

Week Five - Calling

Assigned Reading: Chapter 6

Ephesians 4:1

1 “I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called . . .”

1 Corinthians 13:9-12

9 “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. **12** For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

Colossians 1:9-10

9 “For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, **10** so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.”

Brief Summary:

Kate acknowledges that her cancer cannot be cured. The immunotherapy is working so far, but a few stubborn tumors hang on. After receiving unsatisfactory answers from her oncologist, Kate enlists the help of some fellow historians – “all wonderful researchers” who also happen to be named Kate – to create a database (93). In this online database, her team of “Kates” record information from medical experts regarding their patients who have similar types of cancer.

One treatment that is quickly ruled out involves the removal of a tumor that is buried deep within her liver and resides dangerously close to a major vein. This surgery is simply too risky, the surgeon explains, because it would inevitably lead to a “diminished life” (94). However, she eventually decides to undergo a liver resection to remove the larger tumors.

In this chapter, we also learn something about Kate’s background and her Canadian sensibility. She attributes the “itchy feeling” she gets when sitting still to being from Winnipeg, “which floats like an island on the prairies” (96). All that open space, she believes, habitually triggers ambitious projects that Kate successfully carries out. This ambition perhaps accounts for her extraordinary achievements in academia. But she wonders if her work will cost her too much (99).

She discusses the history of her parents’ academic careers as well as her own struggle to earn tenure at Duke. While attending a professional conference, her friends in academe refute her argument for abandoning her current research project and lead her to see how integral this work is to her life. She is reminded that her work is clearly a calling, not just a career.

Discussion Questions:

1. Kate enlists the help of a team of historian friends to create a database filled with information about possible treatments, survival rates, and outcomes for other cancer patients. One “world-class surgeon” contacts her to discuss the pros and cons of a radical hepatectomy. During this discussion, the surgeon tells her that such a surgery would lead to a “diminished life with a high probability of liver failure” (94).

- a. What do you think Kate fears when she considers the possibility of a “diminished life?”
- b. During this Lenten journey have you discovered areas of your life that you feel are somehow diminished and in need of revitalization, especially as we attempt to emerge from pandemic living?
- c. How might Kate’s journey remind us this Lent to seek the fuller, more abundant life that Christ offers?

2. Upon returning to work after medical leave, Kate asks Duke colleague Will Willimon how she will know when the work she **loves** has cost her too much. He responds, “It likely depends on whether this is a career or a calling” (99). In a later scene, as Kate reviews a diagram of her diseased liver, it occurs to her that “Everything costs something” (104).

- a. In your estimation, what is the difference between a career and a calling? In what way does our Lenten journey help us respond to our calling as Christians? What does our calling to follow Christ cost us? What **should** it cost us?
- b. The chapter title – Do what you love and the money will follow – echoes a recurring message in our culture. Does its message ring true in your experience?

3. Kate explains what kind of demanding scholarship is expected of her in order to be granted tenure at Duke. Her own father, an ambitious, first-generation college student, fell just short of earning his doctorate within the required time frame. For the first time, Kate can relate to the “kind of anger” he expressed as a struggling adjunct instructor, for she is facing her own professional deadline and further challenged by her health crisis. Recognizing that the same kind of anger he felt now simmers within her, she describes it as an “outrage and fear that everything he’d [**d**] done would amount to nothing” (103).

- a. Have there been times in your own life when you have felt angry about all the demands of a high-pressure career or outraged at being passed over for a promotion you felt you deserved? Upset and frustrated that everything you had done would amount to nothing?
- b. How does our need to achieve and receive recognition in a career intersect with our search for abundant life?
- c. Ephesians 4:1 emphasizes that all Christians should aspire to a “worthy” life, whatever their “calling.” I Corinthians 13:9-12 helps us reflect even more deeply on this Christian calling to live a “worthy” life: “Now I know only in part; then [when the complete comes], I will know fully, even as I have been known.”

As you read and reflect on these biblical passages, consider how the Lenten season, especially, is a time when we should reflect on our “understanding” of the “worthy” life that is fully pleasing to God? (Colossians 1:9-10)

4. At a professional conference, Kate admits to a circle of friends and colleagues that she really doesn't see the point of writing what she describes as a “stupid historical book that no one will read – all for a job I can't keep – when I should have spent every precious minute with my son, who won't remember me anyway” (109). After listening to her express this negative view, her friends urge her to continue doing the work she loves. But they go further and deeper in their argument: “You keep framing your relationships as the only thing of value as if work is somehow secondary or simply an expression of your ambitions and desires. But this is what you **love** and **where your gifts lie** . . . [and] if the worst happens and this book is the last thing you ever do, Zach can still find you there. . . so write the book” (109-110).

- a. How is Kate reminded that this work that she loves is indeed a calling and not just a career?
- b. How does Kate's reorientation and renewal of purpose remind us where we are on our faith journey and help us explore the ways to a fuller, more abundant life that is truly “worthy” in the eyes of God?

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