

## **“Your Work Matters”**

Date: Sept. 4, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Work, Vocation

Occasion: Labor Day

Texts: 1 Corinthians 7:17; 1 Corinthians 10:31

Tomorrow is Labor Day, and I'd like to think out loud with you for a few moments about a theology of work. Before we do, how about a joke? You see, there was this young man who had just graduated from college with an engineering degree.

He figured he was fixed for life, as he applied for a job with a large corporation. The personnel director asked him, “What sort of position did you have in mind?” The college graduate replied, “A sitting position.” Hmmmm. I wonder if he got that job?

It's Labor Day weekend, a time for us to rest from our labors. It is also an opportunity to reflect on our daily work from a Christian perspective.

I believe God intends for our work to be more than just a job, more than a daily grind. Instead it should be a vocation, which means quite literally *a calling*.

Back in 2007 Robert Bellah published a book entitled *Habits of the Heart*. Many have called it a landmark book because it helped to shed light on a problem that has been eroding and unraveling our society. He called it “expressive individualism.”

What he means is that people are more and more living entirely for themselves, seeking what will bring them happiness and fulfillment. He says the sacredness of the individual is no longer balanced by any sense of the whole or concern for the common good

Near the end of his book he offers a possible solution for helping our society come back together again. “To make a real difference there would have to be a reappropriation of the idea of vocation or calling, a return to the idea of work as a contribution to the good of all and not merely as a means to one’s own advancement.”

If Bellah is right, the best hope our society has is the recovery of the idea that all human work is not merely a job but a calling. The Latin word *vocare* – to call – is at the root of our word “vocation.” But too often the word *vocation* simply means a job.

A job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it, and you do it for them rather than for yourself. Our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service beyond our own interests.

In other words, as long as we work so that *I* can be fulfilled, so that *I* can realize my true potential as an individual, we are undermining society itself. Instead we should be working for a cause greater than “this makes me feel good,” or “this job will give me a lot of money so I can do and have the things I want.”

We’ve been living selfishly for more than a generation or two. As Christians, we can be at the forefront of this revolutionary new way of thinking. We are not to choose our jobs and conduct our work simply to fulfill ourselves. Why? – because being called by God is empowering enough. “God has a plan for my life and I will do it.”

We now see our work as a way of service to God and our neighbor. The question regarding our choice of work is no longer “What will make me the most money and give me the most status?” The question, for Christians, must now be “How, with my existing

abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of God's will and of human need?"

The great German theologian and reformer, Martin Luther, took seriously our first Scripture passage today. "Let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him and in which God has called him"

In Luther's time, the Church understood itself as God's kingdom on earth. Therefore only work done in and for the church could qualify as God's work. Only the monks, priests, nuns and bishops had a calling. All other work was seen as secular, or worldly.

Luther turned that view upside down when he lifted up 1 Peter 2:9 which says, "You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm." Luther argued God calls everyone equally to their work. All persons can serve God in whatever job they perform.

When we pray to God in the Lord's Prayer, "give us this day our daily bread," Luther argued, God is at work in all who help to bring that bread to our table: the farmer, the harvester, the miller, the baker, and the retailer. God could easily give us grain and fruit without our working for it, but God doesn't want to do it that way.

God is at work in every profession. As Luther preached, "God milks the cows through the vocation of the milk maids." What that means is that all work is now a way to love the Lord. We are doing God's work, however modest we may think of our work, as a way to show our love for God and for our neighbor.

And one of the main ways we can love others in our work is the through "the ministry of competence." By that I mean doing our best. If God's purpose for your job is to serve the community as a car

mechanic, then the way you serve God best is to do the job as well as it can be done. Be a good mechanic. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “Whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.”

Have you noticed, lately, that customer service isn’t as good as it once was? Have you noticed the way some things are made shoddily, showing a lack of pride in the workmanship of the one who made it. That happens when work is just a job.

When we see our job as a vocation, we will do the very best we can at whatever we apply ourselves to do. Romans 12:1, “Present your whole self as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” That includes our work.

An older plumber was admonishing his young helper, who was always taking coffee breaks. “When I was an apprentice,” he said, “we used to lay the first two lengths of pipe, then the boss would turn on the water and we’d have to stay ahead of it.” An honest day’s work

Competency is a basic value. It is not a means to some other end, such as wealth or status, although such results might occur. Competent work is a form of love. You show that you care.

What that means is that *all* jobs, not merely one of the so-called “helping” professions – are fundamentally ways of loving your neighbor. Christians do not have to do direct ministry or nonprofit charitable work in order to love others through their jobs.

A helpful prayer to begin the day might be, “Lord, I dedicate all that I do today to your glory and honor. Use my work to honor you.” Your daily work, even if you’re retired, is ultimately an act of worship to the God who called and equipped you to do it, no matter what kind

of work it is. I pray that you have a restful Labor Day. May each of us know our vocation, our calling, and do it competently. Amen.