

Faith. Vocation. Culture.
The Washington Institute

Vocation Is Mission:
CALLING AND CONSTRAINT

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Spring Series
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The following is transcribed from Part 1 of the spring "Vocation Is Mission" series of lecture delivered by Kate Harris in the Rivendell School Chapel, Arlington, Virginia, on Wednesday, April 10, 2013.

Welcome I am now going to ascend to the podium where my notes are and I will open us in a word of prayer for our evening. I feel very official up here.

Lord, We are so grateful that we get to gather together and learn more of what it is that you have for us in this life. Life of freedom and abundance and richness; that you call to us in such deep ways that it is more than we can possibly grasp or imagine. I ask that you would send your Holy Spirit to be present with us tonight. That you would speak through me that you would give all of us ears to hear and an attentiveness to your voice Lord, we know that you long to be known. And we long to know you. We pray that you would be present with us and that this would be to your glory. Amen.

So thank you very much for coming out tonight. It's nice to see a few familiar faces in the crowd. And since we're talking about calling tonight I am going to start with an image that has been very formative for me over the years. This is a dress, this is a picture of a little black dress that is part of a project that ran in 2009 called the Uniform Project. It was an online experiment by this fashion designer in New York, I can't ever quite remember her name. But she was interested in doing an experiment in sustainable fashion. She was frustrated with the New York fashion industry always requiring that there were new things to buy, new trends to be up on, new products that had to be consumed in order to be on trend. And what she was interested in was this question: "Can we do fashion in a more sustainable way?" She wanted to take this little black dress, this garment as she calls it, it buttons down the front or the back as you'll see, and see if she could wear the same black dress every day for a year but create a brand new look each day using only recycled, repurposed, and reused accessories. So here's a little picture of what she came up with. And here's some more. So we get a little bit of an idea that this was not like a quaint little project. This was a big, big action in creativity.

So why this dress and this project for our topic tonight? The short answer is that for me this imagine unlock a several years long question that I have held deep in my own heart about what to make of my experiences as a woman honestly seeking to understand how reconcile what often feel like warring passions in my own heart over my sense of calling. One the one hand, the longing to be attentive in my role as a wife and as a mother but perhaps also because of a sense that I've never felt released from a nagging, compelling desire to start new projects, meeting new people, engaging new ideas and busying myself in all number of interests from politics to art to writing and organizational development which mostly just correlate in my life to like pretty messy house most of the time. But trying to tether these two tensions that didn't feel like it was sufficient for them just to be tradeoffs. But trying to figure out how do I navigate this as a Christian. And a quick parenthetical here which is important one is I recognize that not everyone in this room is a mother. That is something which is particular to my calling as I'm speaking from that platform but the reality is that all of us have tension in our vocation. All of us have this sense that I feel like I might be wanting to spend my time and effort here but then at the same time I also have this tug in another direction. To the extent that we have discernment that we're battling disparate desires or complex decisions and commitments, this is a human question. It isn't a woman question, it isn't a mother question, it isn't a mommy-wars question. This is just an honest question about how do we actually navigate the complexity of what our life is when we are seeking to faithful across a number of different areas.

So as I sought answers to these questions in my own life, I felt like on the one hand there were a lot of resources and research offered to me in sort of the work-life balance realm of life, the logistics side of it. This is how you can do it all and this is how you can pack it all in. And then on the other hand as I went to the church, I found that a lot of the resource was oriented around seasons of life and having young children or being in a stage of singleness or having more time for professional development. And there is absolutely truth to this. I have no bone to pick with the reality that all of us live our lives in seasons. But rather I felt like neither of those answers was wholly sufficient to help me tether this dually competing tensions that I had in my heart.

And then I found this dress! This is the image that finally unlocked something really deeply and sustainably true for me. This novel idea that perhaps the constraints and the limitations that I was feeling in my life that I was feeling were maybe encroaching on my life or that were impediments to my calling, which is mostly how I thought about them, You know I've got all this stuff in the way before I can go live my life and do this big thing. But instead to think about my constraints as she did with this garment, to think of them not as barriers to potential or problems to be solved but rather that the constraints themselves could be a means of clarity, of focus, of creativity in my life and work. It was only by confining herself to this dress that she was able to do something that was interesting and something that was creative and something that was fun actually from the project. She wasn't, you know, in angst about what to pick out every morning; it transformed the limitation into something was really catalyzing.

It helped me with this image to recognize that all of us are pursuing our callings in the midst of constraints. There isn't another way to pursue them. And perhaps the constraints themselves are the important part and that they give shape to what it is that I do. So I started thinking about this idea, I found that this idea of constraint is actually quite a common one. To think of constraint as a means of clarity and of focus, as a way to root and orient ourselves, I was able to see that this is all over the place. In ecology and agriculture limiting land use is what helps the land to flourish. It is planting one crop at a time on a particular plot of land; it isn't trying to do 18 crops at once. In marketing, it is one message. It isn't, "We're Nike and we love athletes and we make people fast and we make people jump higher." It's just one phrase and everyone is disciplined to say our message is most effective if we confine ourselves to one message. In business, you see this all the time. This is a hard water additive for dishwasher detergent that I chose because one of our board members makes this product! And it proves the point that any wise business person you hone in one product, one distinctive, one thing that you say "We do this better than anyone else." If you try and scatter the seeds too wide, if you try to communicate too much, you basically just get pulled 18 different directions.

Artists especially know this. It's a very, very common principle within art that creativity requires constraint in order to thrive. This is a painting by a wonderful Japanese artists, Mako Fujimura, and it's titled "Charis-Kairos" the tears of Christ. And just so you have some appreciation for this piece of art, Mako practices what is called, it is an ancient Japanese art painting technique *nihonga*, and they make all of their own paper out of this particular trees and tree leaves in Japan. And then every color and pigment you see on here is a precious mineral. So the gold that's on there is actual gold that has been ground down through a particular ancient process and then painted onto this page. And if you were to see this painting in real life, it would be about the size of that wall. It's enormous. So you can imagine just the stunning nature of this piece of art. He did this as part of a reflection on the 4 holy gospels. It's the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible and he was commissioned to do reflections on the 4

gospels. And this is what he said through the course of this project. He said, and I'll give you a little sneak peak,

"For the past several seasons of lent, I have been meditating on this account of three siblings, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus of Bethany. In particular John 11:35 has become a central passage for me to consider in self reflection because an artist learns very early that creativity demands boundaries and limits to thrive. When I began on my recent journey to illuminate the 4 Holy Gospels for Crossway Publishing's celebration of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, I needed to find the thematic boundary. I was so overwhelmed with the grand scale of the project, that I chose the shortest passage in the Bible: "Jesus wept." And that decision has led to many discoveries for me along the way."

I love that he was so overwhelmed by possibility that he picked the shortest verse in the Bible to confine himself, and this is the result that we get. I love that! I could say a lot more about art here, but in thinking about this idea that it's through constraint that we can be creative and it can be clarifying in our calling, there are 3 particular ways that I think constraints help us in very practical ways.

First, our constraints uniquely serve in helping us know God more fully. They also help us know ourselves more honestly, and finally it helps us know better what and how to choose wisely among what can be seemingly endless feeling options. Before we get too far down the road, I just want to take a minute to define vocation, because it is one of these church words I find, like accountability or community or the things we all nod and smile and know what we mean but don't necessarily know what we mean. This is an image that Steve Garber, who I work with, uses all the time. And basically the etymology of the word vocation comes from the Latin word *Vox* which translates as "voice" or "call" and they are completely synonymous, one is Latin and one is Greek. And the general, the simplest way, of understanding vocation is it is our entire life lived in response to God's voice, lived in response to God's call. It often gets understood because of all sorts of movements in church history as work or our job or our career or our occupation. But what is more truthful is to think of vocation as this huge, overarching word that encompasses all of the different responsibilities and efforts and interests and skills that we have. And that then we have within that, certain spheres of occupation and there can be more than that one sphere obviously. But we tend to talk about our occupations as our little "c" callings or little v "vocations" so calling to a particular place, a calling of marriage, a calling to law, a calling to art. And depending on how well what it is that we're "occupied" with, how our time is occupied, depending on how aligned that is with what God is asking us to do or calling us to do, those circles may overlap a whole bunch, they might be very, very hard distinguish between, or they might be very, very barely touching. And that is just a helpful image to think about this.

A couple notes on this that I have found helpful, the reality of our callings is that they are complex, there is more than one circle. And I've always loved Andi Ashworth says, "Callings are complex and sometimes collide." And this picture looks a lot more like how my life feels most of the time. It isn't this tidy, linear, two circle little diagram that makes sense of all things. It's sort of like I have a lot of those random, teeny circles right along the edge that I'm not totally sure about. I also am always and have to be reminded of this that we are always living into our calling. Our calling is happening over time, takes place over a long stretch of time, and this is a verse that's always from the time I first became a Christian, has always been really encouraging to me. It says, "Blessed are those whose strength is in You, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage." (Psalm 84:5) I think we worship a God who is kind to set realistic expectations for us. He's not asking us to do more than we can, He's saying look you're going to be in it for awhile. And

then finally, if vocation is about hearing God's voice, we have to be listening. Vocation cannot be separated from listening and knowing the voice of God. So spiritual practices: retreat, prayer, taking time to be silent, taking time to understand and know the Lord through his Word, the scripture, these are all ways that we can start to understand vocation.

So if that's calling, we're going to think about how if we're taking up our calling in the midst of constraints, how does this help us know God more fully, to see more of who he is, how He has designed us and how he longs for us as Christians to take up his work in the world? And one wonderful lens into this I find is thinking about the Incarnation. This is one of my favorite religious works of art by Giotto. It was painted in the fresco in 1311. And I find it's a little unusual to be looking at a picture of the manger on a day like today where we're all sweaty and hot and it's ridiculously summer-ish outside. But even though advent and Christmas are a long way behind us, and even Easter now is behind us, it is important to note that the entire Christian year, the entire liturgical year begins in anticipation and celebration that God became incarnate. He became man to dwell among us in time and space and flesh and blood. And this very act which is so central, so defining of the Christian faith apart from anything other faith on earth, that we worship a God who bent low, who took on flesh and lived in suffering, died as one of us in itself a demonstration of how God himself chose to work through the constraints of flesh and time and space. God himself chose to do his own work in the world in the context of constraint. And as God made flesh, his power, his nature were not constrained of course; his miracles and resurrection are evidence that his flesh did not bind his omnipotence in any ultimate way but that there is something very, very deep and important for us in this imagine of the Incarnation as we think about the stuff that feels like it's hemming us in.

These are just a few reflections pulled straight out of Luke 2. And this is basically how I've seen God dignifying our ordinary constraints. So we're confined by time. "When Corineus was governor of Syria." We are where we are, we're in the season where we're in, in the generation and culture that we find ourselves in; this is where we are. And it is of little consequence where we might be or where we could be. The next is place. We are confined by place or by space however we understand that: "Up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the City of David which was called Bethlehem." A city, a church, a neighborhood, a hometown we cannot avoid our sense of belonging. It's fundamentally spacial no matter how much we fight it. We're confined by certain relationships: "Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed." We belong to other people: to our families, to our friends, to our roommates, to our spouses, to our church, to our community and so did Christ. We're confined by circumstances: "Because there was no place for them at the Inn." God actually had to contend with stuff that just was happening all around him. If you actually step into something, you're stepping into a reality that is already at play, that's already at work. Time doesn't stop, events don't stop and circumstances are part of what govern our choices and our life and what it is that God is calling us to do. And finally, we're confined by flesh, we're confined by our bodies: "The time came for her to give birth and she gave birth to a son and wrapped him" because he was cold. So these confines, these details tell us something important I think about how God thinks about our so called limitations. The fact that God himself who has all the universe at his disposal was not all atwitter about maximizing potential or pursuing every option, or keeping doors open to be as really truly effective as he could possibly be. He didn't choose to transcend time or space or even decades but rather chose the rote mechanics of gestation and labor and delivery. He chose to come to a particular mother and particular father and a particular place in a particular time. He chose to work through the same ordinary human constraints that we all face to varying degrees and didn't see them as impediments. He saw them as the point.

I could spend days of my life contemplating the wonder of this, particularly as Rembrandt ponders it. But for now, I'll simply leave us with this quote from Kathleen Norris, a Catholic poet and novelist. She says this,

“Christianity is inescapably down to earth and incarnational. I say inescapably as most of us at one time or another try to avoid an incarnational faith. The Christian religion asks us to place our trust not in ideas, certainly not in ideologies but in a God who was vulnerable enough to become human and die. And who desires to be present to us in our every day circumstances. And because we are human, it is in the realm of the daily and the mundane that we must find our way to God.”

So if the incarnation reminds us that God really, really, really gets what it is to have to contend with constraints, the challenge of course is for us to get it. And that for me at least is the harder part. That's where the constraints of life are actually a very practical teacher for us. They help us know ourselves more honestly. And the word here “honestly” is a very intentional because there are a lot of ways we can know ourselves better. There's a lot of ways we can more about ourselves, there are a lot of ways that we can seek to understand more of who we are but it's a very, very different thing to know ourselves honestly and our constraints is one of the few things that can help teach us that.

So here we are back with the Uniform Project. Accessories. I don't know this for real, I have not talked with the founder of the Uniform Project though that's maybe on my bucket list. I'd like to do that one day. But I have to think given the confines of this project, gave her new eyes to see things she would otherwise pass by. She's having to work extra hard every day thinking how am I going to make this dress work tomorrow? I'm going to look at this purse and I'm going to really kind of pay attention like could this work with what it is I'm trying to do? She was more attentive than she otherwise would be.

Simone Weil is a French philosopher and mystic. One of the things she has said that has stuck with me as being deeply true and it's a large theme throughout her writing is: “Paying attention is the highest form of prayer.” I find that when it comes to understanding our calling, this is certainly true. At a most basic level, paying attention can be as simple as paying attention to little things as we go through our day. What are things that maybe I feel a rush of excitement like “Oo! That was fun!” Or perspective like, I'm in a group of people and I'm getting a totally different read on this than you're getting. I see this differently, I feel this differently, I'm aware that my perspective is somehow off or different. Aversions. Stuff we think I just cannot believe that that could be so. I cannot stand that. What does that tell us about what it is that we actually care about? And then admiration. What or whom do I admire? I call these my non-celebrity crushes because I have a lot of people that are pretty darn nerdy that I would like drool over meeting. Because they're just sort of my thing. They are stuff I admire. And this is the stuff that actually makes our prayers take on the eloquence of things like “ok, Lord, I'm going through my day and I'm having this rush of excitement. Is that a thing? Like should I pay attention to that? Is that something that counts?” And while we can think about this as just an exercise in self-awareness, “oh yes I need to be taking notes and journaling all the interesting things about myself,” the reality is that it is really more about engaging an open dialogue with God who longs to be in relationship with us and longs to be present with us and will be and is regardless of whether or not we're paying attention but the gift to us is if we can pay attention.

Wendell Berry takes this up in a slightly different way but sort of carrying on this theme of attentiveness, he wrote an essay in the late 70s about what he calls the “Modern Crisis of the Lost Identity.” And this is what he says:

“The lost identity would find itself by recognizing physical landmarks, by connecting itself responsibly to practical circumstances, it would learn to stay put in the place in which preference or history or accident had brought it; it would, in short, find itself by finding its work.”

And since for many of us, we’re to some degree on the same search, we’re looking to find our work, we’re looking to find our identity, seems like there is wisdom in Berry’s tips. Find our identity where we recognize and connect to those things which hem us in. We recognize and connect the stuff that is ours to do.

So how does this happen? My little stick figure. There are two ways, there are more than two ways but I tidied it and put it in two ways, that we can pay attention to what it is that God how he might be speaking to us: internally and externally and I’ll start with externally. And Janee, you are one of my examples! So self and circumstances is the major way that we externally take in data that can be formative in our vocation. A few years ago, several years now because my daughter is now 6, Janee Sedmak hosted very gracious and beautiful a dinner to bring mothers together around this question of how do I take up the vocation of motherhood? And I wrote an article sort of writing up what the conversation was and it was mothers at all different stages. The dinner itself or the conversation itself was significant because it was rooted in this view of vocation that we talked about briefly earlier, this capital “V” vocation and this big understanding of vocation that was woman trying to sort out what it means to mother with stewardship and intent while also holding that role in tension with the many other relationships and responsibilities that God might be calling us to. It’s an effort to not make too much of what motherhood is and also not make too little of it. But rather to think about it in light of what it means to take up God’s work coherently and responsibly in the world given who we are as people.

So there were two stories that I used in this article that came out of that evening. One was my friend Laurel who is a fine artist, she is now expecting her fourth child, and what Laurel talked about that evening was that she had her first child early in marriage and said, I have learned that I am a better mother to my kids when I make time for art and I rearrange my entire day around doing it. So my kids are on drill sergeant schedules for naps and as soon as they were down I make coffee, I eat chocolate, and I paint. And I do it every single day like religion. Because it is the thing that enables me to be attentive to my family.

Janee told a different story having older children and was reflecting back on when she had three younger kids and was participating in a Bible study at church, leading it, and she said I vividly remember this day where I was cramming everyone into the car and they were all hollering and screaming and I was cranky with them and they were cranky with me and I stopped and thought, what am I doing? I’m trying to do all this stuff to stay involved but really I’m probably missing the point. And what I love about these examples is there is no one perfect fit for how it is that we discern what God wants us to do. For one person, it’s saying yes to art for another it’s saying no, I don’t need to do this particular commitment right now. But the way that we do that discernment is somewhat about awareness of our own wiring and who we are and how we work best, but it’s equally rooted in the reality and constraints of your life. What is possible? My constraints are real. They are actually at play in what it is that I can

and cannot do. So the wisdom was not simply about what can I do, what might I to do, but it was this embracing of what can I not do and what must I do?

The second one is really just a generic little wordle cause I thought that was kind of fun. To think about who are you? In personality tests and inventories are you an introvert, are you an extrovert, are there certain environments in which you flourish, where you're more productive, times of day when you're more productive, basic self-assessment tools. And this just sort of helpful to have in the tool belt. Do some work to figure out how am I wired and how do I work best?

Others ways we can pay attention externally beyond sort of knowing ourselves and being honest about our circumstances is through other people. Other people are often the best people to know ourselves more honestly, they guard us against self deception, at least the people in my life guard well against that! Steve in his book that he wrote awhile ago now, talks about Fabric of Faithfulness and basically this is the result of research he did over many years trying to figure out what are distinctive characteristics of Christians who are able to sustain their faith over a life time. And not only sustain it, but deepen it. What do they have in common? So he wasn't trying to examine the trend of how many people fall away from the church or how many people stay, but just what is it, what do these people do? And the three things he observed were: they had a worldview that was sufficient to account for all of life, they had friends that were walking together in a very committed way trying to do, taking up their work together with semblance of support, and then mentors, finding people to whom you could apprentice yourself saying I admire that person, I want to be like that person. And this is different than pick a name from a hat and you're assigned with this older woman or older man and now be best friends, which sometimes works by the grace of God. But it's really more the burden of saying I need to learn from other people who know something and I feel like all the time I am going in front of people saying tell me stuff, tell me anything. Tell me how to be sort of more like this thing that you have figured out.

The second one, and I have Susan who is in her polka dot top tonight just to make sure she's recognizable, is to find your people. I call this the pick and stick. This is basically what marriage is for anyone who has a deep mystery about it. Pick them and stick with them. It's not rocket science. It's not always that sexy. This is true basically of how do we invite people into our lives? Pick them and stick with it. It's not a whole lot more complicated than that, even though we love to make it complicated. I use Susan as my example because Susan and I were Fellows together and the Fellows Program at The Falls Church was really the first thing that got me comfortable with the arbitrariness of this. I showed up from Colorado as a brand new Christian, I knew very little about anything and I was assigned a host family and a mentor and a job work placement, and the reality is those things formed me. And I didn't pick them. I didn't know them, I didn't have a whole lot in common with them, they were not my favorite people, I would have been pleased to unpick many of them. But the reality is that the program itself taught me that sticking with people is enough, it's sufficient. And Susan who is evidence of that, we've now had a long, long, long wonderful friendship for many years. And this is what friends do for you, people that you stick with, that you will bind yourself to over life. They help you with broader perspective on what it is on what you're going to be doing over time; they've known you for a long time, they know the things that are consistent and they know the stuff that's sort of the fad of the moment or the voice of insecurity or the neurotic thing that probably needs to stop anyway. Those are the people that can give you perspective over I've heard this before and I've heard this consistently.

They can also give a different vocabulary than we have by ourselves, different language, more categories. So our friends are the people who will say, you know are such a good listener. And we might

think, well I didn't know that was a thing. I didn't know that was anything but now because you've said it, I can pay attention to it. Or you are so well organized, you really help things run efficiently. You're such an encourager of other people. You have encouraged me more than any other person in my life. You're so good at practical solutions; how do you think of the stuff that I can never ever think of. You're such a thoughtful gift giver, I always really appreciate what you can give to me. And what we do as friends, what we do as people, we give each other more language, more categories to say this counts. This is something that doesn't have to be my whole thing, it doesn't have to be my career, but it can be something.

Then finally, people we commit ourselves to give us context to contend with our constraints in a real way. When my husband and I were thinking about going overseas for him to study and get a graduate degree, we had early in our marriage decided that there were two couples that held up a prayer covering at our wedding, and neither of us are from particularly healthy or well-grounded families so it was very important for us to feel like, if we're going to do marriage we need some people who can help us understand how do you do marriage? What does it look like? And we've had 2 couples that we basically asked, will you stand with us at our wedding and will you help us, will you help us be married over the course of our lifetime? And so when we were facing this decision with one young child and one child on the way and thinking of going overseas, we had already had a context to have a really honest conversation about that decision with people who had known us for a long time, who knew a lot about our lives, who knew a lot about our decision making, probably too much. But when you're committed to people, you can ask different questions and you can hear more answers from them. You can hear more carefully from them if you have a context to contend with the constraints that they raise. And the Deans, which are a family that we meet with, basically said we don't think there isn't any reason you shouldn't do it, we think there could real benefits, but we think it's going to be a lot harder than you think it is. It's going to be harder financially, it's going to be stress on your marriage, it's going to be tiring, and they basically just told us, you are going to get your behind whooped. And there were days in England that I thought, "Thank God for the Deans. They told me it was coming!" But it was so, so, so helpful to go in to a decision with the confidence that we don't know ultimately, we don't know finally, but we do know there are people that we trust who have been on this with and we can contend with the reality of what comes up.

Finally, we see this idea of pick and stick in the Bible is called covenant. And we see this from the beginning of time, God himself doesn't ask us to do things that he hasn't done himself. And through the Abrahamic covenant that we read about in Genesis 17, he basically says "I am picking this guy. I'm going to stick with this people. And through that I'm going to usher forth the entire plan of salvation. I'm not going to start with all people, I'm not going to start with every human person. I'm going to pick and I'm going to stick. Just wait and see what can come from that sort of commitment."

So that's externally – other people, self, and circumstances. Internally. Pay attention to what you love. This is sort of the one that comes to us knee-jerk. Oh yes! I love things. That must be what I'm called to do. This is not untrue but it's not the whole story.

Does anyone know Emily Henderson, other than Susan who is the person who introduced me to her? Emily Henderson is a designer and stylist. This is something that she wrote on her blog a year ago. She says,

"I woke up sad and then this happened. It's by stylist Emily Chalmers. And I love her. like a lot. She was the first trendsetter that gave me permission to display my

crazy hoarding collection of vintage floral and fauna. I had been collecting from the age of 14-26, secretly obviously... I would put a few out here and there, test the waters, but in general it was just my own little treasure. As long as it was bright, feminine and one of a kind I hoarded anything I could. But it was considered weird, my friends just thought it was random, and when I saw Emily's apartment in Elle Decor like 5 years ago, it gave me permission to own my love of baubles. Sometimes, especially when you are young, you feel like you need 'permission' from somebody you admire to really love what you already love. Of course this is just in your head and you don't actually need permission but for me, it was Emily Chalmers."

This language of giving permission to love what you already love is something that we all need. We need someone else to say, that counts. You can love that. It's ok. And it seems easy, you know this seems like sort of the easy low hanging fruit part of what we want to understand in our calling. But for most of us it's actually hard to know how to translate that into what we're supposed to do. This is one area where our constraints actually help us a lot. I am a hopeless generalist. I find many, many obscure things interesting. There's many careers I've entertained in the course of my life that I think I could do which is delusional but still fun to think about. This is where the Uniform helped me a lot practically. That is recognizing while there's endless options in the world, it is only through roots that we can grow in any fruitful in direction.

For me, rootedness in my own life happened through kids. They limited my time, they limited my sleep, and for the first time I could see the difference between what were casual interests and what were for real, legit things that my mind would not release, that my attention would not depart from, and that is very practically how our constraints focus us. If I'm still thinking about this when I'm falling asleep at night when I have no business thinking about anything, that counts and that's something we need to pay attention to. They add a certain cost to the calculus that makes us choose and prioritize some things over others. It gives clarity to what we can and cannot do, will or will not do with the limited resources that we have.

So we come back to Emily's baubles which are actually quite fun to look at. One of the things that we need practically when we start paying attention to things we love, is we actually need bigger categories to account for the things that we do that can in fact count as calling. It's not just titles, it's not just roles, it's not just skills, it's not just degrees we can earn at a college. But it's the whole scope of creation that God has taken from his own heart and put in ours and said you can love this too. And that's what we try and explore through calling. So for Emily it was baubles. She allowed herself to tug at the thread of her own interest long enough that what emerged was a distinct style. We all need to do this; none of us, even those of us with the clearest call from God, we don't know exactly what it'll look like until it plays out. Even Mother Teresa who talks in her memoirs about hearing from the voice of God, details like where her convent would be located and the color of the rooms, she still had to live in to it. She still had to do it. She still had to actually trust God enough to see how that thing that she knew and could see and that she legitimized, she still had to live into it to see how it shook out. We need God and others to help show us and then validate those little hints of something that can be a seed that grows into a calling over a lifetime.

The second thing, and I started with loves because it's the easy stuff, is paying attention to our disappointments. And this is the flip side to paying attention to what we love because if pay attention to

the little and big things that we love make us feel giddy and quirky and excited and thrilled about life it's also opening ourselves up to disappointment. It's sad but true that the constraints of life seem to keep us from the very thing that we want to do and from the things we feel called to do. We long for something and it doesn't happen and this is often where the voice of calling get snuffed out. We hoped for something and it failed, we desired and it feels like it was thwarted, we were obedient and now this. But our disappointments, particularly those we feel and encounter as we submit to certain constraints are how we grow in Christ. It's how we mature in Christ. We can't stop at what do I love and what feels fun? In the same way that we can't do that with kids and have them grow up with any maturity. So these questions, how can this be, how do I do this, I don't understand, this is where our faith grows. So our disappointments have to be central in what it is we understand for our calling.

A story from my friend Laura who is a filmmaker, and many of you would probably know her film "As We Forgive" on reconciliation in Rwanda and it was very successful and won many awards. But I didn't know Laura at the time but got to know her soon after. Then when we came back from England, I had met her once before but knew her very little and I met her and her at the time 6-month old son at the library and said Laura, how are you doing? And she said, I'm kind of terrible. And I thought, ok. Why are you terrible? And she told me this whole long story where she said you know, I had all this work in "As We Forgive" and then there was this other project that I got drawn into with some other producers and it was such a good film. I really, really, really believed in this film and it was a lot of expertise that I had from my previous work, and I had worked on it and edited it and done some of the shooting, but it was really to the point that if I was going to participate in the project I needed to come on as a producer and bring money with me. So I called up on my producers who had helped on the "As We Forgive" project, and said look, I believe in this story it's so, so good I'm giving of my own time and it's wonderful! And she said it was just closed doors everywhere. I was praying about it; I want to do this. The reality was I was 6 months pregnant, I've never had a kid before, my husband is planting a church, I just at some point had to think, This isn't going to happen. She said, I called the producers and said, I wish like mad I could do this but I can't cause my life is happening. And she said, I found out last night it was accepted to Sundance. And I cried my eyes out. And I cannot tell that story without getting goose bumps because that is the reality of disappointment in our calling. It's not cheap and it's not cute and it can break the whole deal for us if we let it. But it is part of what God asks us to do when he asks us to be honest about what it is that we're willing to do for him and with him.

And the third just on that note, which is sort of a step up from disappointments, is paying attention to our wounds. Being clear-eyed about practical constraints like time and money management is one thing. This is the stuff where I'm pregnant, I've got a husband planting a church, I can't bring money in. Those are constraints that really push us into disappointment and test us. But wounds are the stuff that actually push us when we're hemmed in by stuff we can't change. This is we're single and we want to be married. We battle illness and fatigue that clouds every single day of our life. We don't even have energy really to get up or get out of bed. We have a child or parent or spouse with special needs or that needs special attention that consumes our life. We're unemployed but we wish we were working. We are stuck in a town, or a place, or a circumstance that doesn't fit us but we have to sit there for awhile. These are constraints that we rail against. And this is the stuff that we don't want to contend in our calling. This is the stuff that impedes. This is the Fall. This is the brokenness, this can't possibly be part of what God is asking me to participate in and this is what we tell ourselves.

This is my daughter, Addie who is 6. She was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes about nine months ago and this in my own life has caused a new constraint in my life. It's not just a disappointment. It's a real

thing that shapes the reality of our life every day. It's chronic illness, it's shots, it's counting every gram of food she eats, it's training anyone who will watch her for longer than 5 minutes how to contend with an emergency scenario. Constraints are real in my life but it's also the reminder that wounds are real. If we won't contend with them, we'll never honestly contend with our calling. They shape us, they shape how I parent, they shape in my case how much margin I have, how much flexibility I have, but the reality of wounds is that pain draws our attention more than any other force. Even more than beauty. Cause when pain is afflicting us, it forces us to pay attention to it.

This is a quote that actually has been very helpful for me over the years. This is from *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. He says, "All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth is in dust and ashes." Cormac McCarthy is not a Christian so far as anyone knows, but this is a deep truth of how the world actually gets worked out. But the reality is that if God is calling us to heal his world, wounds are going to be part of it. And there not just going to be part, they're going to be like sort of at the center of it.

So the fact that God calls us to work that heals, are the way we hear stories like the recovered addict who goes into nursing or counseling or facility management to help recovered addicts, it's a woman who's dealt with chronic pain her whole life who goes into patient care or medical research in search a cure or perhaps even into pharmaceutical sales. It's the child of a divorce who builds a strong and stable family one day at a time. It's broken things, wounded things, tattered things, that shape our deepest joy. And that's what we see here if we're willing to contend with it. But as I look at the things that I feel called to, and that my sisters and my husband and others closest to me are called to, I'm more and more convinced actually that God uses our wounds to heal the world in a real way. In the same way that we look to the gospel to see that God doesn't ask us to do things that He has not himself modeled for us, we can read Isaiah 53: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgression, he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."

It's his wounds that heal us but it's our wounds that heal the world. It's the stuff that's broken in us that we can then go tinker and chip away at and that that is actually very dignifying, very gracious, that God gives us something to do in the face of it. We don't have to sit and wallow in it, we can actually take up our calling in the midst of it.

Our constraints help us know better what and how to pick among seemingly endless options. So if we move out of sort of what is it that we should be paying attention to, how is it that we can be asking the Lord to draw our attention and change our perspective with the ways He might be working, there's also this more practical piece: How do we actually know, then, what to do? Several months ago, last fall I guess it was, I read this book *Kristen Lavransdatter*. This can only be described as one of the more epic books of my life. On its face, it's a thousand plus page trilogy about a young girl coming of age in 13th century Norway, but as I became increasingly engrossed in this narrative, what I really realized is this was sort of a deeply, deeply true book that was really a study in willfulness. It was really a study in choices: How do we choose or not choose well? Near the end of the book, after living a full life, a complex marriage, large family, ups and downs, victories, terrible mistakes, this is like a really long, long book, she's walking alone on pilgrimage reflecting on her life that is now mostly lived and this is a quote that has haunted me and probably will for a long time. "Surely she had never asked God for anything except that He should let her have her will. And every time she had been granted what she asked for – for the most part. Now here she sat with a contrite heart – not because she had sinned against God but

because she was unhappy that she had been allowed to follow her will to the road's end." And it's a terrible, wonderful thing in this life that we are able to follow our will to the road's end. But the onus to pick well and wisely and perfectly in light of all that God has called us to, can be crushing if we try to bear it by ourselves or if we try and take this as the ultimate truth.

So lest we be terrified by that, we come back to constraint in a different angle. Simone Weil says this, "The most effective part of our will is not effort but consent." And this is where we see the dress come back to us. This is the Uniform Project. Fundamentally, she consented to the limitation. She picked it on one level, but on another level she just consented to it. It was a willingness to abide by the rules of the project. She didn't reinvent it half way through or adapt the rules but simply allowed it be to what it was and I'm sure there were days she did not want to wear that dress. I'm sure there were days where she was like, "I'm done! I've done it seven months, surely that's enough." But she agreed in some very basic way that she would will herself to keep picking what she had once picked. And Wendell Berry talks about this beautifully in an essay called "Fidelity." He says, "...one who returns home to one's marriage and household and place in the world desiring anew what was previously chosen is neither the world's stranger nor its prisoner but is at once in place and free." And that's basically what consent is. I will pick again what I previously chose. I will yield to the stuff that is pushing in on all sides. I will let it be my life and I won't be a victim of it, but I will be willful in it.

This is the power of Christ is his willingness to consent. More notably in the Incarnation throughout scripture we see Christ consenting to the will of the Father, not passively or as a victim of circumstance, but in willful consent, he is the model of how we willfully consent to things that we would rather not pick or choose. I will choose to accept these things you have given me. I will choose to step into this reality that you have shaped for me. I will, I will, I will.

This is where our choices are bound up together but they are given new shape. Our choices, as we tend to think about them, are typically oriented around our own autonomy, what do I want, what works for me, and for the most part this is how we think about our calling. Perhaps this is how we think about our Christian life much of the time actually. But choosing to consent is a different thing altogether. It's choosing to let ourselves be shaped by things other than simply our preferences or desires and instead to be shaped powerfully by those things that have the power to shape us.

In practical terms, Iris Murdock says this very practically, "In critical moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over." That is look at what is in front of you, see what you see, your choice is probably mostly made. For most of us, it means choosing to anchor ourselves, to commit ourselves, to consent to those things that God has already now, today put in my life. To pick and stick as we've already talked about. It isn't far off, one-day, futuristic stuff. We are called to be faithful today. We're not called to be faithful one day down the road when I'm not as impeded, when I've got more time on my hands, when I can pursue all the things that God's put in me to pursue. One, we're not assured tomorrow but definitely we don't want to waste the time we have to be faithful in this moment. And the only way we can do that is to start where we are.

We can trust God that he will give us opportunities for faithfulness since that's his desire as well, but it's finding those things that in our own life that can be a little black dress, not in a legalistic way, not in a rigid way, not in a confining, terrible, constricting way, but in a way that roots us and that orients us and results in freedom.

One practical way that I think we can look for anchors in our life are to look at the exact constraints that Christ dignifies in the creation. We can look at how much time do I have, what is the time and season that I find myself in, place, relationships, circumstances, flesh. This is stuff that is governing whether we yield to it or not. In my life this has look like I came to the Fellows program 10 years ago, I thought you know I probably can't do much better than this, and I'll stick with it. So when we went to look for a house, we basically put a circle around the church and said this is the most family-like place that we've found and we'll stay. And at the time, we were under no illusions it was perfect church or the only church but it was our church, it was the church we had been given and we decided we would stick with it. When we moved back from England, I chose to live a mile from my best friend, Susan, and that's yielded many, many happy things. We chose marriage mentors at the beginning of our marriage. We've chosen things to just say we'll yield to the people you've already given us. We'll bind ourselves up in a way that will actually take shape to our lives.

So as we start down the path of choosing things, insisting is a big word for me. Insisting on coherence because we really shouldn't settle. We shouldn't be willing to make compromises on a life that's intended to be full and seamless and complex. It shouldn't intimidate us, we shouldn't try to sterilize it or try to make it overly tidy, but rather to insist on it all coming together. So if we start down the path of choosing something, which really is where it begins, choose something, of beginning to consent to that which is ours, in all things, we can trust that God will lead us toward coherence. None of us, not one of us, can be wholly fulfilled in just one area of life, like, say our job, or our role as a spouse or parent. God simply didn't design us that way; he designed us in his own image. To have deep love, complex desires, dynamic and interesting cares woven into our being and he longs for us to come into that fullness, to become more like him. That is, after all, the goal of every Christian is to become more like Christ. And Christ was a complicated, vast, dimensional person. And we should expect that of ourselves.

Fragmentation and compartmentalization are two of the great temptations in this: To sort of set our focus on what feels like an achievable goal, a small, achievable area and just say that's fine. All the rest can go to pot and I'll just do this one thing. But that isn't really what we're called to and it diminishes the Gospel if that's where we actually settle and make our peace. In a practical way, this is making choices about travel commitments as a couple or as an individual that can actually sustain some possibility of community, some possibility of relationships, some possibility of still engaging in the place that you are. Or it's making choices based on where to live not just on financial realities but based on can I engage with other people, can I engage in the work that I want to do, can I have a flourishing life here? Or this is just a matter of sort of maximizing my square footage or maximizing my investment?

This is the tattoo that one day I will get, hopefully not in purple. This is the reality of choosing faithfully. That is, "The reward for being healthy is that you get to be." So you should be really, really clear that choosing coherent things and sustainable things, and faithful things is not anything someone will give you an award for. No one is going to put a sticker chart in your bathroom and give you a lollipop at the end of the week because you made really, really, really hard, gut-wrenching, unsexy choices to be a faithful person. Spending exorbitant amounts of time and money to resolve impossible conflicts with a spouse or child or a friend isn't something anyone gives you applause for. No one says, "oh well done. Way to really make that point graciously." Similarly, learning how to know yourself better, to actually do self-awareness, know how to relate more effectively with others, do work on that count isn't something anyone is going to encourage you to do necessarily or praise you if you do it. Chances are actually greater that if you actually do it, people will actually say yes, that has been annoying for a long time. Remaining chaste, keeping finances in check, having sex regularly if you're married, eating well and

exercising, having regular family dinners, committing to a particular church or community despite imperfections, this is stuff that is really ordinary but if you root into it, if you will drill down, this is where flourishing happens. There isn't another place for it. And no one is going to write you a big check at the end of it, no one is going to give you a reward. The only reward is that you get to be healthy. The fruit of a well loved family, is a family well loved. That's the fruit of loving your family well. The fruit of resting is you feel rested. The fruit of being a good friend is you have a good friend. It doesn't guarantee you much else but it's enough.

So to think about our constraints in closing, this is one of my favorite quotes again by Kathleen Norris who says it better than I could.

“We want life to have meaning, we want fulfillment, healing, even ecstasy, but the human paradox is that we find these things by starting where we are, not where we wish we were.”