a leper changed his life forever, when through this encounter he came to know the presence and incarnation of Christ in unexpected, unimagined ways. For a more mundane example, when I was a graduate student, an Episcopal monastery welcomed me (a Baptist) to their table, both the Lord’s Table and their breakfast table. It was here that I met my future husband (a surprising place to meet a spouse!). Not only did their hospitality introduce me to my husband, but also gathering every morning around the Lord’s Table with these brothers in Christ changed me. I saw in a fresh way that the food we share with others is an extension of the food, the body and blood, which Christ gives to us. Though I had been trained to think of the Lord’s Supper as “just a symbol,” I came to see Holy Communion as a real means of grace, bringing me into communion with others in the monastery and wider community. All this is to say that hospitality shapes us and our guests to be open to the surprising grace of God. It enables us to resist the idea that the way things are is the way they have to be, or that our futures are easily controlled. Our calling is much more adventuresome than that, for we are called to be open to the strange ways God works in our lives and in the world.

The practices of *meditating on God’s Word* and *spiritual direction*, in differing ways, form us to receive guidance from another. When we meditate on Scripture, we trust that the Holy Spirit will speak to us through the stories and teachings of the Bible. Originally this practice, known as *lectio divina* or holy reading, involved “sitting” with a Scripture

passage, repeating and even memorizing the words, and “chewing over” them in prayerful reflection so as to enter into communion with God in prayer. So understood, *lectio divina* enables us to grow in dependence not only on the Bible (and thus the earliest Christians) as a rich resource for forming us, but even more on God. It helps us resist the contemporary assumption that we discover our identity and vocation by breaking free from

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the past and pursuing a solitary quest to “find ourselves,” rather than in and through communion.

*Spiritual direction* opens us to receive spiritual guidance from another. An informal sort of spiritual direction takes place wherever we gather to discern God’s Word for our lives, whether in a Sunday school class, a Bible study, or even an informal conversation over coffee. More formally, spiri-

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tual direction is the practice of meeting with a spiritual friend who listens to our stories and joins us in discerning how God is working in our lives. This latter kind of spiritual direction has made its way only recently into some Protestant churches. But whether practiced informally or formally, spiritual direction trains us, like *lectio divina*, to resist the idea that we must discern

our vocation alone. Rightly understood, Christian vocation is about growing in our ability to be vulnerable, about listening to and with others for the guidance of God’s Spirit. We are not called to be autonomous but to be members of a Body where we rely on other parts; growth in vocation means perceiving how others’ gifts as well as our own gifts contribute to the whole. From this perspective, we are not called to be without neediness, but rather to grow in understanding of our true need for communion with Christ’s Body.

*Fasting and Sabbath-keeping*, by providing rhythm to our lives that can sustain us over the long haul, form us for “a long obedience in the same direction.”<sup>7</sup> In the church year, fasting typically is followed by feasting; we fast during Lent and feast at Easter. This rhythm reflects the sadness, repentance, and longing for the fullness of God’s kingdom that is still to come, as well as the joy of the resurrection and the inbreaking of God’s kingdom. In this ebb and flow we see our vocation as something we live between these times of *already* promised and begun, and *not-yet* fully realized. We are called to be a people of longing and joy, both forgiven by God and forgiving toward others. In terms of our vocation, this rhythm helps us appreciate that wherever we are and whatever we do, there will be brokenness, disappointment, and tragedy, for the fullness of God’s kingdom is not yet. At the same time, brokenness and sin are not the final words, for we are called to embody the hope and joy of the resurrec-

tion. Our hope does not lie in human effort or potential, but in the reality of God's presence and promises. In our disappointment and failure, we need not despair. The realities of sin, forgiveness, and resurrection provide us a deeper, more profound way to interpret any particular situation, and thus to practice a long obedience in the same direction.

*Sabbath-keeping* trains us to participate in the rhythm of work and rest, as we set aside time to rest in God. We cease our work, busyness, and effort as a testimony to the conviction that *what we do* does not ultimately define *who we are*. To repeat what was said earlier, who we are is to be received as a gift from God. When we gather as church, we are trained to resist the idea that anything else—money, family, education, job, or reputation—ultimately defines our lives. Theologian James Cone emphasizes that church was the one place where African-American slaves refused to define themselves as their oppressors did. Before God in worship, they knew themselves to be full and blessed children of God. Sabbath-keeping can form us to “rest” our identities more fully in God, trusting that God alone creates, redeems, and sustains us, trusting too that we are given the grace to enter God's triune communion and so to become God's *pleroma* (abundant fullness) for the world. We see more clearly that our task is not “to get God to do something [we] think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that [we] can respond to it and participate and take delight in it.”<sup>8</sup>

Central to all these practices is *prayer*. “Prayer consists of attention... waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive,” Simone Weil writes. “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.”<sup>9</sup> Though I would add that prayer also involves the more active dimensions of petition, confession, and thanksgiving, Weil rightly indicates that practicing prayer means attuning ourselves to God. Thomas Merton, the great twentieth-century Catholic monastic, describes his “very simple” way of prayer as “centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love.... One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as ‘being before God as if you saw Him.’”<sup>10</sup> So understood, the practice of prayer helps us resist the idea, so common in our culture, that waiting is of little use. We typically associate waiting with frustration and wasted time. In our busy and fast-paced society, our lives are oriented around getting things done quickly, whether eating fast food or finding what we want on the Internet. Waiting is thus a profoundly countercultural act. The rich kind of waiting we practice in prayer trains us to be patient with ourselves, others, and even God. Such waiting means we do not have to work constantly to ensure our needs are met; rather we may trust God to provide. In terms of our vocation, prayer trains us to trust that God will provide what we need, both as a people and as individuals, to live lives of faithfulness to God.

These and other Christian practices can give us a rich sense of our vocation. We discover that though the particular circumstances and responsibilities of our lives may change over the years, the faithfulness of God does not. God's steadfast faithfulness and overflowing abundance enables us to live in grateful response to God *wherever we are*.

## NOTES

1 Referring to Luke 10:38-42 Teresa notes, "...believe me, Mary and Martha must work together when they offer the Lord lodging, and must have Him ever with them, and they must not entertain Him badly and give Him nothing to eat." See *The Interior Castle*, translated by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1989), 231. The quotation is from page 233, with my emphasis.

2 "Israel's being chosen is not a privilege or a preference *over others*, but existence *for others*," writes Gerhard Lohfink in *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 37.

3 *Ibid.*, 174.

4 "Franciscan Spirituality," in Michael Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 408, my emphasis.

5 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 231.

6 St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1944), 78.

7 Eugene Peterson, borrowing this phrase from Friedrich Nietzsche, uses it in the title of his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 13.

8 Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor, Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 4.

9 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950), 51, 56-57.

10 As quoted by Larry Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 97.

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