

A Sermon for Easter 3B 2009, *Passion and Purpose Sunday*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls us with passion and purpose. Amen.

When I run into friends or colleagues that I haven't seen in a while, I often get asked if I'm still singing. It happened again this Wednesday at a clergy gathering I was at. It always strikes me as an odd question. What I think my friends usually mean is whether I still do the half a dozen or so professional singing gigs per year that my schedule allows. That in itself seems strange enough to me: I love those opportunities and do as many of them as time permits – I sang the Haydn *Lord Nelson Mass* in Princeton last night and will repeat it this afternoon in Newtown, PA.

But since I tend to take others' words at face value, I often hear my friends' question in a still stranger way: as if I'm being asked whether I actually still sing *at all*. This strikes me as *exceedingly* strange, because it is impossible for me to imagine living without singing. I've been singing in showers, churches, parks, schools and homes for as long as I can remember. For me, singing is part of what gives my life joy, energy, and meaning. I'm passionate about singing. I cannot live and not sing.

I feel this way about singing because being a singer is one of my vocations – something God has called me to be and to do that sits somewhere near the center of my soul. God has called me to other vocations, as well – child of God, husband, father, step-father, and, in case, you hadn't noticed, priest.

I tell you about my several vocations this morning because today our Diocese is observing *Passion and Purpose Sunday*-- "a day for preaching, teaching, and reflection about vocation." But what *is* vocation, anyway? Vocation comes the Latin verb, *vocare* -- which means *to call*. To have a vocation is to follow a calling, a beckoning, an invitation, perhaps, even, a command. We often feel that calling as an internal need, something we are so passionate about simply *have* to do it – as I've just said of myself, *I cannot live and not sing*. To have a vocation is also to have a purpose. This thing that we are passionate about being and doing needs to make some difference in the world. That difference needn't be huge – if I and the other musicians I performed with last night gave revealed the beauty of Haydn's music to the 100 or so people who heard us and gave them joy in so doing, that is purpose enough. But whatever forms they take, *Passion and Purpose* come together to shape our vocations.

We Christians believe that the passion and purpose of our vocations come from God. The passion we find in our callings connects in some way with God's passionate love for this world. The purpose of our callings fulfills in some way in God's purposes for this world. And, we believe, the One who calls us, who gives us our vocations, in none other than the God who created us in the divine image and who has redeemed us in Jesus Christ.

There is a basic shape to vocation shared by all Christians which we heard about in today's readings. *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God;* writes the author of the First Letter of John. We are *called* God's children. In baptism in Christ, we are called and loved as God's daughters and sons. Being loved by God is central to our vocation.

But that is not all. In Luke, we heard Jesus speak these words: *Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. You are witnesses of these things.*

If the knowledge that we are God's beloved children is basic to our vocation, basic, too, is the calling to be witnesses to the Good News of God's Love we have been given-- that, as we just sang, "Jesus has died and is risen." (Hymn 178, *Hymnal 1982*). Our most basic passion as Christians is to know ourselves as passionately loved by God. Our most basic purpose is to bear witness to God's death-defying Love wherever we see it at work in the world.

But if there is a fundamental vocation all Christians share, it is also true that this vocation takes different forms in different people's lives. Often, when Church people start talking about vocation, we immediately assume that we are talking about the calling to ordained ministry. It is true, of course, that ordained ministry matters a lot to the Church's life -- I wouldn't be here as your priest if I didn't believe that. It is true, as well, that the Church needs gifted and committed people -- especially, these days, young people -- to discern and embrace vocations to ordination. I'm new enough to St. Francis not to know whether we or one of our ancestor congregations has ever sponsored someone to become a priest or deacon. If we haven't done so in a while, I hope and pray that the time will come soon.

Yet if vocation to ordination matters, in no way is it true that it is the only Christian vocation worthy of the name. Nor is it true that ordination is a more holy vocation than other supposedly secular callings. I have an ongoing conversation about this at home. As many of you know, my wife Judith is a research scientist who works to develop medical technologies to help people with bone and joint injury regain health and freedom of movement. I am sure her that her vocation as a scientist who enables healing is of at least as much value in God's eyes as my priestly vocation. I haven't quite convinced her of that yet -- but I hope *you* get the point. There is a huge variety of ways that we are called to live out God's passion and purpose for us -- and God needs and wants them all for the good of the world god so much loves. What matters is that we each live the particular vocations that God calls us to.

So how do you discover your own unique vocations? How do you identify the places where your calling in Christ is to be lived out? Ethicist Andy Fleming suggests you ask yourself three questions:

What do I like to do?

What am I good at?

What needs to be done in the world?

Writer and philosopher Sam Keen says something similar:

The sense of vocation arises at the point where a crying need, a call, an appeal seems to be addressed to us that we can only answer by sharing the endowments, talents, and skills we have been given.

Novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner puts it most simply:

*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness
and the world's deep hunger meet.
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Notice how all three writers say that vocation is found at the meeting place of our desires and gifts on the one hand, and the world's needs on the other. Vocation is found where our passion and God's purpose come together.

Discovering vocation, then, happens as we pay attention to what attracts us, enlivens us, energizes us, grabs us *and* to how that passion can be lived for God's purpose in the world – how we can make a difference to others, serve the common good, love our neighbors, work for justice and peace and, in doing all of that, be witnesses to the renewing presence of the crucified and risen Christ.

That process of discovery often begins in our own hearts, but it should never be done alone. We must talk to friends, parents, teachers, clergy, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders – mentors of every sort. We need the wisdom of others who can tell us truths about ourselves that we can't see on our own. I needed a spiritual director years ago to tell me that, even as I prepared for priesthood, it was spiritually essential for me to keep singing – because singing is one of my vocations. Helping our sisters and brothers discern vocation and then supporting them in that is part of the work of a Christian community.

This is true, of course, for young people as they move towards adulthood, but not just to them. Especially in the present economy, people of all ages are being forced to rethink their employment. It happens also as people move into retirement. If you are in such a place in your life, I encourage you to take this challenge as an opportunity to discern vocation anew.

And, of course, to discover our vocation as *God's* calling to us, we need to pray. We need to offer the passions of our hearts to God, to listen for God's purpose for us in return – and to be ready to have God's passion and purpose change ours. Biblical accounts of the calls of leaders like Moses and the prophets show that God sometimes calls people to vocations which they think are beyond them. But God knows better. Often, as James Whitehead says, *Vocation is a gradual revelation--of me to myself by God. Vocation is a gradual revelation--of me to myself by God.* We discover, often in unexpected ways, who God has made us to be and is making us as we live into our vocations over the course of our lives.

So, my friends, passion and purpose. Your passion, God's passion; Your purpose in life; God's purpose for you in Christ. Seek your passion; live God's purpose -- Go to *that place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*

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