

Called to Receive

Philippians 1:1-11

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On Labor Day, we who come to worship remember that what matters most is not our work, but the work of God.

If your refrigerator is like most, it has become a gallery of things close to your heart. A crayon drawing of a rainbow hangs a little crookedly next to the smiling artist's school picture. Just below the crooked rainbow is the Christmas family photo of close friends who live too far away. You look at the wiggling two-year-old squirming on his mother's lap and smile when you read the words, "Peace on Earth" embossed below. Next to that are some snapshots of your own family taken at a birthday and on vacation.

In the middle of all these delightful photographs of your loved ones is the picture of a somber little girl from a third world country. You are supporting her for a few dollars a month through World Vision. Every time you go to the fridge your eye catches her's and you remember the rickety shack she lives in. It doesn't even have food in it, much less a refrigerator. Below her photograph is the address you clipped out of the paper that tells you where to send money if you want to help the families in Montana who have lost their homes to the raging fires. Sometimes you can't believe how easily your heart breaks these days. Whenever there is an earthquake or a hurricane, you dig deeper into your pocket to contribute to the relief because, well, you have to do something.

But you are already doing a lot. In the mail today you received a letter from a friend's college-age son who wants to spend a year as a missionary in India but has to raise money for the trip. You think you ought to send him a check, because he is such a sweet kid and this would be a great experience for him. But in the same batch of mail came an invitation to a fundraising banquet for cancer research, and an appeal by the PTA to help with the bake sale so the band can buy new uniforms. You drop all these letters on the kitchen counter where they join the quarterly statement you got a while back from the church. When you saw that statement, you were horrified to discover that you aren't giving as much as you had planned on giving this year. You have one child getting ready for college, another who needs braces, a parent who is going to have to go the nursing home, and now you've discovered you have to replace all of those Firestone tires on the family vehicle.

They are all counting on you. Sometimes it feels like the whole world is counting on you. And it is all because you are kind of person who puts a child's drawing of a rainbow on the fridge.

Now, you would think that with all these demands for our heart and our money the last thing people would be worried about is what they are called to do with their lives. But if my pastoral counseling load is any indicator, we are very concerned about our calling. I would even say that next to relationship issues, the thing that people come to me to talk about the most is calling, which is actually a relationship issue as well.

As Paul says repeatedly throughout the book of Philippians, your primary calling is to know Christ Jesus as your Lord. You are called to come to the Caller. But we rush away from this clear simple insight too quickly saying, "Yes, I know that, but surely the Lord wants me to do something. What has he called me to do?"

We use the word calling when we are concerned with the purpose, meaning, and design to life. We know that we have been placed on this earth for some reason, and we don't want to miss it. "What is at the heart of my responsibility to God?" That is what's behind our concern about calling.

During the end of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, playwright Vaclav Havel was imprisoned for his stand against totalitarianism. After his release, he became the celebrated president of the free Czech Republic. But during his four and a half years of confinement to hard labor, Havel wrote some powerful reflections on life under the guise of letters to his wife. These have been published as Letters to Olga. In these letters, Havel claims that he can withstand the great difficulties of prison if he can discover what his responsibility is. He writes, "The secret of a man is the secret of his responsibility."

We may not be in prison, but we know about hard labor. We understand hard work on the job, at school, and at home. Perhaps the very hardest work of all is maintaining healthy relationships. When we get overwhelmed by our hard labor, the thing we most want to know is – is this really my responsibility? Is this really what I am supposed to do? Is this my calling?

So isn't it fascinating that when the Apostle Paul is writing the Epistle to the Philippians (a letter that is all about calling) he begins by writing not about our work, but about the work of God? It is as if to say, you will never understand your calling or your work or responsibility until you first understand the work of God. Paul was imprisoned in Rome, near the end of his life, and was writing after years and years of hard labor. But he begins his insights on calling by saying, I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (1:6)

Why do we have such a compulsion to work and be responsible? Because we are made in the image of God, and God is a worker. We have somehow bought into the stereotype that God is just reclining on the clouds watching the world go by. But the Bible begins by describing God's work in the creation he called good, and here Paul is reminding us that God is still completing his good creation of our lives. He is not done with his work in your life. He has not yet brought it to completion.

The word in the Greek that is translated as work is "ergon." It has the connotation of purposeful, productive activity. In physics, an "erg" is a measurable unit of work. So what Paul is trying to say is that God's involvement in our lives is purposeful, concrete, and

sometimes even measurable. So the best and most important thing I have to say about calling is that it is the calling of the Holy Spirit to move over your life as the Spirit did at the beginning of creation, in very specific, measurable ways. This creative work shoves aside the darkness and chaos, creating beauty and light in its place.

Now when you look at your life, this creativity may be hard to see. Your eyes may be focused on the dark disease that lurks in your body, or on the chaos of a life that is not working out as you dreamed, or on the banality of a job that is going nowhere. But that is only because the creativity of the Spirit is not finished. My daughter Lyndsey is a painter. Often when I have sneaked a peak over her shoulder in the middle of a painting, I've only seen a lot of strange lines and color. Once I even let slip out a disappointed, "Oh my." But I'm not the artist and can't see what she has in mind. When the artist gets done, and I see her beautiful completed art unveiled, and in delight I then exclaim, "Oh my!" God, the artist, isn't done with his good work in your life. Things can change! In fact, things will change, as he completes what he has begun.

When? When will God have completed his good work in our lives? "In the day of Jesus Christ." For Paul, it always get back to Jesus Christ. Creation began not only with the Father and Spirit but also the Son. It has its most decisive moment in the incarnation of God in Christ. And it is moving to a culmination of new creation in Jesus Christ. In the words of Karl Barth, "Jesus Christ is at the center and the boundaries of our history."

Here the church stands firmly against the postmodern cynicism of our day that keeps telling us life is just one more crazy thing after another. No, the history of the world, and the history of your life, is moving to a very decisive fulfillment. The artist knows what he has in mind. If you want to get a glimpse of what the art will look like when the Holy Spirit is done, look at Jesus Christ. That is who the Spirit is painting in the ongoing creation of your life. Look at the Kingdom of Christ. That is what the Spirit is painting in the unfolding canvas of history.

So, that describes God's calling. What then is your calling? Well, what is the calling of the artist's canvas? To receive the creativity. Stop wrinkling up with anxiety and worry as Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount. Stop trying to take over for the artist. Behold his beauty and wait with baited breath for the next opportunity to say, "Oh my!"

But what about all those pictures on your refrigerator? What about all those things you've got to do, and causes you've got to support? Those aren't things you've got to do. They are things you get to do. They are painted onto your heart as calling. We don't ask you to give your money to this church because we have needs. We ask you to give because it is God's own calling to support the church and God has chosen to complete his work through your life. Giving is one of the wonderful ways that God is demonstrating his creativity in your life. He is painting over the anxiety and worries about not having enough and freeing you to look more like Jesus Christ whose heart was so full of the love of the Father that he gave his life. That is your calling.

It is a particularly American preoccupation to reduce the calling of God to a job description. That is usually what people want to know when they come to talk about calling. They really just want to ask me, "Can I get a different job?" I always shrug my shoulders and say, "Sure, I guess." But for thousands of years, calling has meant so much more than that. It has meant, "How do we discern what God is doing with all of life?" And I can answer that question much more definitively. God is transforming you into the very image of Jesus Christ, from one degree of glory to the next.

Do you really think that in heaven we are going to be spending eternity introducing ourselves to each other by saying, "Hi, I was a lawyer down on earth." Or, "Hi, I was homemaker. Have you seen pictures of my kids?" Or, "I had a hard time figuring out my calling, but I did just in time, then this truck came down the road and hit me..." No, if you are paying attention to God in this life, in heaven you will give thanks that the art of grace broke through to your life on earth.

By the grace of God you started to give because you discovered it was your joy. You learned to forgive because it was your duty. You studied the Bible because it was the Word of Life. You worshiped because it was the only thing that satisfied your thirst. You loved because it overflowed from your heart so full of the love of heaven. Along the way you started to look like Jesus, and God fulfilled his own calling in your life. Then in heaven, when these glorious portraits of Jesus Christ in each others lives are completed, we'll take eternity to give thanks to the artist saying, "Oh my!"

God of Grace, everything we are, everything we have, everything we do, such as it is, we place into your hands asking that you will use even us in the fulfillment of the high calling of Jesus Christ. Amen.