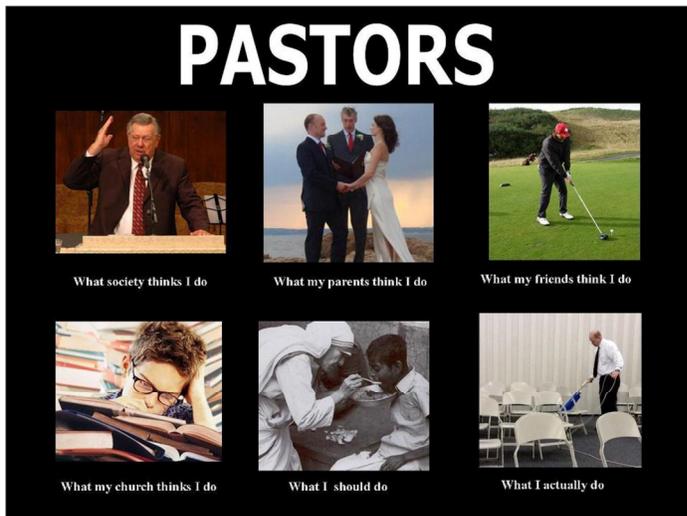


Everything Matters
September 4, 2016
Luke 14:25-33, Jeremiah 18:1-11
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

Almost twenty-six years ago I was ordained as a “minister of the Word and Sacrament” by the Presbyterian Church (USA). For more than a quarter of a century, I have been paid to be a Christian. My vocation has been an amazing gift and a wonder-filled journey. It is an odd calling, as the people who love me have tried to pin me down as to exactly what I do all day. Everyone has a thought, of course:



On Labor Day weekend, however, I'd like to take a moment to address two mythologies about my particular line of work.

Every now and then, I'll get a call from someone who says, "Oh, Reverend, I hate to bother you with something like this, because I know how busy you are, and, well, I really shouldn't even mention anything, but, well, if you can spare the time – even just a couple of minutes would be amazing – I wonder if you could possibly help me with..." Now, don't get me wrong, there are times when my life is hectic and frenzied, but if I'm too busy to pray with you, then maybe I'm not doing it right.

Of course, on the other end of the spectrum, I am compelled to hear cracks like “Wow, must be nice to get paid a full time salary when you only work an hour a week.”

It is, as I have said, an odd calling. And because of that, I get it – I know the temptation that you have to roll your eyes at me when I stand up here and presume to lecture you about work and employment. “How dare you pretend to know what I go through, Pastor? After all, you work in your nice little bubble of Christianity, where everything is sunshine and roses and unicorns and rainbows. I’m not sure you know how hard it is in the real world...”

“My supervisor looks down her nose at me all day, every day.”

“Do you know how exhausting it is to try to do your job when you’re assigned to work with two or three people who care more about getting their next ‘high’ than they do about getting any work done?”

“I’m afraid to go to the bathroom in my school. How can I pay attention to anything else?”

“There are four positions in my department. As of January 1, there will be three.”

“Now, Pastor Dave, what was that you wanted to say about my job?”

Having recognized the differences in all of our experiences, let me offer two observations, one of which is theological and the other historical.

Theologically, I might remind you that work is a privilege – it’s a part of God’s gift to humanity. In Genesis, it is very clear that we had a job before we knew anything of brokenness. Adam was called to take care of the Garden before there was any

mention of sin. We often treat work – especially hard work – as if it's some sort of punishment, but that's simply not true. Work is one of the ways that we live into the image of God. Just as God is a creator, a fashioner, a designer, so too we are called to use our strength and energy in ways that bring forth life and grace.



And historically, I should point out that Jesus had a job. He was what the locals called a *tekton*. Our traditional translations indicate that he was a carpenter, but the Greek word simply means “builder”. Since most of the homes in London were made out of wood when the Bible was being translated into English, you can understand how “builder” became “carpenter”. What I noticed when I visited the places where Jesus lived, however, like Capernaum and Jerusalem, is that so much of what exists in that part of the world is built with stone. As a *tekton* in that place and time, Jesus was surely no stranger to heavy lifting, or sweat, or the frustration you feel when your co-worker gives you measurements that are a quarter of an inch off.

Having said that, then, what do we hear this Labor Day weekend from Jesus, a member of and friend to the working class?

The passage you've heard is a difficult one by any measure, and it's been made more so by some unfortunate translations over the years. Let's look at what was happening.



¹ Jesus was big news. The crowds were coming out time and time again because, well, Jesus put on a good show. I mean, you never knew what you were going to get: there was water turned into wine; thousands and thousands were fed miraculously; the paralyzed, blind, mute and more were

¹ James Tissot, *The Resurrection of the Widow's Son at Nain*, between 1886-1894.

healed; and who could forget the way he took on those religious hypocrites so fearlessly. There is no other way to say it than that Jesus was, well, huge. His popularity was off the charts.

And one day he turns to the crowds that find him so enthralling and he says, “You know, this is serious! This lifestyle of faith – it’s not a diversion. This isn’t a fad or an amusement. It’s not a hobby – it’s the main thing. And because it’s so important, those who follow me are expected to lay everything on the line. The kinds of things that you see me doing are foundational and world-changing – they are reflective of the purposes and intentions of God now and forever. The healings, the miracles, the teaching... all of this points to the ways that God moves and acts and dwells in this world. So if you are ‘following’ me, it has to mean more than standing around and applauding what you see as my latest parlor trick; it has to mean that you are going to care about the things that I care about, do the things that I do, go to the places where I am sent, and act like the presence and call of God has made a difference in your life 24/7/365.” In other words, we dare not “follow” Jesus the way that we “follow” celebrities or athletes on Instagram or Twitter. If we are not willing to go “all in” with Jesus, we are hobbyists or voyeurs.



²The prophet Jeremiah, who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, made much the same point as he taught Israelites about the power and sovereignty of God. We often hear these words as a statement of God’s absolute freedom and unlimited power and indeed Jeremiah indicates that God spins the history of this planet as a potter turns clay on a wheel. However, there are several places in this passage that reveal the truth that some human response and responsibility is expected. The word “if” appears throughout this text, bringing a conditionality to our relationship with God that does not exist between the potter and

² *Jeremiah*, by Michelangelo (1512).

the clay. “If” you do this, “then” this will be the result. There is some sort of deep and intimate partnership between the Creator and that which is being crafted. Clearly God is in charge, but just as clearly we have a role to play. What we do, who we are – it all matters.

And because both Jesus and Jeremiah point to the fact that God wants all of us, all the time, there’s no time like Labor Day for the preacher to point out that this life of faith includes not just the religious stuff you do, but the entirety of who you are. Your occupation is a means by which you are called to serve the Lord.



I want to pause here and say that I’ve chosen the word “occupation” intentionally, and I want you to know that I’m thinking of everyone, not merely those who are employed. I want you to hear that word and think about the things with which you are “occupied”. The ways that we spend our time and our money and our energy and ourselves are reflections of the things that we believe to be ultimately true.

Whatever you set your hands to – whether that’s working down at the plant or watching the grandkids or sitting in an AP Biology class – it’s important to strive to do that well. It’s important because the ways that you are who you are while you do what you do will either point people closer to the things that are eternally true in Jesus Christ or distract them from the presence of God in the world.

Regular worshipers will remember, I hope, that we just finished an entire year studying the Sermon on the Mount. Think about the kinds of ways in which we are called to act: with kindness and mercy, in honesty and integrity, with humility and decency as those who are genuine and generous. None of these traits are occupationally specific – anyone can do that.

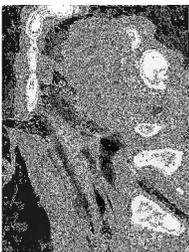
And you say, “Look, I get that, and I really want to be like that, but to be honest, I hate my occupation. My co-workers annoy me...I can’t wait to graduate...I feel so useless being retired...I resent the circumstances in my life that have forced me into this particular occupation.”

If any those things are true, then I would by all means encourage you to work towards changing your reality, but I would also remind you to refuse to compromise who you are and who you are called to represent as you live out your daily life.

Here’s the deal: if showing up here three or four times a month – or even if you get all “super Christian” on the people around you by serving as an elder or deacon or Sunday School teacher – if that’s the primary way that you show the world who you are and what you believe, then your witness is incomplete and it points to a life that has been adorned, not transformed. Deciding which day you will choose to act like you think a follower of Jesus should act is not unlike taking a bunch of Christian trinkets and decorating your life with them – they’re not really substantive, but they’re eye-catching and have a vaguely positive message.

But if you live out your faith every day at school or work or home and in your interactions with others (including the social media), then people will see a life that is fundamentally and integrally engaged with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Six months before he was assassinated in 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a group of students at the Barratt Jr. High School in Philadelphia. He challenged these young people, and the words he used to address the children ring true to us as well:



And when you discover what you will be in your life, set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it. Don't just set out to do

a good job. Set out to do such a good job that the living, the dead or the unborn couldn't do it any better.□□

If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well. If you can't be a pine at the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley. Be the best little shrub on the side of the hill.³

Your occupation – the ways in which you are who you are, where you are, doing what you do with whom you do it – is your number one way of serving God and reflecting God's presence in this world.



And finally on this Labor Day weekend, as you do all of this, remember that as you go about the world conducting *your* business each and every day that you are constantly interacting with people who are performing *their* occupation. So think about what you buy and where you buy it. Is your “great deal” on shrimp propping up the slave labor trade in Thailand? Does the place where you shop pay their workers fairly and offer them good working conditions? When you go out to eat, are you a good tipper? If you can't afford to be generous to the one who is serving your meal and cleaning up your messes, you can't afford to eat out and you need to stay home. Remember to give your teachers and coworkers a break. You don't know what kept them up all night. Be nice to the custodian and the receptionist. Because in a perfect world, they are all striving to do the same thing that you and I are doing – to show up each day being our best selves, seeking to reflect God's love and truth into the world.

³ “What Is Your Life's Blueprint”, available at <http://old.seattletimes.com/special/mlk/king/words/blueprint.html>

This weekend, and each day, show the world who you are – and show the world whose you are – by the efforts you put forth to follow Jesus in the simple tasks of daily life.

Thanks be to God! Amen.