Discerning our Vocation(s)

For centuries the word “vocation” was used in the church to refer only to the lives of professional religious people (priests, monks, nuns). Now we have come to believe that God offers holy vocations to all people – but how do we discover them or know when we have found them? This week’s session is a time to consider what gifts of vocation God is offering to you in your life, and to explore your own sense of your spiritual pilgrimage through life, as you perceive it at this time.

**From “Let your Life Speak”**

**by Parker Palmer (a Quaker, educator and noted spiritual writer)**

What a long time it can take to become the person one has always been! How often in the process we mask ourselves in faces that are not our own. How much dissolving and shaking of ego we must endure before we discover our deep identity--the true self within every human being that is the seed of authentic vocation.

I first learned about vocation growing up in the church. I value much about the religious tradition in which I was raised: its humility about its own convictions, its respect for the world's diversity, its concern for justice. But the idea of "vocation" I picked up in those circles created distortion until I grew strong enough to discard it. I mean the idea that vocation, or calling, comes from a voice external to ourselves, a voice of moral demand that asks us to become someone we are not yet--someone different, someone better, someone just beyond our reach.

That concept of vocation is rooted in a deep distrust of selfhood, in the belief that the sinful self will always be "self-ish" unless corrected by external forces of virtue. It is a notion that made me feel inadequate to the task of living my own life, creating guilt about the distance between who I was and who I was supposed to be, leaving me exhausted as I labored to close the gap.

Today I understand vocation quite differently--not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice "out there" calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice "in here" calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.

Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks -- we will also find our path of authentic service in the world. True vocation joins self and service, as Frederick Buechner asserts when he defines vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Buechner's definition starts with the self and moves toward the needs of the world: it begins, wisely, where vocation begins--not in what the world needs (which is every-thing), but in the nature of the human self, in what brings the self joy, the deep joy of knowing that we are here on earth to be the gifts that God created.

Contrary to the conventions of our thinly moralistic culture, this emphasis on gladness and selfhood is not selfish. The Quaker teacher Douglas Steere was fond of saying that the ancient human question "Who am I?" leads inevitably to the equally important question "Whose am I?" -- for there is no selfhood outside of relationship. We must ask the question of selfhood and answer it as honestly as we can, no matter where it takes us.

**Questions for Reflection*:***

1. What is your “deep gladness” ? When did you discover this deep gladness?
2. How would you describe your sense of the world’s deep need? How did you come to sense this need?
3. Elsewhere Palmer writes, “Most of us arrive at a sense of self and vocation, only after a long journey through alien lands.” Have you made such a pilgrimage? If so, what did you learn about yourself? What in you changed? What remained the same?
4. How would you articulate your own sense of vocation(s) at this point in your life?

**A Prayer**

My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me  
Nor do I really know myself,  
And the fact that I think I am following your will  
Does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
  
But I believe that the desire to please you  
Does in fact please you.  
And I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this,  
You will lead me by the right road  
Though I may know nothing about it.  
  
Therefore will I trust you always though,  
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
And you will never leave me to face my struggles alone.

-- Thomas Merton