

“Our Life’s Work”

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Tomorrow is Labor Day.
In addition to being a very welcome long weekend
for many of us,
this is also the day we set aside in this country
to honor working people.

And today, as you know, is my first time preaching to you
as your newly settled minister.
I’m taking up my work with you
and doing my best
to lay the foundation for a long and healthy ministry with you.
So it seems appropriate to consider the idea of *work* today.

Work is a loaded word, isn’t it?
At its best, in its most spiritual sense,
work gives our lives focus and purpose.
We take pride in the work we do
in service of things we really care about.
Work is an expression of our nature
as beings who think, who imagine, who dream
and use our hands,
in partnership with everything else that is,
to turn our dreams into reality.
Work at its best
is how we share with the world
the very best in *ourselves*.

But at its worst,
work is hard. It's exhausting.
It's boring.
It's back-wrenching and soul-killing.
At its worst,
work eats us alive
and keeps us from doing things that are truly meaningful.

Back in the 1970s, the great Studs Terkel interviewed an editor
for his book *Working*.
The editor told him,
“Most of us, like the assembly line worker,
have jobs that are too small for our spirit.
Jobs are not big enough for people.”

Jobs that are too small for our spirit.

I think my worst was a temp job doing data entry.
I got hired to go into the office on the weekend,
when no one else was around,
and put in a full day typing numbers into the computer
from stacks and stacks of almost identical forms.
It was deadly.
But I got paid, so I did it.

Then I think of my old coworker
who just lived for her annual Caribbean vacation.
Her computer screen had a picture of a tropical beach.
Her checks had pictures of palm trees on them.
And yet, for 50 weeks of the year,
she sat at a computer in the un-tropical city of Boston
and crunched numbers.

It wasn't a bad job, as jobs go,
but it was too small for her spirit.
That job did not come close to being an outlet for her spirit,
It barely touched what was really important to her.
And by many standards,
she was one of the lucky ones.
She made decent money,
she didn't worry about getting fired,
she was able to support her family just fine.
But that job, which consumed so many hours of her life,
did not come close
to tapping the fire and the spirit that was inside her.

Back in 1845, a German philosopher named Karl Marx
had some choice words about work in modern society.
These days we take completely for granted
that people have jobs doing specific things.
You work as a plumber or a teacher,
or a farmer, or a minister,
or whatever it might be—
but by and large, if you have a paid job,
you get paid to do one thing, to fill one particular role.
That's what we call "the division of labor."

Marx pointed out,
as soon as you have this division of labor,
which we have had in various forms for just about all of recorded
history,
each person has to pick a role, a job, a specialty,
and it becomes a trap.
You can't escape it.

If you're a teacher,
you can't very well show up at school
and announce that today you've decided to go pick tomatoes at the
farm down the road.

If you're a construction worker,
you can't say to your boss,
you'd really rather give piano lessons today.
This is so obvious to us,
we don't even think about it, right?

But Marx saw it was a trap.
Sure, when everybody has their job,
things tend to get done.
But what happens to the *people*,
the *human beings* who have to inhabit those jobs and those roles?
Marx imagined a society
where nobody would be forced to specialize in only one thing.
In his society,
everyone would be able to learn how to do anything they wanted,
and they wouldn't have to pick just one thing.
So, as he said, you would be able

to do one thing today and another tomorrow,
to hunt in the morning,
fish in the afternoon,
rear cattle in the evening,
criticise after dinner,
just as [you] have a mind,
without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.¹

¹ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (1845), online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>.

This may seem fanciful, dreamy, impractical.
But Marx is really on to something here.
He's on to something about *freedom*
and what it means to be a human being.

It's not that *work itself* is a bad thing.
On the contrary,
work can be wonderful.
It can be creative,
it can be liberating
and moving and profound.
But for that to happen,
you have to experience a certain kind of freedom.
You have to feel that you are choosing to do the work you're doing—
that even when it's hard or frustrating,
it's your choice to be doing it.
And within that,
you have to feel you're free to do the work
in the way that makes sense to you,
like a painter can choose her next brush stroke.
You have to be free to use your intuition.

What I'm talking about is really an internal sense of freedom,
more than external policies or laws *per se*.
Maybe you've heard about the concept of *flow*.
Flow is something that can happen
when you know what you're trying to do,
when you have control over what you're doing—
when you're free to do something in your own way—
and you get completely absorbed in what you're doing.

Sometimes when you are all these things,
something happens.
It's like you feel an energy that wants to flow through you;
your mind and your body feel very clear and pure,
and you find yourself stepping out of your own way
so that energy can just come through,
and you are doing it,
but it's like you're the *vessel*,
and the energy knows what to do
and it's the most natural thing in the world
to simply allow it to move you,
and in this state
when you act,
you feel this sense of sheer *rightness*,
you know you, or rather the energy flowing through you,
is doing the absolute right thing in this situation.
That's *flow*.
And that is a deeply spiritual experience of work.

The Chinese philosopher Zhuang-zi
tells a story about a man who works like this.

Cook Ting, he says, was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui.
Every motion, every slice of the knife was so graceful
that Lord Wen-hui cried out in delight.
“What skill! That’s amazing!”

Cook Ting set his knife down and said,
“What I care about is the Way.
It goes beyond skill.
When I first began cutting up oxen,
all I could see was the ox itself.
But now I do it by spirit.
I don’t look with my eyes.
My perceptions and my thoughts stop,
and spirit just moves where it wants....
I’ve had this knife for nineteen years,
and the blade is as sharp as though I had just sharpened it.
There are spaces between the joints,
and the blade of the knife has really no thickness.
If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces,
then there’s plenty of room....
And whenever I come to a complicated place,
I size things up,
I tell myself to watch out and be careful,
I keep my eyes on what I’m doing,
I work very slowly, until —
flop!
the whole thing just comes apart
like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground.
I stand there holding the knife and look all around me,
completely satisfied, reluctant to move on,
and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

Lord Wen-hui answers, “I have heard the words of Cook Ting
and learned how to live my life!”²

² Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia UP, 1971), pp. 50–51 (adapted).

That's the kind of work I'm talking about—
work that connects us with the universal energy of the world,
work that feeds the spirit.

And the story shows us, also,
that our own inner attitude
matters just as much as the external task we're doing.
Maybe you've heard the Zen saying,
“Before enlightenment,
chop wood and carry water.
After enlightenment...
chop wood and carry water.”
Which is a typically Zen way of saying,
the very basic things we do,
the work we do for our jobs,
the housework we do at home,
have the potential to be profoundly satisfying and spiritual
if we approach them with mindfulness.
Making dinner can be a spiritual practice.
Sorting the mail can be a spiritual practice.

Yet we also know that some jobs are really hard to redeem in this way.
Our work is most satisfying
when we believe in what we're doing,
when we have a vision of the future
that our work is bringing into being.
It's like the digger wasp from our poem
who says, “I'm digging now for their protection.”
She's working for the children she will never see
and doing what she needs to do
to keep them safe.
“Eyes on the prize,”
as the old saying goes.

And so we too want our work to make sense.
We want it to contribute.
We want it to make a difference
and make life better for the people we love.
We want our work to be a natural manifestation
of our vision, our imagination, our creativity.
We dream and then we do.
And that kind of work
is work that satisfies.

It is my deep and sincere hope
that the volunteer work you do here at church—
the work we'll do together in the months and years to come—
will be *good* work—
not drudgery,
or slaving away,
but work that is truly satisfying.
I want the work we do together to nourish you.
I want it to reflect your passion and your vision
for the future of this church.

If this is *not* your experience of working here at church,
I would like to know about it.
If you are feeling burned out or stressed
or taken advantage of, or whatever it might be,
I hope you'll come talk to me.
Part of *my* job
is to help *your* experience volunteering at church
a life-giving experience,
something that brings you joy,
something that helps you learn and grow
as it builds our future together.

Here at church,
I want the *jobs* you do
to give you an opportunity
to share your gifts
and maybe to try out new things you've never done before,
because the point of a religious community
is not to recruit volunteers
to get stuff done for the congregation.
The point of a religious community
is to help people grow.

This is quite different from a business,
where the focus is on getting the job done.
Here, in religious community,
the focus is always on the people.
In this place, an electrician can become a giver of sermons.
A software programmer can put on a play with young kids.
We don't have to be limited to our narrow work-based identities.
We bring our *whole* selves here.
So the challenge for all of us
is to *develop* ourselves as whole people,
people whose work is joyful
because it flows from our hearts and our minds and our spirits.

And I know actions speak louder than words,
so I'm going to do my very best to practice what I preach, as it were—
to model good work.
I pledge to you that I will seek to do my work mindfully
and with integrity.
And I invite you to do the same!
I pledge to you that I will not exhaust myself
or burn myself out.
And I hope you will do the same!

On this Labor Day weekend,
I challenge you to recommit yourselves
to working with grace and with skill.
I challenge you, wherever you are,
whatever constraints you might be under,
to find a place of freedom in your work.
And I wish for you
work that is big enough for your spirit,
work that matters,
work that brings forth the beauty and the power that is *you*.

May it be so.
Amen and blessed be.