

Stephen

This week's reading invites us to talk about vocation. I used to think of vocation as your occupation – the work you do for a living.

In the Catholic church, the word vocation is often associated with religious work. A vocation is work in the church – such as priest, monk, or nun. In fact in Martin Luther's day, that's really all the word meant. And it was viewed as a higher, more sacred form of work.

But part of Luther's reformation was to reclaim the concept of vocation. Essentially, Luther said, all work is sacred that contributes to the well-being of others.

Luther's work has shaped our understanding of vocation. As Christians, we all have the same vocation – it's to love God and love our neighbor...to witness to Christ's love in words and actions.

In our baptismal service, after the baptism is complete, we light a candle and quote Matthew's gospel – let your light so shine that others may see your good works and give glory to God. Our primary vocation is to be witnesses...in words and work...to the new life in Christ.

Quoting the prophet Micah, our vocation as Christians is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

But we each have our own unique ways of carrying out that vocation...ways that hopefully align with our specific God-given gifts and talents.

Stephen and the six other deacons are examples of how this works.

First, we begin with a problem. The new community of believers is still sharing things in common with the goal of making sure the neediest have what they need to live.

But as the church has grown, it's not been organized well enough to get the job done. The disorganization, and the human tendency to favor those who are most like us have led to an inequity in the distribution of food.

The twelve apostles have been gifted by the Holy Spirit with the ability to preach and teach. They have spread the word of Christ's death and resurrection throughout Jerusalem. They've been remarkably effective. The church has been growing like wildfire.

But this business of keeping people fed first of all was keeping them from their primary job. And they don't really seem to have been very good at it.

So, they tell the people, find seven people who will assume the job of feeding the hungry so we can focus on what we're best at. Stephen is one of them.

Their title is deacons. Even today, a deacon in our denomination is someone whose calling is to serve God and the church through service to others.

All the jobs we do, paid and unpaid, in the church and outside the church, are how the church carries out its vocation. It's how we let our lights shine so that others are captivated by this Jesus way of life.

Those who do the everyday tasks in the church, whether it's first century or now, are just as important as those whose primary job is to preach and teach.

But there is something else about this story. Stephen's main role is to supervise the kitchen. But when opposition put him in a tight spot, he too can proclaim Christ crucified and risen. The Spirit will empower all of us to witness when opportunity arises.

The part that's left out of this reading is Stephen's response to the council. It's a long speech in which he essentially traces the entirety of God's work through the people of Israel from Abraham to David. He focuses on Moses, and on the disobedience of Israel. He destroys the argument of these troublemakers. But then he finishes with this:

⁵² Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³ You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

As you can see, that didn't end well for him...at least not in an earthly sense. He saw the heavens opened and Jesus at God's right hand. And we know he wound up with Jesus. But those stones would have hurt.

Stephen is the first Christian martyr. The word martyr actually comes from the Greek word for witness. There's a connection between witness and suffering in the Bible that's hard to ignore.

We might think that our witness is never going to get us killed in this country. And it probably won't. But we need to think about what Christian witness here is. Some of what passes for Christian witness in our country is really Christian nationalism, a form of idolatry that conflates Christianity with patriotism.

But real witness to Christ's self-giving love and what it means about our own calling still can result in tremendous pushback. Because sometimes we want to exclude people....people who

aren't like us or who live in a way we don't approve of. If Jesus loves them, we know we're supposed to too.

All-inclusive love that is willing to suffer with and for others is still not a popular way of understanding God for some people...especially those who feel threatened by that and who prefer a more exclusive...and powerful... group to belong to.

Real witness to Christ's love is actually kind of hard. That's why the church exists. It's why we need a community to work together to do that witness.

We all have different gifts and abilities. Those gifts are to be used in our work to witness to Christ's love, wherever we are and whatever we're doing. That's what it means to be salt for the world. That salty flavor of Christ's love works its way into every aspect of our world...through you...through us.

This last year, we have witnessed to Christ's love in ways we never expected. We found ways to keep that sense of community. We've shared our worship online.

One thing that the pandemic has showed is that while church membership is declining in most places, there is a spiritual hunger among people.

Especially early in the pandemic, people tuned in to online faith offerings – worship, midweek reflections, and other online offerings – in pretty significant numbers.

The pandemic has forced us to catch up to the power of the internet for witness. Our approach might be a little clunky yet. And I'm still trying to figure a lot of things out about how best to use the internet.

But now that we've begun, we need to keep learning and evolving in our online witness. I'm grateful for people willing to help with that.

Mostly, this morning is about saying thank you. It's been a hard year. I am so grateful to have gone through this with these two congregations. We've had almost no pushback to the decisions we've made to keep the community safe. Not all pastors and congregational leaders have been so fortunate.

We'll do some more specific thank yous in a bit. But thank you to everyone who has hung with us this last year...who braved Zoom and put up with the glitches and challenges of being together while separated.

I and a lot of other church leaders think the pandemic and the political unrest of the last year has pushed the church to a crossroads. We still really don't know what the future, short term or long term, has in store for the church.

But there are some things that will remain true.

We have all been given gifts and talents to do our part to carry out the mission of the church to witness to the Jesus way of life in words and actions.

You likely already know what some of your gifts are but at some point I'm hoping we can do a little adult education session on exploring that. Your particular gifts are as important as anyone else's.

The aim of our witness will always remain the same – to proclaim Christ's self-giving love to the world, in words and actions.

And most important, it is the Holy Spirit that gives the church its power and courage to witness. That power can see us through the challenges and changes that might be before us.

So again, thank you for all you have done for the church. Although there are still some unknowns about the future, the Spirit is alive and working here to lead us into that unknown with courage and love.