

OUR GIFTS AND VOCATIOS by Heidi Campbell

I want to start off by saying that I am deeply humbled to be standing here in front of you all and to share my thoughts on the topics of gifts and vocatios. In addition to this, it takes a great deal of teamwork to put together a successful worship service, so I'd like to thank everyone who has helped out today, especially Rodger, Catherine Merola, and Joey Moschetti. Thanks to Joey and Catherine, my daughter's artwork made it on the cover of the bulletin.

As I discuss gifts and vocatios with you this morning, I hope to convey that these are two topics that can stand alone in their greatness or can come together to complement one another, synergistically. It is also my hope that the topics of gifts and vocatios will become an integral part of our faith family as we continue to nourish and maintain our love and support for one another.

One of my favorite series of sermons by Bruce is the Basic Disciplines of the Christian Life. If you are not familiar with these sermons, they discuss the importance of seven key elements that are needed to develop a close relationship with God, the Holy Spirit, ourselves, and our faith family. These disciplines in order are:

1. Praying every day
2. Reading and studying the Bible every day
3. Finding and following your Vocatio
4. Finding a Mentor (to help us on our Christian path)
5. Participating in a Disciple Band (AKA Bible Study Group)
6. Committing to be an Evangelist (to six individuals)
7. Tithing 10% of our income

I shall focus on disciplines one and three this morning, and I will start by discussing in more detail the difference between vocatio and vocation. Vocatio comes from the Latin root *vocare*, which means "to call." It is a word that is rarely used or heard today, and if you type the word "vocatio" in a Word document, autocorrect will change it to "vocation." The literal translation of vocatio is "a calling." Vocation, on the other hand, is from the Latin word *vocatio* and had the "n" placed on the end of the word as it passed through its Late Middle

English etymology and settled in Old French. The definition of vocation is “a strong feeling of suitability for a particular career or occupation” or “a person’s employment, main occupation, especially regarded as particularly worthy or requiring great dedication.” To me, the difference between these two words is that one reflects God’s true purpose for us – our “calling” – and the other is a result of human observations and assessments of our interests, gifts, and abilities.

This is an important topic to me because I have experienced firsthand the difference between *vocatio* and vocation in my own life. I grew up not too far from here in Costa Mesa with my older brother and sister, my Mom, and my stepfather. At a very early age, I showed a great deal of aptitude for music. I won’t bore you with all the details of my background in music, but it was clear to my parents and others that I had the potential to become a successful musician, and my parents were very supportive in providing me with piano, voice, and violin lessons and taking me to choral performances, piano recitals, and competitions. We were living the Malcolm Gladwell dream in *Outliers* of putting in those 10,000 hours to be a world-class musician.

And then something unexpected happened. In my junior year in high school, I was enrolled in a U.S. history class with a great teacher named Mr. Leigh, and I began to realize that I had gifts and interests other than music. During this history class, I began to feel a pull and an interest in teaching – specifically, teaching academics. So I brought this up with my family, as I prepared for future college applications. The idea was immediately shot down. “What a waste of your talents.” “It would be selfish of you to not develop and share your God-given talents.” These were statements that were being said to me. So I did what was expected and went to college as a music major, and I ignored what I had felt and experienced my junior year.

By the end of my second year in college, I knew I was in the wrong major and field. I had lost all joy in practicing and studying music, and I was beginning to have panic attacks during performances. I tried to power through these emotions, but by the end of my third year, I needed a break from college to figure out what I was going to do with my life. Now, in hindsight, I know that God was trying to get my attention, but at the time I felt like a complete failure. As Eric Elmes talks about in his book *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, I was going through the natural process of finding one’s *vocatio* by enduring the Gifts of Uncertainty, Emptiness, and Getting Lost. For four years, I walked in a very Dark Wood. I felt alone, without support, and guilt-ridden that

I had somehow rejected God's gifts for me. I kept praying and talking to God to please help me find my purpose, and I stayed vigilant and steadfast in my pursuit.

Then one day I got a call from a friend that a school she was working at needed a teacher, but there was a catch: they needed a music teacher. I went for the interview, loved the school and people who worked there, and was offered the job. At first I wanted to reject the offer, but I felt pulled toward this opportunity, and my intuition was telling me to take the job. As Eric Elnes states in his book: "The principle way God offers direction to someone in need while respecting freewill and the constraints of natural law is through gentle intuitions that arise within human consciousness" (p.89) I'm very grateful that I had the courage to follow through with my intuition and this pull I was feeling, because what ended up happening was the first great teacher on the road to discovering my calling came into my life.

Jane Jones was one of the founders of the school and, at the time, the Academic Director. She was like an Elizabeth Cady Stanton or an Eleanor Roosevelt in my eyes. Strong, smart, a visionary; passionate and caring about the growth and development of each of the teachers working for her. I'll never forget when, in one of my first annual reviews with her, the only goal she wanted me to work on the following academic year was to be more patient and kind with myself. I loved working with the children I was teaching, but I dreaded the weekly performances the music department held at assemblies. I would get really nervous when I had to accompany on the piano, and I would make silly mistakes due to my nervousness. (Residual backlash from all of my years of participating in piano competitions. I had to be perfect or I would let everybody down and make a fool of myself.) It was amazing to me to have a new mentor in my life who would say things like, "You don't think it's just the students who grow here, do you? You get to grow too." or "Who cares if you make a mistake. Don't we encourage our students to make mistakes and to know it's okay to make mistakes?"

Now, I don't think it was Mrs. Jones' "call" or vocatio to mentor me and help me with the roadblocks I had managed to put up in my life. But I do believe that God had sent someone with the talents and gifts to pull me out of the miry pit that I had created and dug for myself. Because of her help, I became a more confident person and teacher and, five years into my job, I had the strength to follow through on another "intuition" and pull I was experiencing: to switch from

teaching music to teaching academics. The school was reluctant at first to switch my position, but ultimately I was given the opportunity to teach third grade and finally, after ten years of searching for my calling, I had arrived. The tug, pull, innate interest I had experienced in that high school U.S. history class had finally come into fruition fourteen years later, and I knew I had gone from living in a state of having a vocation ... to living in my vocatio or calling.

This life-changing and life-affirming shift took patience, faith, hope, steadfastness, and, most importantly, connection with and trust in a higher power greater than myself that had plans for me beyond my finite human comprehension. In the chapter “The Gift of Uncertainty,” Eric Elnes writes about this. “If the source of the call is truly coming from a power higher than yourself, it means that it is calling you forward based on far greater information and awareness than you can possess on your own.” (p.25) So, those of you in the audience who are parents, how does this statement make you feel with regards to your own children? Do you think that your child or children have a true higher purpose that is based on greater information and awareness than you can possess? And if so, how do you tap into this information in an effort to help your child? Better yet, how do you help and support your child in discovering this greater information and awareness?

I think it is very natural for parents to want to protect their children from the dangers of the world. Unfortunately, sometimes that need to protect stems from fear, and our fear can lead to control. When I was in my late twenties, I learned a valuable lesson about what little control we truly have over our lives, and more importantly, I learned what little control we have over protecting loved ones in our lives, like our children. For five years I volunteered at Children’s Hospital of Orange County (CHOC) with my Basset Hound, Chloe. She was a great pet-therapy dog, and we were assigned to the OICU floor where children were battling cancer. We got a lot of tough cases, and in those five years we experienced the loss of five great kids. One of those children was a twelve-year-old girl who was a great softball player and who came from a very devout Christian family of unwavering faith. Chloe would be called in to help motivate her to get out of bed and do some occupational therapy in the hallway. This amazing girl didn’t want to play softball for the therapist who was helping her or for other hospital staff, but when Chloe showed up, she would get out of bed and “pitch” fruit for Chloe to catch. Afterwards, when they returned to her room, she and Chloe would take a nap together in her bed.

A little over a year of visiting her at CHOC with Chloe, this young lady succumbed to her cancer, and I will never forget some of the profound things said at her memorial that shaped how I would end up raising my own children. A friend of the family read a poem they had written, and it talked about what a gift the girl had been to her parents and everyone in the community, but the friend also had written that the girl had been a gift from God for them to cherish, not keep. At first I was taken aback by the message of the poem. This girl's parents had been through hell and back over the past few years, and now someone at the memorial was publicly telling them to remember that she was not theirs to keep: that she was first and foremost a child of God – a gift that had been given to them – and it was out of their control when she returned to her true Father. This message has stayed with me for many years.

When I had my own children and was making important decisions on how I would raise them, my experiences growing up, my search to find my purpose and calling, my faith, and that incredible reminder that my children were a gift for me to cherish, not control, all helped me to realize the important blessings and lessons I wished to teach them:

1. To develop and maintain a relationship with God through prayer
2. To help develop talents that they were interested in developing and that brought them joy
3. To live in a state of gratitude
4. To be patient with themselves

Prayer is at the top of my parental blessings and lessons and, to do it well, one needs to learn how to drown out the potential cacophony of mental noise that can occur while praying. Bruce talks about nine inner voices that can potentially pop up while we are praying, and the most important and the one to listen to is the “true self.” For me, I have to help silence the pragmatist and the pessimist while I am praying so that my true self can be heard and the Holy Spirit can be heard. Eric Elnes discusses the topic of prayer quite a bit in *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, and my favorite analogy is how praying and listening for guidance can be like sitting down at a busy dinner table. Who else is sitting at the table with you, and where is the Holy Spirit seated? A great passage in the first chapter of Eric's book says: “The Spirit simply isn't one to strong-arm a conversation or offer

advice I don't truly want to hear. In fact, the Spirit seems perfectly content to remain silent until or unless I care enough to rearrange the seating order." (p. 17) I like to think of the potential voices that occur when I pray as choir members, and I need to put everyone but the Holy Spirit on mute, or have a whole rest with an eternal fermata over them. Even then, the Holy Spirit is not going to offer advice with a microphone or an Ethel Merman impersonation. A "still, small voice" is what the Bible says – a voice we may miss unless we are calm, patient, and mentally quiet as we pray.

My intentions with these four blessings and lessons is to give my children the support and help they will need as they begin to search for their purpose and calling. But I know I cannot do this alone. My children mean the world to me, but I have come to realize that I cannot be everything to them and do everything for them. It takes the help and support of loving family members, Godparents, friends, and a faith family to raise children, and I am very grateful for this faith family and all of the gifts and vocatios that have blessed us and will continue to bless us as my children grow. Did we not see this morning the gifts and vocatio of Kathy Kipp during the Children's Moment? I know that one of the most powerful times I have seen Kathy's gifts and vocatio was two years ago on Mother's Day when she was outside on a bench, cradling one of the children of this community who had lost their mother to cancer. Did anyone else see that? It was profound, and it is very rare to see such tangible moments like that where God is working and present in our community. I know that as my children grow and develop their relationship with God in this church, they will be blessed by Kathy's gifts and vocatio, and I am very grateful for that.

What about Rodger? Every Sunday we are blessed by Rodger's gifts in music and his vocatio. It was wonderful to hear recent high school grad Madeline Van Otten thank him for his help with her audition tapes when she was applying to universities with music programs she was interested in. It may not be Rodger's vocatio to make audition tapes, but his developed gifts to be able to do that may have assisted someone in fulfilling their own calling. Another church member who comes to mind is Nola Casserly. Nola has an incredible gift for healing and expresses these gifts through her vocatio. Have you ever noticed how healing it is just to be around Nola? It exudes from her, don't you think?

And what about Bruce? He is an example of the origins of the word “vocatio” – being called into the ministry. How many of us have been transformed by the insights and wisdom of our no-nonsense and wise minister, who has a flair for words rooted in Old English? I know I would be reliant of some sort of pharmaceutical concoction if it had not been for Bruce’s gifts and vocatio while I went through the Dark Wood of my divorce and the never-ending aftermath of my divorce with three small children in tow.

I truly could mention gifts and/or vocatios that each member of this community brings to the church, and how important that makes each and every one of us as a loving church family. How many of us have asked Dorothy Siddall for her opinion on a medical matter, or walked into a newly furnished room by Diane Stellar and felt blessed and grateful for her attention to detail and the level of care placed in a renovation project. I could go on and on. Each of us has something we contribute, and that contribution makes us stronger as a community. This is another reason why the topic of gifts and vocatios is so important to me. *“As God has called you, live up to your calling. Be humble always and gentle, and patient too, putting up with another’s failings in the spirit of love.”* (Ephesians 4:1-2)

This past year, I have had the good fortune of spearheading a new task force on the topic of vocatio. Harry Kipp, Kathy Kipp, Dorothy Siddall, Diane Stellar, and, most recently, Cindy Dupuie and I have been exploring the important role of vocatio within a faith family, how to find one’s vocatio, what happens when one experiences an awakening into their vocatio, and how to support individuals interested in finding and exploring their vocatios. This fall, we should be ready to offer the congregation support and help in this area. When these support systems are more formally announced, we invite anyone interested in exploring this important topic to reach out to us, and we look forward to being of service on your journey of finding or moving into your calling.

The last item I would like to discuss about gifts and vocatios is that they can evolve and change throughout our life. For example, I know that my calling or vocatio is teaching, but how I live out that calling has changed. Four years ago, I left my teaching job in an effort to help my son, who was struggling with learning and daily life skills due to his autism spectrum disorder. It was a very hard decision for me, but I could not devote the time needed to help my son and keep up with my responsibilities as a teacher. What happened, though,

is that the next great teacher showed up in my life. At the time, my son was nonverbal and not learning in his pre-K program, and I was searching for a methodology or an expert who had answers. A friend of mine who also had a son with autism asked me to join her at a Summit on autism at the University of California, Irvine. There, I heard a speech pathologist and associate professor from Harvard Medical School talk about autism and how to effectively use technology to assist with communication for individuals living with an autism spectrum disorder.

There is a chapter in *Gifts of the Dark Wood* entitled “The Gift of Being Thunderstruck,” and this was one of those rare moments in my life where I was thunderstruck. I knew I had to talk to this professor, and I contacted him a week after his lecture to ask for his help with my son. That decision to act and reach out after being thunderstruck resulted in this new great teacher assisting me with how to best help my son, and it also resulted in him becoming a mentor and encouraging me to pursue a new career path in teaching. Currently I am only one class away from finishing a Master of Science degree in Education and starting a doctorate in Education in January. My goal is to create, develop, and conduct research on new curricula and methodologies in autism education as a university professor. That’s my new calling, and I know it’s going to take me a while to get there and I’m going to have to tap into gifts and abilities that I never knew I had before, like conducting research, collecting data, and putting together well-written research articles for potential publishing. I know there will be times of uncertainty, but I have a wonderful support system around me, a great teacher to help me get there, and my trust and faith in God that I will be protected and guided through prayer and gentle nudges as I walk this new path.

With regards to the feelings of guilt I used to experience about not pursuing a career in music, I feel very fortunate that God gifted me with three children who all show an interest in music. In fact, one of my daughters tries to write songs for fun and cries out of frustration when she can’t get the melody in her head written down on staff paper. Well, guess what? I can help her with that. One of my strengths in music is writing down music by ear, and I can now teach my daughter how to do it. With regards to my son, he currently struggles with saying words that are three or four syllables long, but when you pitch the syllables on different notes, he can sing the word with great accuracy and articulation. When I asked his speech pathologist why he couldn’t say these long words but could sing them,

she told me that the neural networking for music is in a different region of the brain than speech, and it made sense to her that he could sing difficult words better than he could say them. Well, guess what? I can put melodies to four-syllable words until the cows come home, and I can't think of a better way to put my musical gifts to use than to help my son learn how speak and help my daughter learn how to write her own music.

Scripture states, *“But each of us has been given a special gift, a particular share in the bounty of Christ.”* We never know when these gifts are going to come in handy and bless others on their path to finding their vocatio.