

What's My Line?

Sarina Brooks
Centre Street Church, UCC
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Does anyone remember the old television game show *What's My Line*? It had a panel of celebrities who had to guess the occupation of the contestants. The panelists asked a series of questions to try and guess the occupations, and if the contestants could stump the panel, they won. I loved this show and watched it in one of its several revivals as a kid. I loved trying to guess what the occupations of the contestants were and delighted when the celebrity panel was stumped. There was also a celebrity guest that the panel would try and guess. The panelists were blindfolded for this portion of the show, and it was entertaining television viewing. The occupations varied widely and ran the gamut from the common to the unique and then plain weird.

A 1958 newspaper article from *The South Bend Tribune* ran an interview with the show's director at the time, who noted some of the most unusual occupations of the contestants included a man who made eyeglasses for chickens, a lady who made false tails for thin-tailed horses, a bald man who made toupees for humans, and a woman who employed other women to sit around with her and crochet pockets for pool tables.¹

The Bible is no less full of wild and strange occupations. According to Biblegateway.com, the Bible lists at least 5,433 occupations. Among them are the ones we might think of such as farmer, carpenter, priest, tax collector, weaver, musician, shepherd, stonemason, and soldier. Others that we might not think about include Levite, tanner, washerman, lawyer, and linen worker. Occupations that are not listed include beggar, prostitute, sanitation worker, and many other "jobs" done by people who lived on the margins of society and were beneath the notice of the general populace. Other ways of living that are not listed include servant, concubine, slave, prophet, wet nurse, and seer.

We could go on and on listing the ways that people made their living in Bible times, and then we could assign values based on those occupations, jobs, and roles. Some of these listed here do not even count as occupations or are not deemed worthy of being listed. What makes the work one person does more worthy than that of another? Why is the perceived value of a person so closely connected to what they do or don't do in their lives? Why are some people deemed more worthy than others, both in Biblical times and in our own?

We live in a world that determines the value of a person based on what they do or do not do for a living. Many of us place these values on ourselves and deem ourselves to not be worthy or good enough based on our jobs, careers, education, socioeconomic status, cars, the size of our bank

¹ <https://indystar.newspapers.com/article/the-south-bend-tribune>

account, and countless other factors. These valuations keep us separated from each other, categorized, lined up in various levels of worthiness. They make us feel inferior, disconnected, anxious, and often empty inside. We base our worth on the work we do, and most of us feel like we do not measure up or are failing at some imagined standard that we and others set for ourselves.

When we think about our relationship to the Holy, and the work that we, as people of faith, are set to do, do we know what that work is or feel worthy of being called to do it? Many people of faith feel a need for someone else to do that work. They either don't understand or don't believe that they are called to do holy work, and they don't feel worthy or know how to do what's being asked of them. The Bible is full of people called by God to preach, teach, do specific tasks, go on journeys, prophesy, and more. Most of these people don't want the job God has asked them to do, and most feel unworthy of being called by God.

When Jonah was called by God, he ran away on a boat, was swallowed by a massive fish, but finally with great reluctance answered God's call. Amos kept telling people that he was just a farmer, but he finally went to the king's court and reluctantly prophesied. While in the presence of God, Isaiah bemoaned his fate and his unworthiness of being a messenger for God. John the Baptist was hailed as a great man of God, but he felt unworthy of the tasks God set for him. Moses was so anxious and fearful that he needed help and was often incapacitated by his feelings of unworthiness.

Moses, Amos, Isaiah, Jonah, and John were all just men going about their business when they were called. Summoned to be prophets, amidst their ordinary lives they heard the call of God. Women like Meriam and Deborah also heard the call of the Holy to speak, act, and pray in the name of God and to carry God's message to the world. These women were even more unlikely prophets than the men, because they lived in a time when women had extraordinarily little power and often no voice in the wider community, let alone the Holy places. All unlikely, and yet each one chosen and called by God. All going about their ordinary lives and chosen by God. Reluctant for the most part, but each one willing to listen and follow the urgings of the Holy to go about the work of the Spirit in the world.

In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that another prophet will come. One called by God. Moses does not promise the people a great and powerful prophet or some all-seeing person who has their stuff together. What he promised was that another person would be chosen by the Holy, and that person would be like him. Someone just wandering through their ordinary lives and holding down an ordinary job, not standing out from the crowd. Someone who definitely seemed unlikely to be called to spread God's message. Joshua was chosen to succeed Moses, and the Bible is full of people being chosen like Joshua, just one unlikely soul after another.

When we hear the word *prophet*, various images come to mind. We may think of people in white robes—think Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*—holding stone tablets, or more modern-day versions of self-proclaimed prophets shouting that the end times are coming.

Whatever your image of a prophet is, it probably includes people talking about knowing the will of God, predicting the future, or doing miraculous things. *The Britannica Dictionary* defines a prophet as “A member of some religions (such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) who delivers messages that are believed to have come from God.”²

Jeffery Kranz, from *The Beginner’s Guide to the Prophets in the Bible*, says, “Prophets are humans who speak on God’s behalf.”³ The Bible is full of prophecies about the past, present, and future that focus on the treatment of people who are marginalized, behaviors that people need to change, violence and war in the world, how to act and behave in loving and kind ways, what God wants for us, and how we’re supposed to treat each other and our relationship with God.

Let’s take a moment to consider both these prophets of old and the definition of a prophet. These were ordinary people doing ordinary things when God called them with whispers, urgings, dreams, and images. They went out from their ordinary lives to tell people about the messages they had received from the Holy. Some messages were clear, while others were more complex and confusing. The common thread for all these prophets was they were called from ordinary lives, and they all said yes.

First Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (NRSVUE). The United Church of Christ’s website says this about the Priesthood of All Believers: “All members of the United Church of Christ are called to minister to others and to participate as equals in the common worship of God, each with direct access to the mercies of God through personal prayer and devotion.”⁴ As members of the priesthood of all believers, we are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in redeeming each other and the entirety of creation. As part of this mandate, we are all equally seen as called to participate in the prophetic and priestly ministries that Jesus modeled and called us to do.

We might not feel worthy. We might be unsure, anxious, afraid, or we might just not want to do it. We might run and try to hide like Jonah or feel anxiety ridden like Moses. We might talk gibberish like Saul, though hopefully we won’t feel called to run around naked for three years like Isaiah. We will likely not feel like a prophet, or we’ll want to deny being a prophet.

First Corinthians 12:7–12 says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the

² <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/prophet>

³ <https://overviewbible.com/prophets/>

⁴ https://www.ucc.org/domestic-policy/ourfaithourvote_about/about-us_what-is-the-united-church-of/

interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (NRSVUE).

If we listen, the Spirit will whisper to us and show us ways to be prophets in our ordinary lives. We need not leave our professions, wander in the wilderness, or walk naked through the streets to bear witness and tell others about the Good News of Christ. We need to know that we are worthy to do this work because we are followers of Christ and members of the priesthood of all believers. We need to simply be willing to listen, believe, and go forth with faith, courage, and love—knowing that because of God’s grace and love, we are enough.