

FOR THE COMMON GOOD

SERIES: KINGDOM WORK



Catalog No. 20170723

Jeremiah 1:4-8;

29:4-10

6th Message

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July 23, 2017

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May 27 of this year marked the 80th anniversary of the completion of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Before the bridge was completed in 1937, the fastest way to get from Marin to San Francisco was by ferry. The Sausalito Land and Ferry Company could bring you from Sausalito to San Francisco in about 25 minutes. Obviously, because of the nature of the ferry system, the number of people who could cross the Bay was limited as well.

While many people recognized that a bridge from Marin to San Francisco would be extremely beneficial to the city, most experts thought that it would be impossible to build a structure that could span the 6,700-foot strait while withstanding the strong winds and fierce currents that dominate the opening of the Bay. As we all know, those experts were wrong.

There was nothing about the building of the Golden Gate Bridge that was easy, however. Rather, it took hundreds of people who dedicated their vocations (at least for a time) to the completion of the project.

Joseph Strauss was the engineer who came up with the first design for the bridge. Strauss worked with engineer Michael O'Shaughnessy and a board of other engineers to finalize the design.

The California state legislature had to sign off of the project as well. To oversee the construction, maintenance, and operation of the bridge, they created the Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District.

Once all of this was in place, construction began. Ten different construction companies, employing hundreds of cement workers, steel workers, underwater demolition experts, engineers, project managers, and other crew members, completed the project in four years.

Today, more than 110,000 vehicles cross the bridge every day. These are commuters headed to work, locals headed into and out of the city, and tourists taking in the beauty and wonder of this magnificent structure and the city that it now represents.

When asked to comment on the building of the bridge, a PR representative said, "The bridge is a symbol of hard work, determination, and most of all, the power of grit to create a better future."¹

Think about that last phrase. "The power to create a better future." It is safe to say that San Francisco would not be the city that it is today without the Golden Gate Bridge. Not only would its defining landmark be missing, but it is also likely that San Francisco would never have risen to its prominence as a global city. The Golden Gate Bridge and the other Bay Area bridges have allowed access to the city that opened the door to economic and cultural growth that allowed San Francisco to become what it is today.

As those hundreds of workers were designing and building the bridge, they were creating a better future for the city of San Francisco, even if that was a future with more traffic. Those workers were making it easier for people to access the city from the North Bay. They were increasing the profitability of the businesses in the city as they received more visitors. They were making it possible for you and I, 80 years later, to drive up to Sausalito or Muir Woods or Point Reyes without having to go around the Bay or take a ferry. They were, in more or less significant ways for different people, creating a better future.

Or, we could say, they were working for the common good.

Those workers were contributing to something far bigger, far greater, than themselves. The Golden Gate Bridge was not built for the benefit of the few hundred people involved in its design and construction. It was built for the good of the people of San Francisco, the Bay Area at large, and everyone who would benefit from the completion of this project. It was built for the common good.

How many of us have a desire to see our work make a positive impact on the world? Don't we all long for our vocations to have some positive, lasting impact in other people's lives? Where does this desire come from?

This morning, as we continue exploring the concept of vocation in our series *Kingdom Work*, we are going to see that this desire to help others through our work is a central part of God's design for our vocations. More specifically, we are going to see that your vocation was not given to you for your benefit but the benefit of others.

If you are going to listen to anything I say this morning—if you are going to take one thing away—let it be this: *Your vocation was not given to you for your benefit but the benefit of others.*

This is an extremely counter-cultural idea.

Most people in the Bay Area would balk at the idea that our vocation is given to us. Given to us? I worked hard to get to where I am today! For years and years, I put in the blood, sweat, and tears. I did the hard work. I earned my position. Nobody gave it to me.

But the very word vocation itself should make us question this assumption. The word vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, which means “to call.” Our vocation is our calling. And to have a calling implies that somebody has called us.

Indeed the Lord has called us. He has given us unique skills and talents. He has provided us with unique opportunities. He has entrusted us with unique responsibilities. Our vocations have been given to us by God.

This is a very different story than our culture would have us believe.

If most people would reject the idea that our vocation is given to us, they would also reject the idea that our vocation is not meant for our benefit.

For many people, their vocation *is* their identity. What's the first question that you ask someone that you are meeting for the first time? (What's your name?) What is the second question? (What do you do?) And you answer by saying something about your vocation. Because we think that what we do is who we are — that our vocation determines our identity.

If our vocation determines our identity, then our vocation is necessarily about us. If I am what I do, then my vocation was given to me for my sake, not for the sake of others, and not for the common good.

Skye Jethani, a pastor and the editor of the *Leadership Journal*, calls this line of thinking “vocational narcissism.”²

Vocational narcissism is the cultural narrative that my vocation is all about me. I can do whatever I want to do. I can be whatever I want to be. And I can do that because it allows me to get wherever I want to go. This is the narrative that our culture tells us over and over again.

Instead of accepting vocational narcissism, Jethani says that we need to embrace *vocational generosity*—the understanding that our vocation is not about us but rather is meant to be a vehicle through which God's love to the world is demonstrated. Our vocation is one of our primary tools that we can use to love our neighbor. We should be giving ourselves away through our vocation, not using our vocation to feed our own ego and gain more power and prestige for ourselves.

Our vocation was not given to us for our benefit but the benefit of others.

The prophet Jeremiah understood this others-oriented approach to vocation better than most.

He had a vocation that was very clearly given to him by God for others. But Jeremiah also believed that the people of Israel had been given vocations that were meant for the common good—even the good of their enemies.

Let's look together at the book of Jeremiah to see what we can learn about this others-oriented approach to vocation. First, let's look at Jeremiah's vocation.

Jeremiah 1:4-5:

Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Before Jeremiah was born, he was called by God. He was given a vocation. He was appointed a *prophet to the nations*. His job, more or less, was to warn Judah of the judgment that God would send because of their rebellion and idolatry.

Jeremiah did not choose to be a prophet. In fact, I think it's unlikely that Jeremiah would have been a prophet if he had been given a choice. Prophets had a knack for getting rejected at best and killed at worst. Jeremiah himself is often called the "weeping prophet" because of the sorrow he faced in his role as God's messenger. Jeremiah didn't choose to be a prophet. He was given this vocation from God.

I'm sure many of us wish that our calling was as clear as Jeremiah's. For some of us, maybe it is. Maybe you had a Jeremiah experience where God told you exactly what you were appointed to be.

But for most of us, that's not the way that it works. Instead, we take the skills, passions, and opportunities that the Lord has given us and try to discern what it is that the Lord has called us to do.

Jeremiah's vocation was not only very obviously given to him by God; it was also very obviously others-oriented. Through his work, he was loving and serving the people that he was preaching to. His vocation was dedicated to helping others.

When God first called Jeremiah to this other-oriented vocation, Jeremiah's response seems to suggest that he was struggling with vocational narcissism.

Jeremiah 1:6:

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth."

You can see here that Jeremiah's eyes were focused on himself.

How can I be a prophet? I'm just a kid, and I don't know how to speak. He is concerned about himself here. He is thinking about his vocation in terms of how it affects him, not the people to whom God is sending him. So God steps in to correct this.

Jeremiah 1:7-8:

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord."

Jeremiah needed to learn that his vocation was not about him. Rather, it was about the one who was sending him and the people to whom he was being sent. As the book of Jeremiah unfolds, we see clearly that he was able to embrace the others-oriented nature of his vocation.

Having a vocation that is outwardly others-oriented does not necessarily mean that you are not a vocational narcissist. It doesn't necessarily mean that you are working for the common good.

Can you think of a prophet who was out for his own good? Jonah! Jonah's calling was equally clear. And yet Jonah ran in the opposite direction. Eventually, he did go to Nineveh as the Lord has instructed him. But when the Ninevites repented, Jonah was so upset that they were receiving God's grace that he wished he was dead. His vocation was outwardly others-oriented, but in his heart, he was only concerned for himself.

I know many people here at PBC who have vocations that are clearly helping other people in important and tangible ways. We have teachers, doctors, and nurses here; parents and grandparents caring for little ones, and those who are retired and spend significant time volunteering here at church or elsewhere.

All of these vocations, and many I didn't mention are (from the outside) vocations that are built around helping other people. But let me offer a word of caution here: *Just because your vocation is outwardly others-oriented, you may still be a vocational narcissist.*

You could be the best heart surgeon in the Bay Area, saving people's lives every day, while inwardly being more concerned about moving your career to the next level than about the patient sitting in front of you.

You could be the founder of a non-profit that rescues trafficked women and children around the world and be motivated by the admiration of the people sitting next to you right now instead of the victims you are rescuing.

You could be a teacher who chooses to go into the worst school district to help the most underprivileged children and do it because it feels good to make a difference instead of doing it for the kids themselves.

And you can be a pastor who spends hours prepping for a sermon on Sunday because you like the emotional boost of hearing people say "great job this morning" instead of doing it out of love for the people you are serving, not that I would know anything about that!

If we are not careful, we will all become vocational narcissists. We will buy into the cultural narrative that our vocations are about us. That is why it is so important for us to continually lay our vocations down at the foot of the cross, asking that the Lord would use our work for his glory, not ours, and for the good of others, not our own.

Up to this point, we have been focusing on Jeremiah's vocation. But Jeremiah was a prophet. He was in ministry. It is easy to see how his vocation was meant to help other people. But what about me, you might be asking. Maybe you are an engineer or a sales person, a student or a construction worker. Maybe you spend 90% of your day sitting in front of a computer screen doing work that seems fairly disconnected with the kingdom of God or the common good. Jeremiah has some vocational instructions for you as well.

Vocational Instructions for Exiles

We are going to jump ahead to Jeremiah 29. For years and years, the people had been ignoring Jeremiah's warnings. Eventually, God brought judgment on his people by allowing them to be taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.

The Babylonian exile took place in a series of three phases, similar to the PBC remodel.

In the first wave, Daniel and his friends, along with other strong and bright young men, were taken from Israel and brought to serve in the king's palace.

In the next phase, everyone but the poorest of the poor was removed from the land. This included the king of Judah along with all of the other government officials, as well as all of the craftsmen and metal workers. In other words, this was the entire ruling class and working class in Israel.

In the third phase, Jerusalem was completely destroyed.

In Jeremiah 29, Jeremiah writes a letter from Jerusalem to all of the exiles who were taken in the second phase. These are the craftsmen and the metalworkers, the politicians and the rulers. This is a bunch of people who had meaningful vocations back in Israel, but now they find themselves living in a foreign land under the rule of their enemies. What are they to do in this new situation?

Jeremiah 29:4-7:

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The commands that Jeremiah gives here are *vocational commands*.

A few weeks ago, we looked at the Cultural Mandate found in Genesis 1:28—the original job description for humankind. Do you remember what we saw there? God's plan for human work is that we would fill the earth and subdue it, that we would organize ourselves into societies and create things that were helpful for those societies.

Here, Jeremiah tells the people to build houses and plant gardens and to get married and have children. These are *vocational* commands. Even in the land of their enemies, the people of Israel were to practice their vocations, and not just for their benefit, but for the benefit (or welfare) of the city where the Lord had sent them. They were to use their vocations for the common good.

Just as God sent the people of Israel into Babylon, he has sent you here. Whether you were born here or moved here for school or work or family, God has sent you here. His desire for you, while you are here, is that you would use your vocation for the good of this place. What might it look like for you to do that?

A few years ago, two Stanford Business School graduates started brainstorming how to help with Bay Area the housing crisis. Specifically, they were concerned that teachers around the Bay Area could not afford to purchase homes (or even rent in some cases) in the communities where they taught.

To respond to this crisis, they founded Landed, a community-based equity home financing. This program will match educators who are looking to purchase a home with parents, alumni, and local real estate

investors. These investors will pay up to half of the down payment of the new home in exchange for a share of the appreciation (or depreciation) of that home.

If this startup is successful, it will make it possible for more teachers to buy homes in the communities where they teach, which will not only shorten their commute (and Bay Area traffic in general) but will also make it easier to stay at the same school for extended periods of time and invest more heavily in the families of their district. What a great way to work for the common good of our area!

As far as I know, the founders of Landed are not followers of Jesus. But as believers, we ought to be the ones who are putting our vocations to work for the benefit of our cities. We ought to be leading the charge on social issues that are near to the heart of God. We ought to be tackling the issues — big and small — that foster injustice and disturb God's shalom. This is our vocational charge.

The Lord has sent you to this area, at least for a time. How might you be able to use your vocation for the welfare of the city?

Vocation is compromised. Many of us, I am sure, would love to use our vocations for the common good. But sometimes this turns out to be more difficult than we wish.

Even when we try to use our vocations for the common good, we might find that it is not always easy to do so, especially when we are part of a larger organization that we are not in charge of. For example:

I recently had a conversation with someone who worked in quality control for a tech company. He was just assigned to a project that was making a particular part that would primarily be used in e-cigarettes. He didn't want to promote e-cigarettes, but what could he do?

Or maybe you work for a company that you know buys components from a manufacturer in Asia that has harmful labor practices.

Or maybe you write code for a search engine when you know that 25% of all search engine queries are related to pornography, and those search engines make billions from those searches.³ What do you do in situations where your vocation is both helping and hurting people?

We need to start with the reminder that all vocations are compromised. There is no vocation that can promote the common good in every case. This side of heaven, all vocations will have consequences, either intended or unintended, that end up harming people instead of helping them.

When we find ourselves faced with these difficult situations, we have to seek the Lord's wisdom. There are no easy answers.

Sometimes the answer might be to stay in your current vocation and help correct the abuses that you see.

Sometimes, the Lord might be asking you to change vocations. That's a terrifying possibility, but we've seen it happen before. Moses is called from keeping sheep to leading the people out of Egypt. David, likewise, is called from the fields to become a king. Perhaps the Lord is calling you out of your current vocation into one that will better allow you to work for the benefit of others.

We haven't asked yet why Jeremiah gave these vocational instruction to the people of Israel.

Jeremiah 29: 8-10:

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, 9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord. 10 "For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

In chapter 28, we find out that the false prophet Hananiah had told the people that they would only be in exile for two years. The knowledge that their time in exile would be short fed their vocational narcissism. Why should we settle down and work here if we are going to be leaving in two years?

My wife Linzy and I experienced a similar feeling when we moved to Chicago. We had just gotten married. We moved to Chicago from Southern California, a place that we loved and didn't want to leave. When we got to Chicago, we kept talking about where we were going to go after I finished seminary in three years—back to California, closer to family, someplace new? We had so many conversations about this.

During my first semester, I was processing this with my advisor. After listening to me talk about this for a while, he stopped me and said, “Dan, you stop worrying about where you are going when you leave here and start worrying about what you are going to do while you are here.”

It took a while for those words to sink in, but when they did, we started to plant ourselves. We got more involved in ministry at our church as a way of serving others. We joined a small group, where we were both able to minister to people and be ministered to by people. We even changed our jobs, our vocations. I started taking fewer classes and began working at our church because there I felt like God was calling me. Linzy had been working a job in marketing, but she didn’t feel like that was her calling. So she quite that and started pursuing her own career as a music teacher and worship leader.

When we first got to Chicago, we couldn’t wait to leave. By the time we left, we had stayed a year longer than we had planned and were so sad to say goodbye to the place we had grown to love.

The Silicon Valley is a notoriously transient place. Maybe you are here for your education and have no plans to stay when you are done. Maybe you’ve decided that this area is too expensive and you know you’ll be moving to someplace more affordable at some point. Maybe your job brought you here, but this job is only a stepping stone to get you where you really want to be.

I don’t know how long you’ll be here, but I do know that it’s time to stop worrying about what you will do when you leave and start thinking about what you are doing while you are here. Specifically, how are you using your vocation while you are here to love and serve other people?

If you are a more permanent resident of the Bay Area, the same thing could be said for you. This was the message that Jeremiah had for the people of Israel. You will be here for generations. So get to work! All of us, regardless of how long we are here, have the responsibility to steward our vocations well, and that means using them to help other people

Conclusion

Eventually, the people of Israel were released from Babylon and returned to Israel. However, in his first letter, the apostle Peter tells us that we too are in exile. We are strangers in a foreign land. Heaven is our home. And here we are on earth, our own exile of sorts.

1 Peter 2:11-12:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

“Keep you conduct honorable.. so that.. they may see your good deeds and glorify God.”

We have been given the responsibility to use our vocations for good deeds. Here, Peter tells us that those good deeds are not only beneficial to people in this life, but they also have an evangelistic purpose.

When people who don’t know God see us use our vocations for the common good, they will notice. They may even ask. And the door may become open to share with them our motivation for loving and serving others—namely that we have a God who loved us and gave himself up for us. He has changed our lives, and now we go, in his name and in his power, to love people, serve people, and change their lives for the better.

Our vocations have been given to us by God. Let’s not squander them by using them for our benefit. Let’s use them as a vehicle to make God’s love known and his kingdom come.

Endnotes

- ¹ Shiff, Blair. “The history of San Francisco’s landmark Golden Gate Bridge as it turns 80.” *ABC News*. abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/history-san-franciscos-landmark-golden-gate-bridge-turns/story?id=47657315. Accessed July 2017.
- ² Jethani, Skye. “Response to: What’s The Connection Between Faith And Work?” *quideas*, quideas.org/videos/work-for-the-common-good/. Accessed July 2017.
- ³ “Internet pornography by the numbers; a significant threat to society.” *Webroot*, webroot.com/us/en/home/resources/tips/digital-family-life/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers. Accessed July 2017.