

## **Take This Job and Love It!**

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Romans 13: 8-14

Can you believe it is Labor Day weekend already? It's the end of summer. School has started, temperatures have begun to cool off, and acorns and walnuts are starting to fall from the trees. I don't know where the summer has gone.

Labor Day provides an opportunity to reflect on work. To begin with, I want to share with you a story about how Paul and I raised our three children. When we were raising our three children, we were very enlightened. We knew how damaging it was to force children into a narrow mold set by our own expectations. I can't tell you how many times we heard about young people whose parents would hear nothing of their pursuing a career in say, acting, but instead demanded that they major in business and take over the family's plumbing supply company. We would *never* do that! With our progressive parenting skills, we put our children's personal fulfillment ahead of our own definitions of success and we held the doors to career options wide open. "It's not about money or prestige," we told them. "It doesn't matter what you major in at college. It only matters that you major in something that is meaningful. What matters is that you are happy and fulfilled."

Years later, that advice came back to bite us. In 1999 our daughter Amy graduated from the University of Illinois with a major in Religious Studies and Philosophy – not terribly marketable degrees. After graduation she had a wonderful summer sitting on our back porch reading all kinds of books and contemplating life. It all came to a head one extremely busy afternoon in late August when I called home from church to ask her to start dinner as I was going to be late. On the phone with me she went on and on about how glorious day was and how nice the breeze was and how grand it was to sit on the porch and read. Now, I'm not easily annoyed but I have to admit that I hit the roof with poor Amy when I got home. She had been a college graduate for three months and had yet to start looking for a job so I gave her an ultimatum. I told her that she was going to have to start paying us rent. She, being the twenty-one year old innocent daughter that she was, was incensed that I would say such a thing. I also told her that I wanted her to do two things. I wanted her to call the U of I placement office in Champaign and make an appointment to talk to them and I told her to start calling temp agencies. To make a long story short, not long after that conversation Amy got a temp job at a button factory in Broadview. And, apparently sometime during her first week on the job she told some of the older women at work what I had said. "My Mom said she and Dad are going to start charging me rent!" And the ladies at work all said, "And? So?" And Amy said, "Don't you think that's terrible?" and apparently they all said, "No." That was Amy's first lesson real-life work experience. To end the story we actually never did charge her

rent – I just wanted to get her moving - and after a few months she decided that she'd rather live downtown with a couple of friends rather than with good old mom and dad. After four years of working temp jobs and living on a shoe string she finally decided she'd had enough and went to law school and is now a successful attorney. To this day though we laugh about that back porch conversation and how mad Amy was at me and how unfazed her co-workers at the button factory were when she told them we were going to charge her rent. The button factory workers all knew the value of hard work, of labor – a lesson that Amy at the time still needed to learn.

A while ago, I wrote an article for the church newsletter about how fortunate I was to have what I consider to be one of the best jobs in the world. I love what I do. For me, the line between work and pleasure is utterly blurred. So, when I think about the relationship of faith and work, I tend to do so from my own experience. I think, "God's desire is for us to find a vocation that is a *calling*. After all, it worked for me!"

But as noble as that sentiment may be, in this post-industrial age, this kind of thinking seems to be elitist. Only a few of us lucky ones get to take delight in our toil. Boring, grubby, dead-end jobs with little intrinsic satisfaction far outnumber the enjoyable ones.

So how are we to look at work from a theological point of view? We can start with the fact that one of the basic tenets of the Protestant Reformation was that all work had value. The priesthood and royalty did not enjoy a greater degree of God's favor. One could serve God authentically as a farmer or a merchant. During the Reformation, presiding over the meal you have cooked for your family was every bit as sacred as presiding over the communion table.

I am always annoyed by jokes or commercials that depict the typical loser by having him deliver the punch line, "Do you want fries with that?" Embedded in that put-down is disrespect for the many people who work in the service industry—fast-food cooks and waiters, grocery clerks and baggers, garbage collectors, factory workers, dishwashers, cleaners. If you've ever done any of that work, you know how hard it is. It's important to be respectful and kind to the many workers who do the jobs you would hate. They're just trying to make a living and many are genuinely trying to serve their fellow human beings. And yes, even though their calls are annoying, we need to be respectful and kind to even the telemarketers.

But to get to the point, on this Labor Day Sunday, this is what I want you to remember from this morning's message: **OUR WORK ... OUR VOCATION ... IS LIVING AS A CHRISTIAN.**

I wonder if some of you have ever attended a church with an alter call. At the first church I served on the south side of Chicago we had an alter call. The alter call was at the end of the service. It was when people were invited to dedicate their lives to "full-time Christian service." By that, the preacher meant that if you intended to be a

missionary, preacher, or youth-leader, you qualified for full-time Christian service. My problem with that is that I think that's bad theology. I strongly believe that God has called us all into full-time Christian service.

When you go into the ministry, the credentialing committee always interrogates you closely about your "call." How do you know you are destined for ministry? Why do you think God is calling you. I got into a little trouble with them on that one because I don't think there is anything so special about my call. I'm good at a few things that suit me to being a pastor, but, no, I don't think God singled me out any more than God singles any of you out. We're all called.

There is the story about the construction worker who was building a brand new church. The priest came by to talk to him.

"I just learned that you have a brother who is a bishop."

"That I do."

"And you are a bricklayer," mused the priest. "It sure is a funny world. Things aren't divided equally in life, are they?"

"No, they're not," agreed the worker, as he slapped the mortar along the line of bricks.

"My poor brother couldn't do this to save his life."

We are all called! We are all meant do whatever job we are in to the glory of God. As Max Stackhouse, ordained UCC Minister and Professor of Reformed Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary puts it, "We are all called! Called to be a certain kind of person in the world."

As the Apostle Paul tells us this week in his letter to the Romans, it doesn't matter what our jobs are, our vocation is being a Christian no matter where we find ourselves. Love fulfills the law. Paul says, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Our calling is to do our work in a way that pleases God. What did Jesus do for a job? We know that Joseph was a carpenter so it's possible he took up his father's trade. But we really have no idea what his job was. It didn't seem important enough to the Gospel writers to tell us. If you do a word search on *work* in the New Testament, you come up with very few references to employment. "Work" is all about what we are doing for God's Reign here on earth. We are all called to work as Jesus did. We do not know what he did for a job, but what we do know is what his vocation was: self-giving, compassion, truth-telling, and healing. On this Labor Day Sunday, let us remember that our vocation is our full-time Christian service as well.

Amen.