Vocation as Path: Following the Questions
Seminary and Divinity School Day
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I'm Martha Stortz, Bernhard M. Christensen Professor of Religion and Vocation. And this is Augsburg College, which itself started as a seminary in Marshall WI in 1869, locating three years later on this site.

What that legacy left behind is a lively understanding of professional education done in the context of the liberal arts.

That's our vocation.

What's yours?

What's your calling? Will it be seminary? And if so, which one?

Those are your Big Questions, and a Big Question is one that wakes you at three in the morning – and keeps your fretting.

What's your calling? That's a Big Question.

So I'll begin by giving the answer that Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber gave to a group of Augsburg students a few weeks ago.

Someone asked her a Big Question: "Why should we go to seminary?"

And she answered: "You shouldn't.

"You really shouldn't go to seminary, and if you can do anything else that will make you more money or give you more joy or better use your God-given gifts, do that.

"You shouldn't go to seminary unless you can't **not** go to seminary.

"But if you want a ringside seat at the most holy moments in the lives of other people, helping them see God in the midst of their deepest joys and their deepest sorrows,

"Then, seminary's for you."

I'll follow up with a story from *Pastrix*, where Nadia talks about one of her first days of CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). She's called to the ER, because a gunshot victim just arrived by ambulance. The docs and nurses are cutting off clothes and preparing the paddles. There's bustle and blood, and Nadia asks a Big Question of her own:

"Is there anything I can do?"

A nurse turns to her and says: "Yes. You can be the presence of God in this room, while the rest of us do our jobs."

Now that's a pretty good definition of ministry. How do you know if that's for you?

That's a good question.

In typical biblical fashion, I'll answer your question – with another. Answering one question with another is a classic biblical move, because this is the kind of God we have: not a Q&A God, but a Q&Q God.

You'll discover this if and when you go to seminary:

And the best questions – always – are God's.

Q&Q: it happens all the time.

Like the rich young man who asks his question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"
Only to have Jesus ask back: "What does it say in the law?"

Or, that incident where the Pharisees try to trick Jesus with a question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"
And Jesus brandishes a coin and asks back:
"Whose head is on this, and whose title?"

Or those great questions from the book of Job, where the voice from the whirlwind addresses Job's unspoken question:

"What have I done to deserve this?"

with a whole barrage of questions, questions that roll out in some of the finest poetry in the whole of scripture:
"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who determined its measurements?

"Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together
And all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

Oh, to be able to ask *those* kinds of questions….

But my point in all this is two-fold:
First, sometimes, asking the right question is more important than getting an answer to the wrong one; and

Then, God's questions are always the most interesting.

So if you're considering seminary, what questions might God be asking?

We get a pretty good discernment tool in Genesis 3 and 4, for God creates, then leads the new creation, not by command, but by asking questions. And these questions roll out like waves on the sea:

Where are you?
Who told you that?
What have you done?
Why are you angry?
Where is your brother?

!. First question: "**Adam, where are you**?" (3:9) For Adam used to walk in the cool of the evening and talk with God, until that fateful incident with the forbidden fruit. Then, suddenly Adam is excessively modest or utterly ashamed, but he hides himself – and God notices his absence.

"Adam, where are you?" The question is not just about physical location. God isn't asking for latitude and longitude,
so that God can GPS Adam onto a grid. Location can be existential as well.

There's a sense that, after the incident with the serpent, Adam really is in a different place in relationship to the rest of creation and in relationship to his Creator – and God senses that.

A spiritual compass, after all, has its own "true north," and the needle points unfailingly toward divine mystery. Adam has re-oriented himself vis a vis that center of gravity.

Probably the person who most needs to take those bearings is Adam himself.

Where are **you**? Where are you in relationship to your God? Your church? Your own relationships? Your family? What's your relational and your spiritual compass? What's your own sense of "true north?" These are questions worth asking yourself, as you find yourself poised on the cusp of a key vocational decision.

2. "**Who told you that you were naked**?" (3:11) In this second questions, God asks Adam how that whole concept of "nakedness" entered his consciousness in the first place. The exchange narrates a shame for physical exposure and a need for clothes, but Adam also wants to hide his naked desire to play God all by himself. That's harder to cover with fig leaves or boxer shorts.

"Who told you that?" It's a great question, and it asks about the scripts we live out and the messages we carry with us, telling us what to buy – and where to purchase it, what to do – and with whom, where to go – and how often. The question invites us to sort through the scripts we live by, deciding which ones are from God, which ones are from parents and trusted teachers, which ones are generated by our own inner longings and anxieties.

Who told **you** to go to seminary – or even show up at the Seminary and Div School Day?" It's worth sorting through the scripts behind that question.

On one hand, the question, "Who told you that?" is an invitation to "author" something yourself and give it your own personal touch, different from everyone else's. No one else will make those choices.

On the other hand, the question, "Who told you that?" is an invitation to question all authority, perhaps to challenge it, perhaps to assent to it, but on all counts, not to take it for granted. It's an invitation to think critically about a course of

acting, either adopting it, should it seem "good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28) or declining it should it seem to come from any other spirit.

3. Then, a third question: "**What have you done**?" (3:13) God asks Adam to narrate the story of what's happened, but in his own words. It's not as if God doesn't know what's happened: God is all-knowing after all. But God wants Adam's version of what happened, and when Adam has to supply that, he resorts to blame.

First, Adam blames Eve; then, he blames God for creating her: "That woman whom you gave me…." (3:12) Eve follows her husband's example. When she's approached for an explanation, Eve blames the serpent: "The serpent tricked me – and I ate." (3:13)

The shattering humanity of it all does not escape Martin Luther, who, in his commentary on Genesis, underscores the need to shift responsibility to someone else as perhaps *the* signature human failing. Not disobedience. He comments: "Is not this accusing the Creator and pushing off one's guilt from oneself?" Now there's a Big Questions. Luther continues, "Thus we see Adam and Eve so fallen and sunk in sin that they cannot sink deeper." (*Commentary on Genesis,* 3:19)

What have **you** done? I want to argue that this question points, not only to our failings, but to our gifts. What are yours? Your strengths and talents and gifts point you in a direction. What do people say you're good at? What do you love to do? Are they the same things? Where do they point you?

My colleague Tom Morgan and I do this exercise with our pre-professional students called *Dependable Strengths*, and it's based on the premise that people are much more aware of their weaknesses than their strengths. Think back to a grade-school report card: I know in my family, I obsessed about anything I got less than an A in – and proceeded to spend an inordinate amount of time working to remedy that.

What if I'd spent as much time and energy worrying about where my strengths pointed me? That might have been more helpful.

4. Then a fourth question: "**Why are you angry?**" (4:6) God poses this one to Cain, son of Adam and Eve, who seeks to please God with an offering of meat.

God spurns Cain's meat offering, favoring instead the grain offering of his brother. Clearly, the God of Genesis missed reading all the good parenting books, which counsel against playing favorites.

Possibly what's going on here is an ancient argument favoring settled agrarian societies over more nomadic hunting and gathering ones, but whatever is going on here, the question "Why are you angry?" always finds traction.

The anger that governs so much of our civic life, our congregations, and our personal relationships is only a thin veneer over fear. Underneath anger is always fear.

Here's the Big Question God really asks Cain: **What are you afraid of**? It's worth figuring out an answer.

In my profession as a theologian of the church, I've had no small amount of success talking to church groups angry about "hot button" issues – abortion, war, sexuality – by trying to dig beneath their rage to the underlying fear. And often both sides of an issue are afraid of the same thing: fear of division, fear of silencing or being silenced, fear of doing the wrong thing.

It's said of the academy: "the politics are so nasty, because the stakes are so small." The same could be said of congregational life. But I remember a meeting where there was a lot of blame and division, until someone finally ventured: "Look, here's what I'm really afraid of…." It turned out that everyone in the meeting was afraid of the same thing.

What are **you** afraid of? Pay attention to what's inside your anxiety closet and get to know each worry or fear. Befriend them; take them to coffee occasionally. If you don't know your fears, they'll run you ragged. But if you do, you might put them to good use.

5. Then, there's a final question, which circles back to that initial question God posed to Adam. It's another question of location. Only this time the location concerns, not Adam or Cain, but the neighbor: "**Where is your brother**?" (4:9) In the anger that bubbled up over his fear of not being liked by God, Cain killed Abel – and God noticed his absence.

"Where is your brother – or sister?" With this question, we encounter the other, whether that other be partner or friend or fellow-congregant or colleague, whether that "other" be near or distant neighbor, whether that other be Christian or non-Christian.

The question invites us to name the others in our lives – and name them as family. Luther returned to a key biblical word for regarding the "other": neighbor. The neighbor is someone who may or may not share a common faith, but shares instead a common place, the space of a neighborhood.

Who are your neighbors? Near and distant? Christian and non-Christian?
Remember Luther's other bit of wisdom about the neighbor:
We bear the face of Christ to the neighbor,
and– the neighbor bears the face of Christ to us.

Guard that.

Where are you?
Who told you that?
What have you done?
Why are you angry?
Where is **your** neighbor?

These might Big Questions might be useful to you in discerning your own vocation.

They just might help you be the presence of God in whatever room you find yourselves in next.

But remember this: the job of a pastor or Christian leader is not only to be the presence of God in the room, while the rest of us are doing our jobs, but to help other people find the presence of God in their own lives.

Start with that, at least.

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