

## “Freeing Canaries from the Coal Mines”

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We are here because we share an interest in a particular area of work for God's people: Issuing to young people the invitation to vocation, to a life not just a living and nurturing the call to pastoral leadership among some of them. Kevin has asked me to speak to you tonight about why this work matters. I am grateful for the opportunity to think with you about what is at stake in calling young Christians into vocation and the ministry.

Every summer for the past six years we have hosted a conference for 110 young adults--FTE Undergraduate and Ministry Fellows--who are either considering becoming ministers or who are entering seminary for an M.Div. degree in preparation for congregational ministry. At the conference, we provide everything the Fellows need -- food, housing, transportation -- so they can immerse themselves in learning, doing and talking about ministry and theological education. They hear exceptional preachers preach and passionate teachers teach. They meet in small groups with parish pastors. They pray, make music, do drama and--perhaps most of all--revel in being with people their own age who are asking the same questions they are: Who is God calling me to be? What am I to do with my life? I think maybe I might possibly be called to become a pastor? ...How do I break it to my parents?

We have great confidence in the efficacy of this summer event. Many Fellows have told us that the conference was critical in their own discernment, that it opened their imaginations to the wideness of God's church, that it inspired them. I have also come to expect a few complaints each year -- regardless of what we do or how we do things. The negative feedback usually ranges from “we needed more down time” to “there wasn't enough good food for vegetarians.” But this year -- in 2004 -- I heard a new strain of criticism and it startled me. *t*

In 2004, we hosted the conference at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California. A few of the undergraduates complained that we didn't have a day at the beach. “We *are* in Southern California!” they said. Well, I thought, they just didn't understand the nature of this as a professional conference as opposed to a youth group trip that always includes a day at the beach or amusement park or waterslide. That's not too startling. But here is the one that got me: *There wasn't any time for shopping.* That's right: *There wasn't any time for shopping.* That was on the front side of the evaluation. On the back we ask “Any other suggestions?” and this person, whom I confess I assume to be a woman, wrote *More time for shopping.* On a two page document, she mentioned her desire for time to

shop twice. I couldn't believe it. I was dumbfounded. I was stunned. Shopping? Shopping? *There's no shopping in theology.*

This young woman had gone to a lot of trouble to become an Undergraduate Fellow. She had to complete an application, prepare a resume, get an official copy of her transcript, get a letter of recommendation from a professor and one from a minister, and write an essay on the question "What are your core theological commitments and how do they inform your vocation?" That's a hard question. And on the application she had to check one of three choices: planning to become a minister, seriously considering ministry, or exploring ministry. I assumed that the act of applying indicated a high degree of Christian formation, even an uncommon level of commitment to the Christian faith. But here she was, bemoaning the absence of shopping during the Summer Conference on Excellence in Ministry.

I couldn't forget about this. My colleagues reminded me that it was only one comment out of a hundred. "Remember, she is very young," they said. But I couldn't let it go. "Yes," I thought, "it is only one comment out of a hundred. But what does this signify? What if she is the canary in the coal mine – alerting us to something in the air that threatens to choke the very life out of us?"

Now I do not mean to say shopping is "sin" or is inconsistent with living a Christian life and I don't think this young woman is a bad person; but I want to take her as a symbol and shopping as a metaphor and think about what this means.

Letting go of my *There's no shopping in theology*, I tried to think hard about what function shopping might serve in this dear young woman's life. The stores between the hotel and the seminary in Pasadena are nice – ask the people here from St. Marks in Pasadena – but they are not unique; they were the stores one finds in any upscale mall: Pottery Barn, The Gap, Victoria's Secret, Crate and Barrel, Anthropologie, and on and on for blocks. Now maybe our young Fellow was from a small town in a rural area; maybe she was excited about the proximity of stores with more pizzazz than Wal-Mart. I couldn't blame her for that. Further, setting aside my personal antipathy toward shopping, I thought, "Well, maybe shopping for her is fun, is recreation." The more I thought about it, the more this troubled me. Recreation is about re-creation. Does she re-create herself through what she buys? Does she find who she is in the products, smells, lights, sounds, and colors of certain stores? I came to think of this as shopping as **identity formation**. With this comes a sense of entitlement: I deserve to shop because that is the very essence of who I am. If it were the case that shopping was constitutive of one's identity, we could expect some squawking if one were cut-off from that touchstone.

Then I thought, "Well, maybe for her shopping is an **addiction**." Again, being denied access would be painful. My understanding is that addictions serve as a means of not feeling one's feelings, as a means of escape through numbness. Upscale retail could work this way; in fact, it is designed to do so. Jeff Grant, president of TRIO Design Group and consultant to major retailers, says this, "The entry to the store should be a portal in to RETAIL WORLD. From the front door forward your customer should quickly

be transported into sensory overload. Sound, sight and motion should be immediate and strong.” Could it be that our young Fellow needs regular “fixes” of merchandizing environments to maintain her equilibrium, to keep feelings of loneliness or grief or confusion away, to blind herself to the world outside?

Third, I wondered whether shopping was for her a **security blanket** of sorts, a means of comfort. Perhaps it was the very familiarity of the stores at hand that called to our Fellow. In a world of chaos and unpredictability, maybe knowing that you can count on The Gap to be the same in Pasadena, CA and Des Moines, Iowa and Ithaca, NY makes a young person feel safe. We all need our security blankets, maybe especially during an experience like she was having --in a strange place, with people she didn't know, talking about this odd topic of “The Pastoral Identity” (the theme of the conference).

Each of these three hypotheses – shopping as identity formation, as addiction or as security blanket – causes me to feel quite sad. Underneath each are impulses for the holy – the search for who we are, the experience of transcendence that pulls us beyond our limitations, the yearning for a place of belonging and safety. I feel sad to think that those desires which would lead us to the holy have been entrapped, deadened and distorted by the practices of consumer capitalism – and I don't mean to single out shopping as the primary evil. We could just as well substitute the culture of spectator sports or food (whether Emeril or South Beach) or work itself. In none of these theories - -identity formation, addiction or comfort-- do not we find ground for practices that lead to abundant life. That's why I called our young Fellow the canary in the coal mine --- she is the warning of toxins in the environment. There is something killing getting to our youth. And they deserve to be freed from it.

I want to suggest that responding to the call of vocation is liberative--it is freeing--and it is up to us to make that call audible for the young people among us. This is our duty as the people of God.

When I speak of “the call of vocation” I am speaking of the claim of God on each of our lives for partnership with God's work in the world -- the claim of God made through each of our gifts and each of our wounds, through our very humanness caught in the web spun from God's dream of justice, wholeness, creativity and delight. Paradoxically – as is the case with so many truths – getting our most real selves caught in this web spun by God's dream is the way of freedom. Annie Dillard puts it like this: “We can live any way we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience - even of silence - by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting.”

I think of Jesus going back to his “home church” --if you will--as a moment when he yielded to the most tender and live spot – the spot he found through his 40 days in the wilderness – and plugged it into the pulse of the heart of God beating in the gathered community. Standing up to read from the scroll of Isaiah was a moment when he came into his vocation. Remember what we hear in Luke 4:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day as was his custom. He stood up to read and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release  
To the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To let the oppressed go free,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

I don’t mean to say “Jesus is the young people and you are the people in the synagogue,” but I want to think about this story as a window into the dynamics of vocation nurtured by a congregation and claimed by one of their own. Jesus knew he had been anointed for a purpose and he had come to know what that purpose was. The moment of coming into vocation was an experience of something being fulfilled – what Annie Dillard described as plugging into the pulse. Of course, Jesus did not come to this knowledge of vocation in a vacuum. He was raised going to church – that was his custom. He knew the stories of Elijah and Elisha, of God’s work in the world that preceded him. He had been taught how to read the scriptures and he had learned how to read the scriptures into and through his own life. This church – the ones he made so mad they drove him out of town – mattered to who he had become. I don’t think it is a coincidence that they were the ones to whom he announced his vocation; in some sense he was formed by them. I think we, as the church, have this same duty to the young people in our midst: to form them, to teach them to read the scripture into and through their lives, to place their lives in continuity with the story of God’s people who came before and will come after them, to allow them to claim who they are in our midst. But that is not the end of our duty – forming young people who may hear the call to ministry is not the end of what is at stake.

We also know from Luke 4 that sometimes when one of our own claims his or her vocation, what follows is not always potlucks and money trees. There is poignancy when congregations call their own: sometimes they want to keep them for themselves and sometimes they want to push them off a cliff. Those folks in Nazareth started out “marveling at his gracious words” but once they learned that he didn’t intend to conform to their expectations they were furious. What kind of gratitude was that? Just who did he think he was? In the words of the King James Version, they “rose up and thrust him from the City.” Doesn’t this sound in a way like what the young people we heard from last night are afraid of? That is, a fear of having to assimilate to the expectations of the institution in order to be accepted by the community?

Last year the Pulpit&Pew project published a study of “What Lay People Say They Want in a Pastor.” Adair Loomis, the author of the report, interviewed search committees and judicatory officers to answer this question. Her sample came predominantly from large churches in urban areas who can afford full-time salaries. But here is her summary of what lay people say they want in a pastor:

1. Demonstrated competence and religious authenticity
2. Good preacher and leader of worship
3. Strong spiritual leader
4. Commitment to parish ministry and ability to maintain boundaries – the general expectation is that pastor devoted to ministry in the congregation, giving minimal time to other pursuits
5. Available, approachable and warm with good people skills
6. Man, under age 40, married with children, in good health, with more than a decade of experience in ministry
7. Consensus builder, lay ministry coach and responsive leader
8. Entrepreneurial evangelist, innovator and transformational reflexive leader – Loomis says “This area often presents a disconnect between what churches say they want and what they really want. Many say they want a pastor to help grow the church but don’t want to undertake or think about the necessary changes that will be required.”

This is a very good list of what it would take to run a church of some size with a sizable budget. But here is my question: What on this list captures the imagination of a young person who “cannot not” be a minister of the gospel – one who has the words of Jesus IN him or her? Where does the core desire for healing the world reside in this list? Where does the love of people outside the church bubble fit on this list? Who we say we want --what we think we need-- may not be who God is calling. I believe we have a duty to open our eyes, ears and hearts to see and receive the new leaders being brought to us.

The people in Nazareth had the messenger of good news among them and they missed him. But Jesus knew who he was. And, I would argue, he shows us exactly what we need in our pastoral leaders: courage, conviction, and a deep sense of identity as the ones called to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. So in addition to our duty to help the young find vocation, we have a duty to call into leadership those exceptional young people who may do more than preserve and maintain our congregations, more than serve as private chaplains for our pain, more than be friendly and approachable -- because we live in a world full of the poor, blind, oppressed and captive. I want to share only one example--the latest evidence of this reality that astounded me: In the United States alone, the number of people who have no health insurance is equal to the number of people who live in Oklahoma, Connecticut, Iowa, Mississippi, Kansas, Arkansas, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, West Virginia, Nebraska, Idaho, Maine, New Hampshire, Hawaii, Rhode Island, Montana, Delaware, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alaska, Vermont and Wyoming. This cannot be part of God’s dream of justice,

of the pulse of God's heart. This speech is not about health care reform; but it is about calling forth ministers who cannot hear this list and the thousands of others like it without grieving, without, in Paul's words "hearing the groan of creation." This is what is at stake in this work we take on.

I believe we have in our midst young people with the gifts to be such leaders. Also among the evaluations of our conference in Pasadena were comments that shore up my belief in these young Christians: "Why did we stay in the Hilton? I think that was too posh and too extravagant for us, people who are talking about and aiming to work for justice" and "I think we should not have used so many paper and plastic products! We also should have washed our own dishes – maybe even cooked our food. It doesn't seem right to talk about the poor and oppressed and then let ourselves be served by people who are on the margins." These are the also voices of people who read from the scroll of Isaiah.

So, our work as congregations who love the young people among us is to free them to respond to their yearnings for the holy – for deep knowing of who they are, for transcendence, for the comfort of home – to save them from capture by all that would deaden and distort their sweet longing, to nurture them for partnership with God's work in the world, to anoint them to proclaim the good news and –then--to follow where they lead.