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The Journey of Life

C. William Pollard

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**Convocation – Emmaus College
Dubuque, IA**

**August 27, 2007
C. William Pollard**

“The Journey of Life”

It is a special privilege to be here tonight at the beginning of your new school year and to share some thoughts about the Author of our beginnings and the One who knows what is our future. We often think of college as a time of preparation – for many, it is also a time of transition from teenage to adulthood. Now if this is a time of preparation, what is God preparing you to do?

All of us are on a journey of life. A journey that has a purpose and meaning unique to each one of us with a calling from God both to do and to be.

As I look back on my life tonight and share some thoughts about my journey and how God has called and worked in my life, I realize that you, for the most part, are looking forward and may have some uncertainties about God’s purpose and call for your life. These uncertainties are all part of the reality that life is always lived looking forward but more often than not better understood when we have the opportunity to look back.

Listen for a moment to this letter I received from a graduate of another Christian college. It reflects what may be some common understandings or misunderstandings of God’s calling.

“I am very happy to report that, by God’s grace and fullness, I actually did graduate. For the first time since age five, I am not a student.

“It’s been a good four years of learning. I was a Bible major and English minor. I can now read in the Greek New Testament. I know phrases like: inaugurated eschatology and hermeneutical fallacy. I am beginning to have more confidence in my interpretation of scripture.

“I have made wonderful friends here, in breakfast Bible studies, in noon prayer sessions for missions, in afternoons in the fall playing soccer, in the spring playing baseball, and late nights in the dorm having fun. The farewells will be very difficult.

“So, what’s next? I am moving to Kansas City where I will be closer to my family. I’ll find a job and pay off my student loans. What kind of a job? I really don’t know – construction work or some type of administrative work for a business? I also will apply to various mission agencies. I feel called to the mission field and in a year or two, I hope to be in full-time Christian service. Where, I don’t know. Ethiopia? Papua New Guinea? India? I will wait for God’s call to the right place.

“Please pray for me in the next couple of months. It is going to be quite a transition and, frankly, **I am not looking forward to it.** I am leaving a Christian community to live among **ordinary, working Americans.** I am expecting a considerable

amount of uncertainty and loneliness, but I hope to develop some friends at the local church I will be attending.”

So what is this student saying to us about his understanding of God’s calling?

Is there some form of hierarchy in God’s calling with a special place for what people often refer to as “full-time Christian service?” Will I miss out if I don’t do something that fits into this category? Should I think of God’s call in the context of a location or special place of service? Is it only about what I should do and the place where I should do it or **is it** more about who I am and who I am becoming? And where does ordinary work with those ordinary Americans fit in? The ordinary people that God so loves and for whom Jesus died.

As I ask these questions, I am reminded of a friend of mine who put this message on his voicemail at work and his answering machine at home: Hello? This is not an answering device. It is a questioning device. There are only two questions in life that are relevant: “Who are you” and “What do you want?” Please give your answer after the tone.

Who are we and what do we want? Every one of us is a special creation of God with a dimension of freedom to make choices about how we shall then live. And as we exercise this freedom, God is calling us to a way of life that has both a temporal and an

eternal purpose. A calling that is sacred in its significance and more often than not involves the secular in its application.

What does the word of God have to say about this subject of calling? I am reading this evening from Chapters 2 and 4 of Ephesians and Chapters 2 and 3 of Philippians.

Eph 2: 8, 9, 10 - For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them.

Phil 2:3 – 11 - Do nothing from rivalry or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus who though He was in the form of God did not want equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

Eph 4: 1 - I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

Phil 2: 12, 13 - Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Phil 3: 12 – 14 - Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own. And one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press forward the goal for the prize of the **upward call** of God in Christ.

The Biblical principles from those passages are clear. Our starting point must be with the Caller, not the call. We are being called to someone - to a relationship with God and His Son Jesus Christ. It is a call that involves who we are becoming, as we make choices about what we do.

God's call is all inclusive and covers every aspect of life – all of what we do. The whole of life is a response to God's call with no room for a two-tier view of life with a higher sacred calling and a lower more mundane calling.

As Luther put it, the works of monks and priests, however holy, do not differ in the sight of God from the works of a laborer in the field or that of a manservant or maidservant in the home.

Calling is all about serving others, not about self-gratification. It is about excelling in what we do and so bringing honor to the One Who has called us. It involves both faith and hard work – and our choice to do both – with the results dependent not only upon our own doing but also with God’s help.

Calling is about a journey. During our time here on earth, we never arrive. We are always, so to speak, on the road. There are way points of learning that involve accomplishment and failure, joy and sadness. Our final destination will come only when we are at home with our Lord.

Each of us are at various stages of this journey and there may be more who are so traveling on this road than we realize. Let us not forget that there is room in God’s call for such different travelers as the wise men from the east, Zaccheus in the sycamore tree, and the woman at the well.

There is a priority and focus to our calling, with a race to be won. We have been chosen. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price and our priority is to seek First the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness.

As we understand more of God's calling, we realize that our quest for life is not so much about what we want but instead what God wants. He wants to be our friend. He wants us to follow in the steps of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to be ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors of His love with a message of hope and salvation.

For me, this calling and journey of life has focused on a growing relationship with God and those He has brought across my path – especially my wife of 48 years Judy, our four children and their spouses, and our 15 grandchildren.

Yes, there have been times of doubt and despair, especially during those difficult teenage years and the sudden death of my father when I was 18. There followed the challenges of college and law school and seeking to establish a home, support a family, and develop my profession. During this time, there were also feelings of inadequacy and concern about whether I would measure up.

This resulted in a drive for what I thought was success, which allowed my law profession to become a jealous mistress in my life, only to be stopped by God's intervention with a serious health condition. This was followed by a dramatic change in my life, which involved leaving the practice of law and going to serve as an administrator and faculty member at Wheaton College. It was during this phase of my life that God began to teach me lessons of balance and spiritual maturity.

In 1977, my path took another turn, when I left Wheaton and joined the leadership team at what was then a small public company called ServiceMaster and that had as its corporate objectives

- **To Honor God in All We Do**
- **To Help People Develop**
- **To Pursue Excellence**
- **To Grow Profitably**

I was soon asked to serve as President and CEO and there were many changes and choices to make as we grew the business over the next 25 years. For most of this time, we were doubling in size every 3.5 to 4 years. As I retired from the Firm in 2001, we were employing or managing over 250,000 people and our services stretched from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan.

So you see, my life has not been a simple, logical or predictable sequence of events. God has chosen many different people and circumstances to break, mold and develop me. The most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing. There are not always answers to every question, but during this journey, I have learned about what it means to have a growing relationship with Him, to know His forgiveness for my mistakes, to understand how to spend my life for Him in the lives of others, to realize God's ownership of who I am and what I have, and my responsibility to be a steward of all that He has given me.

I have found that the world of business need not be just a place where you make money and create wealth, but it can also be a place where you can engage those ordinary people with the reality of your faith. It was Henry Ford who was quoted as saying about his employees – “why is it I always get the whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands.”

The people coming to work every day are more than a pair of hands and cannot be understood or measured only in terms of their economic or physical needs. Nor can they be measured solely by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. There also is a spiritual dimension to the human condition. It is this spiritual dimension that influences moral behavior and the development of character and is the genesis of love, not hate; good, not evil. It is this spiritual dimension of people that raises the question of God and His role in both the act of creation and the act of redemption.

As a business leader, I wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I didn't want to play by these rules, I didn't belong in the ballgame. But I also tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community, where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of their faith with the demands of their work were issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning understanding and acceptance. I considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

For me, my work has been a ministry and the business firm has become a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that has reached from the janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but who God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

As I close, listen to another letter from a college graduate, this was one of our Chinese employees who had graduated from a University in Beijing and had assisted me in the development of our business in China:

Dear Bill,

When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and Mao's book became our bible. When I was five or six years old, I could recite Mao's quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood.

Mao said, "Serve the people. Leaders should be public servants." This coincides with some of ServiceMaster's moral standards. When I think deeply, I see the difference that makes one work so successfully and the other collapse fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God and that every individual has been created in His image with dignity and worth.

ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots, which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is beginning to grow in mine.

Shu Zhang is one of those ordinary people that we had the opportunity to meet and engage in a work-a-day world. In the workplace, she was confronted with life choices that go beyond doing a job or earning a living; choices about who she is becoming and whether she would respond to God's offer of love and forgiveness – a choice that only she can make.

As Joshua came to the closing days of his leadership, he challenged the people of Israel to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – our work, whatever or wherever it might be, can become a center of worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the

purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior. This is the will of God and our journey of life should be a response to this call.

God has called each of us to be in the world but not part of it. He has called us to be excellent in what we do, whether we call it a job, profession or ministry, and when we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a lawyer, businessperson, minister or educator, we can live and share our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained. In so doing, we are able to respond to the Caller, not just the call, and His will for the whole of our life. May God richly bless you this school year and may you draw closer to Him.

* * *

August 28, 2007