

God's Work, and Ours
Mark 1:16-20 & Micah 6:6-8
September 5, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Luling

When we were expecting Rachel, Andy went with me to the doctor's appointment a week before her delivery was scheduled. He asked the doctor how much she thought the new baby would weigh. Six pounds, 8 ounces, she said immediately and confidently. Andy said something like, "that's pretty precise." And the doctor replied something like "I've been doing this for a good long while. I have experience and expertise. If I needed to know where something was in the Bible, I'd ask you, because you have experience and expertise in the Bible." It was a nice way of saying, "Hush. I know what I'm talking about." And when Rachel was born, the doctor was only five ounces off: 6 pounds, 3 ounces. Pretty close, because she was experienced and good at her work.

When I drive back and forth from home to Luling, I most often travel on highway 90, because I find I-10 stressful. On that route, I pass directly through the town of Waelder. There's not much to see in Waelder, but right on 90, there's a sausage factory. During the week, there are always people crossing back and forth across the street on their breaks. They're wearing coats and heavy pants and winter hats, because it is cold in the plant, to keep the meat at a proper temperature. They must be very cold, and it must take them a while to warm up, because no matter the weather outside, they keep all that cold weather gear on. They have my respect, because I know that is hard work, with inflexible hours, they probably aren't paid very much, and I detest being cold all the time.

There are other people at that sausage factory that amaze me, and those are the truck drivers. Or the truck parkers. I don't know if those are one and the same. The delivery trucks have to back up into the loading bays at the factory, and they end up blocking traffic on 90 when they do, so there's plenty of opportunity to observe them. Each bay holds two trailers. When the bay is full with two trailers, they are about 24 inches apart, with about a foot of clearance on the outside. You could give me 2 million dollars and 2 months, and I would still not be able to back those refrigerated trailers with that kind of precision. Those people are experts, I assume experienced, good at their jobs.

Just this week, I went to the clinic to get a weird bump on my knee checked out. It's nothing, just a weird bump. As is customary at most clinics, a nurse checked me out first before the doctor examined me. She was an LVN and quite

interested about what the weird bump might turn out to be. She judged it not a ganglion cyst, nor a bone spur. She told me, kind of sheepishly, “I just get curious. I try to guess what the diagnosis is, and then I check and see what the doctors said.” I admire her for that. She’s seeking to learn more, and is a better nurse because of it. And I’ll say that her listening skills far surpassed those of the doctor.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, and I’ve been thinking about this sermon for a while now, several months at least, though I will share something later that I’ve had saved on my computer for a couple of years, so this one has been percolating for a while. It doesn’t take a keen observer of our culture to know that we value some work over others, or that there are some people working some jobs that we don’t even notice, until something goes wrong, or that even our appreciation for essential workers that we found last year has diminished back to pre-pandemic levels. The theological conviction of our Presbyterian ancestors was that every kind of work was valuable, and a vocation, a calling from God. Each Christian has the same calling: to love the Lord our God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, or to put that in Micah’s terms: we are all called to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Not only priests fulfill that calling, but every worker, paid or unpaid, valued or unvalued, can live out that same calling through their lives and their work.

Jesus called the disciples from their workplace, from their lives as fishermen. And he promised to transform their work, into fishing for people instead of fishing for fish. Jesus makes that same call to each of us, to allow him to transform our work, in whatever situation we find ourselves, to work for divine purposes. Retirement is not an exemption from this calling, not even a little bit. Our calling is an eternal one. Wherever we are, whoever we encounter, we can be instruments of Christ.

I had all the stories I already shared kind of tumbling around, stories of people I had encountered who were gifted in their particular fields, in a variety of ways. I don’t want to romanticize manual labor, or caregiving labor, because I know that many of those workers are not paid justly or fairly. And I don’t want to say that only professional church people can live out a calling—quite the opposite. This week, I asked my facebook friends to share about people they knew, or had observed, who they thought were good at their work. Their answers were so uplifting that I want to share them with you.

Some of the people were famous: Mr. Rogers, cello player Yo Yo Ma, Roger Staubach. All people with heaping amounts of talent.

A lot of people shared stories about members of their own family: a

nephew who has become a high school band director and loves every piece of his work, a husband who is a camp director, another husband who quit his business career to become a teacher. A sister in law who is a calm, kind, direct, precise, and methodical ER doctor. A son who got teacher of the year at a San Antonio school district a couple years ago—his mom included his advice to other teachers, which concludes this way: “Most of all, be honest. Young people know when they are being lied to. They’re really good at it, unfortunately, I suspect because many have a lot of experience with that in their lives. Be the truth in theirs.” Good advice for all of us, not just teachers.

There were other stories about teachers, about ministers—not surprising, since I have lots of minister friends, about an administrator at the seminary who prays for each new students as she prepares their welcome packets, and then has an open door for anyone who needs a non-judgmental listening ear. Another doctor who cares for the whole patient, not just their physical bodies. A groundskeeper who made friends with staff and students and stayed in that job for 32 years.

An aide at a nursing home who treats his patients with dignity and respect, a position and career path he decided on as a child, when he saw his aunt be mistreated. A waiter at a restaurant who takes the time to learn and remember names. A fast food worker who was so well loved that when she moved out of town, people took up a collection and bought her a car. A hospice nurse who drops everything when a patient dies in order to prepare their bodies herself, before the funeral home arrives.

A variety of people. A variety of gifts. A variety of cultural recognition. But everyone on this list is someone who recognizes the value and opportunity in their own work: to love, to seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God. Everyone on this list is someone who lives out the Christian calling within their own work.

I’m going to close with a sign that a friend saw in her hotel room at a Days Inn—not a fancy place—a few years ago. It said this “In ancient times, there was a prayer for the “stranger within our gates.” Because this hotel is a human institution to serve people, and not solely a money making organization, we hope that God will grant you peace and rest while under our roof. May this room and hotel be your second home. May those who love you be near you in thoughts and dreams. Even though we may not get to know you, we hope that you will be comfortable and happy as if you were in your own home. May the business that brought you our way prosper. May every call you make and every message you

receive add to your joy. When you leave may your journey be safe. We are travelers. From birth till death we travel between the eternities. May these days be pleasant for you, profitable for society, helpful for those you meet, and a joy to those who know and love you best.” And it’s signed “from our staff.” The staff of this hotel see their work as a vocation, a calling, an avenue to share their gifts of hospitality and welcome. May we all do so as faithfully.

Holy Mystery, For those who are employed in just the right places for them, thank You. For those who do grueling, soul-sucking work, give a measure of Your grace. For those who are gainfully employed and making fair wages, thank You. For the underemployed who find it nearly impossible to make ends meet, give a measure of Your grace. For the unemployed, who would fall behind, who could not afford child care, who couldn't maintain a car or home with a minimum wage job, give a measure of Your grace. Being poor is so expensive, O Holy Spirit. Forgive our judgment for things of which we have no expertise or experience. Teach us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Inspire us to be givers of Your grace to places that help the poor. Let us part with our resources so that another may eat and/or have shelter. May we see You in the least of these in Your family. You said we would see You in them. You were so clear that it gives those of us pause, who are comfortable in life. For hurting and suffering in Your world, may Your presence deeply live. To those who suffer war, floods, storms, fire, earthquake, or illness may we be Your hands, feet, and heart. Bless front-line workers on all fronts--going places and touching people that most of us just would not. May we be witnesses to Your mercy, love, hope, and grace for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.