

“Work and Vocation in the Pandemic”
September 6, 2020

Isaiah 55:1-3
John 6:25-35

As we move through this Labor Day weekend we are aware that work has changed, along with everything else in the past six months.

Many, if not most of us were unfamiliar with Zoom back in March. Now it is the way that we do our work from home. And doing our work from home means we deal with a lot of new distractions and diversions that we didn't encounter at the office.

Last spring and again this fall, teachers and professors have scrambled to get their classes online. And those of us who preach have learned to do so looking at a camera rather than a congregation as we hone our internet presence.

In spite of these new challenges, those who are working are also aware that they are more fortunate than the great numbers of people who lost their jobs—either temporarily or permanently—since the pandemic hit. A record 40 million unemployed has disrupted not only individual lives but also our city, state, and nation. Some have found new positions. Others continue to look for work while dealing with the fallout of unemployment, such as the looming threat of eviction.

Business owners—those whose work provides others with work—are struggling as well, as they look for new ways to stay open in the midst of the economic turmoil.

Even those who have found new work in retirement—often serving as the volunteers that keep organizations and institutions running—have either found that work eliminated or found it is now done with masks and gloves at a distance from others.

Work has changed. Some would say it has changed forever—which remains to be seen.

While work has changed, your *vocation* remains constant even in these tumultuous times.

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call. When we use “vocation” in a faith context it refers to the work to which God calls each one of us. Your calling could be your job—but not necessarily. Many people sense that they are pursuing their calling by doing one thing even while they are paid for doing something else. Many people find a new vocation after they have retired.

Work and vocation are similar but they should not be confused. In the best of situations, the two fit closely together. It's been said, however, that “We may choose careers, but we do not choose vocation. Vocation chooses us.” To me that sounds a lot like Jesus, speaking to his disciples on the night of his arrest, saying, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit...”

Vocation—calling—chooses us and just doesn't let go.

The novelist and minister Frederick Buechner famously said that: “There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say or the Superego, or Self-Interest.” He suggested that “a good rule for finding out [where the call is coming from] is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done,” concluding, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

So, yes, there is something profoundly religious about the calling that underlies our work. Vocation is, for each of us, a summons to the divine and to the discovery of what is sacred within us. It is an act of courage to “choose what has chosen us,” to explore what it is that won’t let us go, what calls us.

Having a sense of your own deep gladness, if you would discover your calling, your vocation, you must also know about the world. Where is the world’s deep hunger that speaks to you? Some will find it far away. Some will discover it close at hand.

Either way, that deep hunger is “out there,” beyond yourself. The Christian calling is never one of retreat to an inner “spiritual” realm cut off from the rest of the world. Our calling involves with the rest of creation.

Since the world belongs to God, the deep hunger that we discover as we look at the world is the deep hunger of God’s creation, a holy hunger, a sacred longing.

The hunger of the world might be for health or beauty, for knowledge or peace, for joy or compassion. You might discover the world’s deep hunger in individuals or in groups of people. You might find it in nature. All creation cries out in some way. And there is one deep hunger that calls out to your deep gladness.

The world belongs to God; all things come from God. Your calling, your *vocation*, also has a divine source.

This pandemic means that, in terms of work, each one of us encounters specific difficulties and challenges, meeting and overcoming them to a greater or lesser degree each day. Sometimes we feel a sense of victory and vigor as the sun goes down. At other times, we feel that we go into the night in defeat and exhaustion.

Either way, let us keep our eyes set on the farther horizon of our callings. These are the days in which we are preparing for and building a new future. It is not yet here by any means. Let us, then, consider how our vocation, our *calling*, can help us in creating our post-pandemic lives and world.

Each one of us needs to know our deep gladness because that is what will guide us through and beyond these days. Your deep gladness is the star to guide you in the dark wilderness.

Why?” the prophet Isaiah asks.

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

“Do not labor,” Jesus says. “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.”

Isaiah and Jesus both suggest that there is something greater beneath or beyond our employment. And so we are invited into a new relationship with the work that we do—whatever that work may be.

N.T. Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham, put it better than anyone else when he wrote: “The resurrection of Jesus means that this present time is shot through with great significance. What is done to the glory of God in the present is genuinely building for God’s future. Acts of justice and mercy, the creation of beauty and the celebration of truth, deeds of love and the creation of communities of kindness and forgiveness—these all matter, and they matter forever...Enfolded in this vocation to build now...the things that will last into God’s new age, is the vocation to holiness: to the fully human life, reflecting the image of God that is made possible by Jesus’ victory on the cross and that is energized by the Spirit of the risen Jesus present within communities and persons.”

Work has changed.

Your vocation, your calling, is still sacred.