

Take this Job and Love It!
Preached by
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FOR REFLECTION:

"How many members of our churches need to discover their priesthood as cooks, as engineers, as computer programmers ...?"
Leonard Sweet

HEBREW SCRIPTURE: Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy;

EPISTLE READING: I Corinthians 12:5-12

...and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

Meditation

Take This Job and Love It!

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Labor Day is a unique holiday among our nation's or even the world's holidays. It honors no person, no battle, no national or international event. Rather it attends to something that forms the infrastructure of our lives—the ways we make a living, the things we do with our hands, the creativity of our minds, the sweat of our brows. Labor Day celebrates the labor on which we spend our lives and those who perform those labors well. Given that all the days of our lives are given to us by God, then it seems appropriate on Labor Day to faithfully reflect on the work that fills them.

When I first contemplated this Sunday's service, it seemed a straightforward affair. But, the longer I thought about it, the more complex it got. I wonder if I were to take a survey today who would respond: We have a job; are unemployed; parents; students studying for a particular occupation; have a career; retired; community volunteers; caregivers; have a hobby or a ministry

we are passionate about? How many of us are enjoying what we do? How many feel trapped by necessity or golden handcuffs? How many wish we could be doing something else if “practical matters” weren’t in the forefront? For how many unemployed, or between employment, or now retired, or with an empty nest, is there a lack of structure, a lack of dignity, a lack of meaning that causes a spiritual ache? If we find ourselves in any of those aching circumstances, (and most of us do at one time or another), burdened by a stressful job or no job, work that brings no joy or in which we can discern no value; if we find ourselves defined or undefined by our work—then perhaps it’s time to listen for the discerning Spirit of God.

Before we do that, I’d like to explore the idea of “vocation” for a few minutes. While a vocation is often assumed to refer to a religious occupation or to simply be another word for “job”—it, in fact, has a much richer meaning, even if the word itself is fairly simple. “Vocation” comes from the Latin *vocare* which means “to call out.”

I was once startled by a question, “Are you a pastor because you love God?” I was startled because it had never occurred to me that loving God might be a distinguishing characteristic of those in religious service. I share this room each Sunday and stand in one, among many religious traditions, with millions of people around the world, who love God—although relatively few of them who are “professionally religious.”

Although the concept of vocation had been addressed earlier in history, the expansion of the idea really got a workout during the Reformation. Curiously, the first discussion was a pastoral response to women. Among the institutions closed by the Reformers were convents. Until that time and for long after, the Church offered the large majority of women the only access they would have to an education, to a degree of self-rule and independence and to an ordering of their communal life, unavailable to them elsewhere. Leaders of the Reformation were sensitive to this and began speaking of the vocation of motherhood and wifery, of being responsible for the religious education of a family, and maintaining a moral home. Yes, in many ways it was stereotypical and it would come back in about 300 years to bite all of us, but especially women. In its time, for its valuing of the lives of women, it was a quite remarkable theology.

That theology of vocation continued to expand to encompass all kinds of work well and thoughtfully done, whether it was carpentry, parenting, governing, writing, cleaning, caring for the elderly, or painting. While any theology poorly used can discriminate or be used to keep people “in their place,” whatever that might mean, a true theology of vocation finds value in every place, work or service. Further, a theology of vocation calls us to be good stewards of all the gifts we have been given as individuals—gifts given to be used for our enjoyment – AND – to serve God’s purposes in the world.

To take our jobs and love them—whether they be paid or volunteer, the mutual obligation of family and community or the solitary act of artistic creation—to enjoy fully, our vocations requires exercise of discernment for each of us and with help from the community of friends, family and church.

First, we assess what our gifts are—gifts that may change, grow, fade or flourish anew over the years. We listen to our own hearts. God speaks to us in our hearts, inviting us to pay attention to what gives us energy, what calls us to passionate response, what gives us quiet joy.

Then we tune into the community around us. What gifts does it verify? What gifts does it need from us? In what ways has God equipped us to be a part of something bigger than ourselves? When we listen, we will not find the same answers, even among those who share the same

occupations or the same stage in life. For each of us experiences the joys, the burdens, the goals, the symbols of what we do with our days are different. One teacher opens minds; one does justice; one serves the poor. One medical professional heals bodies; another nourishes people; another souls; others tend to families, guide rehab, or teach people to live within their limits. One parent may foster independence, another gifts, another social skills and relationships. Created differently in God's image, each of these gifts and callings will have different expression in each of us.

One way to listen and begin or deepen our experience of the spiritual element of our work, that it might have a larger role in our lives, is to consider scripture and find a text that resonates for us. It might be a text that mentions what we do—there are plenty of teachers, healers, lawyers, judges, parents, children, hunters, gatherers, scribes, authors and musicians in Scripture. Even here in the land of the NYS Fair, relatively few of us are shepherds or dressers of sycamore trees; but there are certainly parallels with other occupations. Some may say, "It would be a stretch to find what I do in the Bible" or "There is no text about my occupation that really speaks to the way I feel about what I do." Then is the time to listen for a story that has long been one that intrigued you or is a favorite or you find yourself drawn to. It is my guess IT folk would be hard-pressed to find a direct parallel. Yet in talking to a number of folk whose work is technology-focused, they tell me they experience a resonance, (Bill Gates, notwithstanding:-) with the Genesis story of calling order from chaos.

This is a time for each person to honestly consider gifts and how to employ them—especially those that can be used in the service of God through the community of faith that is UCF. Reflecting on personal gifts and offerings is different than thinking "I'd like to be on this committee or that committee"; different than saying "I know what UCF needs," as though one person might have all the communal wisdom that is here; different than saying, "I should be in charge of this," or "decide that." This is a time when listening to God and one another is far more important and critical to the shape of UCF's future than talking about a vision crafted in isolation.

Reflecting on one's own gifts and the needs of the community is, as they say, "not about you" or me for that matter. It is listening to God and the vocational calling of the church for what it needs—whether that voice comes through the Nominating Committee, or requests for assistance from the pulpit or in announcements or email communications. It is all about God and service and the ways God has gifted each one of us for that service.

Nearly two millennia before John Donne wrote the words, "No man is an island," St. Paul knew and proclaimed it—that no one person is the church—only all of us together.

As we come to the Table to be fed with the most basic food of bread and cup, let us share a prayer. In the praying, may we discover God's Spirit blowing afresh in our lives, God's wisdom guiding our choices, God's will for our enjoyment fulfilled and God's purposes for the world carried out. Frederick Buechner famously wrote that a vocation is "the place where our deep joy and the world's deep need meet." May each one of us discover or rediscover that place for ourselves this year.