

“WORK? I’M SURVIVING”

Date: Sept. 2, 2007

Text: Ecclesiastes 2: 18-26; I Corinthians 12: 4-11

A few years ago at another church I was greeting at the door after worship. A man came out who had lost his job several months earlier and recently had started a new one. I asked him how things were going. His reply simply was “I’m surviving.” Something has happened in the work place in the last 15 or 20 years. I read this week that the average person will have 7 jobs during his or her lifetime. People don’t plan to stay with one company forever as did my father who worked for the Prudential Life Insurance Company for 49 years. College graduates no longer easily get jobs in their chosen profession or may have to move out of state. Early retirement is longed for in many cases but for quite a few people retirement only means looking for another part-time or full time job.

These work place modifications, in many places driven often by the demand for immediate bottom-line profit, pose a great challenge for Christianity. At the heart of our faith has been the assumption that God has given everyone gifts to be used for the benefit of humankind. The creation story in Genesis stresses this human calling. In our New Testament lesson, we read that certain people have a talent for teaching, others for organizing and others leading and so on.

Much of the time the Biblical concept of “gifts” is interpreted as applying primarily to the church. A person is to use their talents as an officer or a teacher or a choir member. Certainly as our program for fall gears up I would not want to deny that important part of ministry. Your particular gifts are needed if we are to be the Church of Jesus Christ.

There is more, however, to the use of gifts” than just application in the church. I always like to preach on Labor Day weekend because the connection between faith and work is so crucial and yet so often neglected in conversations heard around the typical church or from the pulpit. A long time ago I read about a man named Dan Ayers who was in the magazine distribution business. He refused to handle trash magazines that stressed nudity or excessive violence. It cost him \$20,000 a year in business, no small amount in those days. When asked why he did it, Dan made a rather unusual reply: “I didn’t want to pay the price in terms of my values.” Competitors would ask him, “What are you some kind of religious nut?” “I tell them maybe I am but I’m happy about it and can sleep well at night.” Dan Ayers understood the connection we are trying to make this morning: how you act at work needs to be connected with your faith commitment.

Thus our continuing challenge is to apply the gospel where we work. I want to define “Work” as whatever we do with the time we are awake each day. Hence the workplace can be a classroom, one’s home, an office or factory. Regardless of location, each of us is called to serve Christ the best we can each day. We make that statement week after week but I am not sure that it always is applied to what is commonly called “the job.”

Earlier in my ministry when we would travel to New Jersey to visit family I used to think of the person who took my quarter as we got off the Garden State Parkway as offering the greatest challenge to the Biblical call to use your talents. How does someone in a booth collecting quarters all day practice his or her faith? Through the years, I have listened to many experiences of what goes on in the work place, some real horror stories, and I realize that a great challenge does confront every Christian. How does one go to work on Monday with positive feelings when you aren’t sure whether you will be working or told your services aren’t needed any more? How do parents practice their faith at the end of a long day when a child is giving them a really hard time?

It's a challenge to be a Christian 7 days a week and that is why worship is so important as a time for re-grouping and re-charging. It needs to be said, furthermore, that in responding to the call to follow Christ every day there comes great satisfaction. It is as we strive to be faithful that we become disciples regardless of how successful we are at any given moment. It's when we seek to connect our faith with those very difficult ethical situations at work that faith becomes alive and vibrant and growing.

Still, I know it can be difficult and I have been thinking all week about what our faith offers to those of you who do work under very stressful conditions. Very humbly, I would ask you to think about the following.

First, do take seriously the fact that each human being has been given special talents. How can you best use these gifts? If I might speak personally, our son Lon, who improvised on the piano during our Christmas Eve service last year, obviously has gifts in music. It would be a shame if he were stuck in a nine-to-five non-music job so even though the reality is that most musicians barely live above the poverty line, we encourage him to explore his chances as far as possible. It may not work out but he is trying to utilize his God-given talents. I know that some of you have sons and daughters who have faced similar situations as they try to utilize their talents and it certainly isn't an easy path.

Secondly, remember that Presbyterians traditionally have been motivated by the Puritan ethic and a desire to do one's best in whatever one is about. It may be more difficult when the company doesn't seem to care or when kids are more trying and yet the principle remains valid. We need to try our best.

More significantly, keep in mind Jesus' own experience. He seemed to be a master at reaching out to people who were on the periphery of whatever was going on. Someone touched his robe, a person up in a tree....Jesus had the sensitivity to pick up on the needs of people. Even if our labor doesn't always seem beneficial can we turn the work place into an opportunity for ministry? I certainly am not talking about preaching at people but rather following Jesus' example. Many of you already are trying to listen closely to what those around you are saying, to be aware of comments about home life, about cries for help. Some of you in management positions have tried to deal sensitively with your team, being aware of their personal stresses and problems.

Finally, always remember that you are more than just a job, a grade in school, a paycheck; you are more than the success or failure of your children. You are a child of God! Otherwise, you can end like the writer of Ecclesiastes. He sounds like a bitter middle-aged man who has much materially but nothing that really satisfies him. He cries out, "you work and worry your way through life and what do you have to show for it?"

Hopefully as Christians, we bring to each day a different perspective. We are able to declare: "God made me and gave me talents and thus I will always be a somebody."

As we think of "our labors" remember this old story. Three stonecutters were working on a church building. A stranger came along and asked each one what he was doing. The first replied, "I'm doing what the boss told me to do"; the second said, "I'm making a living"; the third responded happily, "I'm building something to the glory of God". May each day be an opportunity to build for the glory of God.