

What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

Ephesians 4: 1-7

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How many times were we asked this question as a kid, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And how many times have we asked that same question to the children in our world?

It’s a fun question to ask kids because they have absolutely no inhibitions in answering it. A baseball player, a fire fighter, an astronaut, a doctor, the President, a rock star.

But how about you this morning? Do you still sometimes ask the question, “What do I really want to be when I grow up?” Or do you secretly wish you could go back and change some decisions made earlier? Or looking now at the rest of your life, does the question still have some energy left in it? Or maybe it resonates because of your own children or grandchildren.

When you are a preacher-type, a lot is made over your “calling.” Many think receiving a “calling” is something exclusive for ministry. Often, we clergy-types are asked what our call into ministry was like. But for all the focus on a minister’s calling, this is an issue for every Christian.

One line cries out at us from the second lesson this morning: “I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

That is Paul the Apostle in his letter to the Ephesians. His message, however, was not to preachers and the vocationally religious. No, he was talking to the people of God, the congregation, the ordinary Christians who made up the church in Ephesus.

So I have been reading some articles this week about career choices just to see what the world is saying to folks who are trying figure this out.

One college student said this:

“You can’t help but feel as an undergraduate these days that the university is no longer a sacred place of unbounded free learning, but instead is just another part of the employability machine. From the continual career fairs and talks, undergraduates are forced to become a part of the marketplace before they have even stepped into it.”

And it seems that the questions haven’t changed all that much in the past fifty years. The tension is whether to be a pragmatist or an idealist. The pragmatist seeks ways to making a living, meet financial goals and family responsibilities and a job is often viewed as a means to an end. However, the idealists are the dream chasers who believe that if you do what you love, and chase the dream, you will eventually make it... whatever that means in terms of success, happiness or money. The dream chasers often quote Albert Einstein:

“Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful” -

Or Steve Jobs: “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do - don’t settle.”

In play here is a parent’s influence and their anxiety in imagining their children becoming aimless dream-chasers who won’t achieve anything.

But does being a Christian change the way one looks at job, vocation, or career? Does it?

I contend as Christians we have a different lens when it comes to our place in the world. Or as Paul says, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

For us there are the obvious questions about our interests, our skills, what we are good at, what we enjoy, and how we will make a living.

But here is the thing. You and I believe our gifts are from God and so we ask other questions: What would God have me do or where is God leading me?

Is there a list of God-approved jobs or vocations?

Is it more Christian to be a dentist or a business person, a teacher or a banker, a salesperson, or a pharmacist, a homemaker, or to work in a non-profit?

Fred Buechner, a clergyman and writer, tries to give guidance to people of faith. He writes:

“There are 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 the voice of society... or self-interest.

“A good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that (a) you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

I like his thinking. The place God calls you and me is the place where our talents, joy, desire and dreams draw us; and the world’s deep hunger is determined by you and me, as we are influenced by our values as the followers of Jesus.

This is to say there are vocations or jobs that are outside our value system. Right? I mean certain jobs or vocations may be “legal” but their purpose seems out of line with what we see as good for the world or the values we have as Christians.

But generally speaking, I believe the vocations or jobs that are “out of bounds” are few and far between. But this is what I do say as a Christian: Whether we are an accountant, secretary, teacher, attorney, homemaker, business man or business woman, receptionist, contractor or insurance agent is not really the issue. Rather, it is how our faith is expressed in being an accountant, secretary, teacher, attorney, homemaker, business person, receptionist or contractor or insurance agent.

Regardless of what we do, the question becomes this: Can we be the face of Christ, the moral voice of Christ, the compassionate heart of Christ, in what we do?

He was an immigrant to the United States from Vietnam. His father had been an officer in the South Vietnamese army who fought alongside the Americans in the Vietnam War. After the war, his family was imprisoned and then as a teenager, his father smuggled him out of the country to Cambodia, trying to protect him from the new government. But in Cambodia he was enslaved and forced to work in a labor camp digging wells, that is until a Red Cross worker discovered him and arranged for him to be sent to the United States as a political refugee.

His name is Than, and his is a long story of success that began with his washing pots and pans. However, through the years he landed a job at a United States bank and worked in banking for twenty-five years. He worked in smaller banks then landed a job in a big one. He was living the American Dream. He eventually bought a two-story house and worked in the call center of the division of home equity loans. One day he received a call from a man in Lexington, North Carolina, who told Than his wife had received a letter from the bank saying

she owed ninety thousand dollars and unless she paid it in ninety days, the bank would foreclose and take her house.

The Lexington man was eighty-eight years old and his wife had Alzheimer's. He and his wife were credit card customers of the bank. However, he said he had paid off his mortgage thirty years before and that his wife had no such loan. He asked the bank employee, Mr. Than — our man living the American Dream, to find documents that proved that his wife owed the money. When Than did the research, including reaching out to other divisions of the bank, neither he nor they could find documents that the Lexington couple owed any such money. When Than went to his boss to report the case, saying that no documents existed for this loan, his boss told him not to follow up with the Lexington man and that if he called back, to tell him it was a balloon, a type of loan that would require the couple to repay the amount all at once.

Before long, Than received another unsettling customer phone call. This time it was from a woman who said the bank had told her that she owed one hundred sixty-five thousand dollars. She protested that she had not taken out a loan. She was very emotional saying, "I have all my children in my home. I don't have money to pay. Where are my children going to live?"

Once again, Than could find no paperwork to prove she owed the money. So once again he took the case to his boss and complained. "I told him this is a fraud; I cannot be a part of this." His boss got upset.

Not long after, his boss called Than in the office where a group of supervisors were waiting. They asked for his security badge and told him that he was fired. A bank lawyer marched him out the front door.

On the street, he was told that if he had any questions about why he was fired, he could call a number for a human resources representative.

He called the number. An H.R. person told him he had been fired for failing to orally respond to a customer whose call he had answered.

For years a model employee, Than was mortified. He couldn't sleep. And he couldn't bring himself to tell his wife or his family that he had been fired.

"I thought, my God, I've lost my American dream," he said.

So here is my point: being a follower of Christ is less about our vocation and jobs and much more about how we are the face of Christ in that job. If I sound like I am anti-banking, you will have to know that my dad was a banker and that my family has more bankers in the ranks than any other profession. No, the issue is how we fulfill our calling in whatever job, vocation or profession we find ourselves in.

There is a better ending to this story. Than was unemployed for a few months and then found other work. But he was haunted by how he had been treated. So eventually he filed a lawsuit against the bank for wrongful termination and for firing him because he would not remain silent in the face of fraudulent practices. He said he wanted the bank to make a public apology.

Just before the case was to go to trial, the bank settled out of court with Than. Sources report it was a settlement for seven figures. Which is a silver lining. But when Than refused to be a part of something he knew was wrong, that settlement was not in the mix. He simply did what he knew to be right.

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. ⁱ

ⁱ Sources

“Former Khmer Rouge Slave Who Blew the Whistle on Wells Fargo” by Emily Flitter, *New York Times*, March 24, 2018

Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993