



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

**Program #5212**

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### WELCOME

**Lillian Daniel:** Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lillian Daniel.

**Lydia Talbot:** And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is Ann Svennungsen, President of Texas Lutheran University. She’ll be talking to us about what it means to follow our vocations.

**Lillian Daniel:** We also welcome back Dr. Martin Marty, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He’ll be reflecting on “kindness” in our series on the “Fruits of the Spirit.”

**Lydia Talbot:** But let’s begin with the story of a popular police chief in Lexington, Illinois, who at the age of 49, was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s. Spencer Johansen keeps a spiritual journal to record his thoughts as he struggles to make sense of his illness in the light of his faith. Let’s watch.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**Spencer Johansen:** You know, when you grow up here, all your life you know all these streets and the houses and stuff. I’ve missed a couple of court dates. Nothing major, just minor traffic cases, but I’ve missed them and that wasn’t like me. And then I just started having a problem with my concentration.

[Well, Spencer, how’s it been going? Good.]

Every doctor that I initially saw told me not to worry about it. They thought it was stress.

[What day of the week is it? Monday.]

[All right, now I’m going to read you a list of words and when I’m finished I want you to tell me all the words you can remember. Hammer, screwdriver, darts, notebook, ice cream, nail, volleyball. Okay. Volleyball, nail, hammer.]

“July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007. I’ve been really out of it lately. I don’t seem to care about much. Little things getting on my nerves. I’d like to spend more time by myself. Not good.”

I had every minister of every church in Lexington approach me and offer assistance. And I turned it all away. I wanted to be angry with somebody, you know, and it’s not as if I smoked

four packs of cigarettes a day to get this. It was nothing that I did and I think I took my anger out on God.

“I’m feeling sorry for myself. I think it’s getting bad again. Wish I could end it in a way not to be a coward.” There was times when I thought about suicide and it got to the point where I just wanted to...I didn’t want to put my wife and kids through this. It was then that I realized that this could go on. I needed to do something. Every day I parked up in front of the Lutheran church in town. This is where I sit every morning and make sure the kids get in the school safe and this is where I saw the sign, “When all else fails, trust God.” It finally dawned on me that message was maybe meant for me. I got to thinking about everybody that’s tried to help me, that’s approached me about my faith. Suddenly those faces kind of started appearing to me that morning. It’s just like one would come from this direction and one would come from that direction.

“Whatever happened to me at 2:30 in the morning on Januray 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008, changed my life. I believe in my heart that God touched me and has given me the strength to face all my fears.” I just pray for the strength to go through the rest of the day and that’s been my attitude lately that I need to get through one day at a time.

“January 16, 2008: One of my fears was how I’m going to die. I had a dream or a vision. The next night I was lying in bed and I just took a deep breath and I was at peace. No pain, just peace. I hope this was God’s way of showing me again not to worry.”

I’ve come to the conclusion now that I have to trust God and if I don’t trust him now, you know, when I’m on my deathbed it’s going to be too late to ask for his trust then.

#### SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

**Lillian Daniel:** Our thanks to Spencer Johansen for sharing his story with us. And our prayers are with him as he continues his journey. Now, let me tell you about our speaker.

Ann Svennungsen is a native of Montana and spent twenty-two years as a Lutheran minister in Iowa and Minnesota. For seven years she was senior pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minnesota, the largest church in her denomination to be led by a woman. Ann is former president of the Fund for Theological Education, and in 2007 was named President of Texas Lutheran University near San Antonio. We’re very happy to welcome Ann Svennungsen back to “30 Good Minutes.” Welcome, Ann.

#### MESSAGE

Ann Svennungsen: Thank you, Lillian. It’s great to be here.

After worship one Sunday morning, a young woman shook my hand and said, “Well, I quit my job last week.”

Surprised, I asked, “Why?”

She said, “I’ve been listening to your sermons.”

Now I wasn't just surprised, I was scared. Could preaching God's word make that kind of difference, leading a bright, gifted, successful woman to leave a six-figure income and her prestigious position at a major advertising agency?

"Actually," she said, "I was being asked to develop a campaign to get 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade kids hooked on caffeinated sodas. I just didn't think that's what God wanted me to do with my life."

What does God really want us to do with our lives? How are we called to live? What is our vocation? The Bible is quick to speak of the concept of work. Genesis begins with God at work, creating the whole world. Then, humans are brought forth as participants in God's labors, placed in the garden to till it and keep it. You see, work is a gift, given before the fall; part of that whole creation which God calls good. You see, without work, without participating in some form of tilling and keeping, we aren't fully human.

It reminds me of a conversation I had with an estate lawyer. One of his clients, a man who truly saw work as a gift, asked this lawyer to prepare his will, distributing his vast resources to the church, to charities and to his children. But a core value for this man was his desire to leave his kids only enough so that they would still need to work. He saw work as a gift, a privilege. So, he left them some money for a trust fund for their grandkid's college tuition, some money for a down payment on a house, but not enough to live on without working themselves.

Work is good, it is part of being human. And the purpose of work is to use our gifts to serve others. Still, today I want to speak about something bigger than just our jobs. I want to talk about vocation. And clearly the church's understanding of vocation isn't just a job, an occupation. One's calling or vocation includes one's occupation, but it also includes our other things, other roles and responsibilities, which means it's perfectly possible for children or the unemployed or retired persons to have a calling. God calls us wherever we are, including our occupations, but not only there.

And for many people their deepest sense of vocation may not be what they do for a living. They may work at a parking garage but sense God's deepest calling in their work tutoring kids at an inner city school. They may spend days at their days at a factory but sense a deeper calling in providing a faithful home for their children.

Discerning one's vocation includes one's work but also other areas of our lives. In my case, I have a calling as a college president, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a church member, a friend, a citizen, to name just a few. And it seems each day brings questions of discernment, questions of focus. Do I go to my daughter's volleyball match or attend the alumni board meeting for my school? Do I take a Sabbath day, or prepare more for tomorrow's staff retreat?

All our vocational discernment is part of our Christian discipleship, for our vocational decisions are a reflection of our primary vocation, our primary calling as Jesus' disciples. How we spend our time at work, in our homes, in the political arena, all these vocational choices are deeply integral to faithful discipleship.

Perhaps Frederick Buechner's poetic description of vocation says it best: "The place God calls

you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet....The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that (a) you need most to do and that (b) the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've probably met requirement (a) but if your work is writing deodorant commercials, ...chances are you've missed requirement (b).” That’s what Buechner says. And though it’s hard to beat his eloquence, I’m also rather fond of another definition for vocation written by some of my colleagues at another Lutheran school. They write: “Vocation is a sense of responsibility encompassing multiple areas of one’s life (work, family, citizenship, etc.) so that the person lives in such a way as to benefit the community.”

It’s a sense of responsibility, living with a sense of responsibility that encompasses all areas of life and benefits the community. Oh, it’s not as poetic as Buechner, but it has a bit more room in it. Further, it’s pretty Biblical, for if our core calling is to love God and our neighbor, then we’re called to use the multiple areas of our lives for the glory of God and for the common good. We have a responsibility to live in ways which benefit the entire community. In my own tradition, Martin Luther always seemed to be pushing Christians back into the community. “If your town needs a mayor,” he said, “become a mayor. If it needs a school, help build a school.” What action will benefit the community? How can I help my neighbor? Vocation, yes, is a sense of responsibility in all areas of our lives so that we live to benefit others.

So how does a person discern these things? Unfortunately there isn’t a blue print, a road map, some sort of Robert’s Rules of Order for vocational discernment. Yet I would suggest that, fundamentally, discernment about vocation comes in the context of relationships—deep, lifelong relationships. First and foremost our relationship with God formed by weekly worship, prayer and meditation, and immersion in God’s word; our relationship with the Christian community with all its mentors and models and prayer partners; and our relationship with the world, especially the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed.

Yes, I love the word vocation from the Latin, “to call.” It is a rich way to speak of the life of discipleship lived in every area of one’s life. But there’s something even more wonderful about this word, vocation. It never stands alone. There’s an implied subject: the word vocation, or calling, implies that there is “Someone” who calls us. Someone, with a capital “S.” To speak of vocation is always to speak of God, the Caller, the One who stands behind it all. Anyone can have a job; believers have vocations. And to speak of Go the Caller is to speak first of grace and love and mercy.

We make all our vocational decisions in that context, held in the arms of a gracious God. Oh, dear friends, this struggle to live faithfully in all of our vocations, this is not something we will always do well or get right. Still, we are called by God, a God full of grace and truth, a God who holds us in love no matter what.

I close today with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the most courageous witnesses to vocation in our time. In excerpts from a poem he wrote from prison, I quote his words:

Who am I? They often tell me,  
I step out from my cell,

Composed, contented and sure,  
Like a lord from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me,  
I speak with my jailers,  
Frankly, familiar and firm,  
As though I was in command.

Who am I? They also tell me,  
I bear the days of hardship,  
Unconcerned, amused and proud,  
Like one who usually wins.

Am I really what others tell me?  
Or am I only what I myself know of me?  
Troubled, homesick, ill, like a bird in a cage,  
Gasping for breath

Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I then, this today and the other tomorrow?

Who am I? Lonely questions mock me.  
Who I really am, you know me, I am thine, O God!

It is good to speak of vocation. Even more, it is good to speak of the God who calls and to begin and end each day secure in our first and fundamental calling, a beloved child of God. Who are you? God knows. You are called beloved, a child of the living God.

### CONVERSATION

**Lydia Talbot:** If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Ann Svennungsen, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Ann Svennungsen.

Ann, you end your message with the piercing words of the German Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who went to his death resisting the evils of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany. That poem, "Who Am I?" goes to the core of what it really means to understand the cost of discipleship. I guess I wonder, how has that understanding of discipleship inspired the choices that you've made along the way in your own vocation?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Right. Oh, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, what a great witness to all of us! Probably none of us will experience what he experienced as a result of living out our calling and yet, I think many of us have those experiences where we sit on the porch swing late at night wondering, why did I get myself into this and can I really do this? Can I really follow this call? Whether it's as a parent of a two-year-old or a pastor of a large church, we have those moments.

And it is that deep sense of God's calling us beloved children, I think, that holds us and provides the grace and strength we need to carry on.

**Lillian Daniel:** Ann, I wanted to go back to the story of the woman in your congregation who heard your sermon and quit her job. I was thinking about how blessed I feel that I get to live out my vocation in my work and I think all three of us would agree that we have that privilege. What's the message for the person who has a terrible job that they can't quit; they have to do it to pay the bills?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Right. And I think I tried to speak to a little bit to that about your deepest sense of vocation might not be your job, but it's like: I am doing this so I can pay the bills so that I can take care of my family or my pet. I think that it's really important because not everyone has the privilege of saying I'm going to choose a job that's always fulfilling. We need to see vocation in the most broad terms, about God really putting us on Earth for good reasons and us having a particular way to serve.

**Lydia Talbot:** And, of course, now there are multitudes now in this wounded economy who can't even get a job.

**Ann Svennungsen:** Absolutely.

**Lydia Talbot:** So that kind of despair...I guess the message from the Christian perspective is hope. Hold on to hope.

**Ann Svennungsen:** Right. And also the fruits of the spirit that you will hear from Martin Marty that we are called to be kind and we are called to be loving. And even in those difficult moments or even in a job where we don't like it very much, we can be kind and good and righteous.

**Lillian Daniels:** And we can be bigger than our jobs. That our vocation is much bigger.

**Ann Svennungsen:** That's a lovely phrase! Oh, what a good phrase.

**Lillian Daniels:** I want to talk to you a little bit about your work with college students. It seems to me that for so many young people, even by the time they're applying to college they're already applying to a specific major, they know exactly what they want to do. It seems as though we've cut short the time of exploration for young people to consider their vocation. How do you wrestle with that in your role?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Well, I think that comment about relationships, that that's where we best discern our vocation, is really important. Of course, I'm biased towards a school the size of Texas Lutheran, where faculty can get to know their students so that they can sometimes see in their students things that the students have not yet seen in themselves and sort of draw them into a bigger imagination about what they might do.

**Lydia Talbot:** A bigger imagination. Now, could you have ever imagined one year ago, Ann—and certainly when you were on this show last, you were Senior Pastor of the largest Lutheran

Church in your denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—that you would be called to be president of Texas Lutheran University?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Not at all. I think Lillian and I both, as ministers in the church, can talk about places where, “Oh my, how did this happen?” Because it wasn’t even part of our imaginations. I’m much older than you, but for me women couldn’t be ordained until I was fifteen years old, in my tradition. So you just don’t even imagine it then.

**Lillian Daniel:** So what allowed you to imagine something that as a young person was impossible?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Yeah. That’s good! It probably didn’t happen until I went to college and even then there was resistance. My parents were like, Oh gosh, our little girl is going to be a minister and how is that going to work for her? And yet they’ve had to kind of evolve, their imaginations had to broaden as well.

**Lydia Talbot:** It’s a delicate balance, Ann, of tilling and keeping, as you refer to in your message. Here you are a college president, a pastor, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a citizen. All of these things. How do you manage to do it all?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Praise God, I’m healthy and strong at age 54. And in some ways with my children all grown now, there is actually...

**Lydia Talbot:** Your daughter the lawyer.

**Ann Svennungsen:** My daughter the lawyer, my other daughter the student, and my son who’s at the Down Home Ranch. There are lots of hours in the day and I work lots of those hours!

**Lydia Talbot:** The Down Home Ranch. Now, of course, the unpredictability of human life. You have a beautiful son who has Down Syndrome. Talk about that.

**Ann Svennungsen:** Right. Yes, he’s 24 and he’s a rancher along with twenty-three other young adults with Down Syndrome, who live outside of Austin, Texas in one the most wonderful places on Earth, I think. It’s a place where these young people have a quality of life that we weren’t sure we could anticipate for John. They live together. They have a city council of the twenty-four of them. They plan their weeks and John works in the barn and it’s just a great blessing. And it’s only ninety miles from us so we see him often.

**Lydia Talbot:** What a gift.

**Ann Svennungsen:** So he is living his vocation in ways that we just are amazed!

**Lydia Talbot:** How has your vocational journey, Ann, been shaped by the fact that you are a cancer survivor?

**Ann Svennungsen:** I think that probably was as much formative for me as a pastoral care giver as anything I experienced because I was on the other side. I was receiving pastoral care. I was able to discern when people were truly with me, right there in the suffering or were kind of wanting to move along. So it was very powerful.

**Lillian Daniel:** Was there a way in which having such a serious illness makes you have a deeper sense of vocation because you realize time is limited? If I'm going to follow my calling, I've got to do it now?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Oh, absolutely! Right. Yeah, I think that's really true.

**Lydia Talbot:** Life is not a dress rehearsal.

**Ann Svennungsen:** Right. You have this one opportunity.

**Lillian Daniel:** So often we say, oh, I'll do that later, I'll do that down the road. And I imagine for you it became suddenly more pressing to move now.

**Ann Svennungsen:** Yeah. Yeah. That's so very true.

**Lydia Talbot:** Say more about your children. Your daughter, Sarah, of course, we know is a lawyer and your other daughter?

**Ann Svennungsen:** Is a junior at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Lydia Talbot:** We have 30 seconds. What was your guiding message to them as they chose their vocations?

**Ann Svennungsen:** And they are still choosing! Really to find your gifts and your strengths, imagine as broadly as you can, know we are always there for you, we're in your corner cheering you on, and serve. Serve God's people, and especially the poor and the neglected. So those were strong words.

**Lydia Talbot:** We're cheering you on, Ann!

**Ann Svennungsen:** Oh, thank you.

**Lydia Talbot:** Thank you so much.

#### REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

**Lydia Talbot:** We turn now to our friend, Dr. Martin Marty, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He has a reflection for us about kindness in our ongoing series on the "Fruits of the Spirit."

## REFLECTION

**Martin Marty:** At a party we were all asked to take turns choosing one word to describe someone else in the circle, but were not to compare notes. When we revealed our choice of adjective for one of us, almost all said “kind.” Not nice, not sweet, not butter-ball-like, but kind. This was remarkable, because in his profession he had to make decisions, was sometimes in controversy, and was so busy that he barely had time to attend the party or to notice the needs of others. Yet, he did notice the needs of others, he could participate in their lives without being a busybody. He could even admonish someone who was out of line, not in authoritarian pride but with neighborly sympathy, and the neighbor could enjoy his concern. He had a hospitable spirit, which is a fruit of the Spirit that we call kindness.

## CLOSING

**Lydia Talbot:** Thank you, Marty, and our thanks again to Ann Svenningsen, Spencer Johansen, and you for being with us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lydia Talbot.

**Lillian Daniel:** And I’m Lillian Daniel. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org) for more information about today’s program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.