

September 4, 2016

Acts 13:1-3
I Corinthians 3:5-17
Ephesians 4:1
Colossians 3:23-24
II Thessalonians 3:6-12

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

It is Labor Day weekend, so I thought we might talk about “work.” Only, I don’t want to talk about the labor movement, more justice in the workplace, fair wages for workers, or more jobs for those who want them. These are huge and important topics, and a great many people know a lot more about them than I do. Besides, we are a church, so it is far more important for us to think about “work” from a Christian point of view. If you think that will make it easy or simple – not so. Christians have rarely agreed about the importance or significance of work. For instance, Catholics traditionally believe we are supposed to do “good works” – that is, feed the hungry, help the poor – and Protestants think we are supposed to “work good” – that is, be conscientious and effective in whatever work we do.

But that jumps in way down the line. Let’s start with Genesis: *“And to the man God said: ‘Because you have listened to your wife and have eaten from the tree which I forbade you, on your account the earth will be cursed. You will get your food from it only by labor all the days of your life; it will yield thorns and thistles for you. You will eat of the produce of the field, and only by the sweat of your brow will you win your bread until you return to the earth; for from it you were taken. Dust you are, and to dust you will return.’”* (Genesis 3:17-19)

It is one of the curses that came with being thrown out of the Garden of Eden. But those of us who believe in and trust Jesus know that He came to reverse the curses. That is, reconciling us to God begins to undo the curses that come from our being alienated from God. So what part of the curse do you still believe in? Is work still a bleak and harsh fate? We know it still is for millions of us. And most of us still know people who like Friday better than Monday.

And do you still believe that returning to dust is all that awaits you? What does the power of Christ and the love of God *mean* in your life?

* * *

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

CONUNDRUM: If we are saved by grace (alone) and not by work, why work? We are not talking about all Christians or all Christian beliefs, but in Protestant Christianity, which has deep roots in Calvinism and Luther and Paul, it is deeply taught: We are saved by grace. Our works are of no avail. We cannot earn, deserve, or work our way into Heaven. Or if you prefer, we cannot work our way into a loving relationship with God. How do you do enough to earn or deserve the love of the numinous, omniscient, omnipotent God? It's hard enough to earn the love of *people*, and some would even claim that's not possible either.

Catholicism and lots of other wings of Christendom never bought into the grace perspective without hanging onto a good deal of the legalism and "the Law" perspective from the past. Yes, there is grace and God is merciful, but you still better do a lot of good works and prove yourself worthy of the Kingdom or you will never get in. But they cannot support this belief from Paul's writings, so the letter of James is claimed as a balance to Paul's convictions. "*Faith without works is dead.*" Luther thought the book of James was a joke, and I do not mean laughable. He thought James was a disgrace to the Gospel. It did not even belong in the Bible, from Luther's perspective, except to alert us to error. "The Epistle of Straw" he called it. For those of you not raised on a farm, straw has no nutrients; it cannot nurture or sustain any life. It is mostly useful as insulation, and to keep you out of the manure.

Back to the conundrum: If we believe in grace, how can there be a "Christian work ethic"? It's interesting that this seems like such a contradiction to some people. There is only one dimension to life and only one way to think about things?

If you work to accomplish something that will prove your worth to God, that clearly is a contradiction to all concepts of grace. But what if you do not work to get into the Kingdom? What if you already trust God's love to have welcomed you into a place in God's family? What if despite your unworthiness, you know that you have been accepted as a beloved child of God? In that case, you do not work to get into the Kingdom; you work because you are *already* a citizen of the Kingdom. You work in sheer gratitude and as a response to the presence and love of God. You work because there is work to be done, and not to *prove* anything. Indeed, that changes how you perceive *everything*. And if you are paying any attention to what you know

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

from experience, you know that the opinions on both sides of this issue are huge anywhere you go, to this day.

Not to get lost in the details, but Calvin changed “predestination” into double-predestination. I hope we still believe that God destines all of us to end up in the family of the Great Kingdom. But Calvin had more and more trouble trying to understand why some people behaved so badly – that is, how some people could be such enemies of the Kingdom. Finally he concluded that God must have destined some for good and others for evil; some to be saved and others to be damned. And of course, in Calvin’s view, God was omnipotent, so you could not change your destiny. Your destiny was what it was and could not be denied. Therefore, more and more people started looking for possible “signs” of what their destiny might be. If your destiny was for God’s Kingdom, were you likely to be brutal and cruel to those around you?

To cut to the chase: In Calvinism, humans were not *capable* of doing “good works,” but God was able to do good works *through* them. God could “call” faithful servants into various tasks for the benefit of others. Not because God was saving them from Hell, but because that’s how God was blessing others. And if they worked for God and not for earthly rewards or goals, God’s will could be done through them. Work was no longer a curse. Work was an opportunity to serve in a Kingdom you already belonged to and believed in. But as always, humans needed to be careful about trying to take over again; trying to do good for their own reasons; trying to get back in charge. Luther was adamant: Vocation is never about what *we* do. Vocation is about what God does *through* us. But it doesn’t take very long to turn it all back over to our will and then ruin everything. Vocation is God calling us into partnership, but God remains the Senior Partner – the one in charge. So it is not *our* love; it is the love of God working through us.

Even around here that love thing gets fuzzy from time to time. “*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.*” (I Corinthians 13) You think Paul was talking about *our* love? That if I am not a more loving person, I clang? Hardly! If I do not know *the love of God* – if God’s love does not dwell in me – it all comes to nothing. One of the best ways to be a noisy gong is to think I can serve God because I am such a loving person. (“Hey, look at me! Boy am I loving!”) In true Calvinism, Protestantism, and (if we pay attention to Paul) Christendom itself, it is never our possibility to become loving on our own hook or by our own power.

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

From the perspective of the “Protestant work ethic,” God gives us daily bread through farmers, bakers, and millers and, it is fair to add, through factory workers, truck drivers, grocery store employees, and the hands that prepare our meals. God creates and cares for new life by means of fathers and mothers and teachers and nurses. God protects us by means of police officers, firemen, judges, soldiers. God brings healing by means of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and a host of other medical vocations. God teaches through teachers, conveys his Word through Preachers, brings blessings of technology through engineers, creates beauty through artists. This is the true perspective of the Protestant work ethic. It is not a perfect world; there are endless problems, aberrations, and of course a huge host of unconverted people jumping in with all manner of motives and purposes that have little to do with serving or obeying God. Sadly, not everybody who claims Christianity is “Christian.” And some people who do not claim to be Christians at all are deep into a true calling from the Holy Spirit. In any case, as Luther commented: “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.”

Good work – a true calling – is one of life’s great blessings. Most of us know how wonderful it feels at the end of the day to realize that we have accomplished something. And most of us know how we feel at the end of a day that seems wasted, squandered – time put in to no purpose. It’s hard not to be grumpy, out of sorts, or at least semi-depressed if we live for very long without doing something that we think matters. The old creed of the UCC suggested that “God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.” Sin is alienation from God. Aimlessness is alienation from all meaning and purpose. We live in an age that is full of aimlessness: false values and counterfeit goals. Aimlessness erodes our hope. More to the point, aimlessness reveals our *lack* of hope. “*Faith, hope, and love abide,*” and the greatest may be love, if we mean God’s love and not our own. But the truth is that without hope – faith and love don’t mean diddly.

* * *

The Christian work ethic is always closely related to a “calling.” Around here we say “*vocatio*,” just to remind ourselves that we are not talking about a mere job – a vocation we have designed or chosen for ourselves because we think it might be beneficial to us. *Vocatio* (Latin, from the same root as “vocal cord”) = the calling from God. It is interesting that our language from the past knew that there was a

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

connection (or was supposed to be) between a vocation and a calling from God. A true vocation is the calling of God for us to work in some way – to try to accomplish *something* in some way. I deeply believe that this is close to the heart and core of the Christian WAY – the Christian LIFE. All genuine conversions come with an assignment. You have heard it from me before. Moses does not see a burning bush just for his amusement. He is being called to a very dangerous mission. And not just danger from Pharaoh, but danger from the very people he is sent to free. Moses is sent to free Israel from slavery AND to bring the people to the Holy Mountain to make a Covenant with God. It will shape and form their lives from that day on. A huge assignment. So huge that without God’s help, it is inconceivable – impossible – to imagine.

Everywhere we turn in the Scriptures, the story is bigger than many people notice. We were just talking recently about the many conversions of Peter. None of them leave Peter without a calling – an assignment. None of them leave Peter unchanged. Paul does not “see” Jesus on the Damascus Road just to straighten out his opinions about various theological theories. It changes his life forever and calls him into his apostleship to the Gentiles – a major controversy and spiritual warfare that will surround him and everything he does until the day he is executed under Nero.

And Jesus does not come out of the waters of baptism with a mere pat on the head and a nice blessing from His Father. It sends Him into a mission that gets so hot so fast that most people barely contemplate it before seeking refuge in platitudes and a comforting “niceness” that try to forget all about the hatred and the opposition – and the cost of being so faithful to God that even good people want Him crucified.

When work is a calling from God, that changes all the rules. We cannot do it just to get successful or comfortable in this world. We cannot do it just to fail in this world either. This world is no longer the yardstick of anything. The calling has its own purpose and its own reality because it comes from a different dimension: it comes from the Kingdom rather than from this world.

* * *

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

I am about to get serious. Not that this matters, unless you want to get serious too. My father used to say, “If you really want to love your neighbor, carry your share of the load.” That takes things out of the realm of mere sentiment and make-believe. It also gets clearer if the neighbor is a member of your faith family, and the load has some relationship to what the community is trying to accomplish together. Do you ever wish that all the members of any church anywhere would carry their fair share of the load? What a revelation and example that would be for us all.

What if – instead of all the hundreds of little volunteer, do-good organizations – every member of our society would carry their fair share of the load? Unimaginable. Inconceivable. We wouldn’t be here, would we? We would be in the Kingdom of Heaven.

What we do, we do for Jesus. What we do not do for Jesus, we do not do. Of course, nothing in this life is that pure and purposeful. We just want it to be, and we keep wishing it was.

Not every Christian today believes that the Holy Spirit of Jesus is intimately and personally involved in their lives. But there can be little doubt that this was the conclusion of the early church. I do hope it is your conclusion as well. So even though many do not seem to notice, the claim – the belief – that the Holy Spirit is calling each and every one of us to various tasks is central to the New Testament perspective, connected with everything else that we think is important about Christian conversion and the meaning of the Christian Life. Paul’s analogy of the church as “the body of Christ” and each member of the body with a part to play and a task to contribute is hard to miss – except when it gets too familiar, I suppose. In any case, it is core Christian theology that the Holy Spirit is calling, guiding, and directing each one of us all the time. The deep excitement and dynamism of the Christian Life are made real in this proclamation and in this invitation.

And if the Holy Spirit is calling, what is the other side of this same coin? If the Holy Spirit is calling, what completes the circuit – what makes the connection that actually allows things to happen? If there is a calling, somebody has to be *listening*. And that’s us. That’s what moves us from theory and platitudes into real LIFE in the Kingdom. It really is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day ...

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

And mostly, at least here, we do not pray talking. We pray listening. After that, some of us still have a problem with obedience, but where do we think we are?

* * *

Christians are always listening for the call of God in every area of their lives. If their work in the world is matching the calling they have heard from the Spirit, well and good. If not, they switch to Paul's "tentmaker" pattern of ministry: they work to feed themselves and to pay their bills, and then their true work begins. Either that or they are seeking ways to change their vocation to match their calling.

You – meaning this congregation – have given me hope (perhaps too much hope) that before I am through in this life, I may know the joy of being part of a congregation that KNOWS – really knows – that VOCATIO is our top mission. A congregation that will never again return to the "weak tea" of pretending that we can be faithful by giving our spare time and our spare dollars to organizations or causes that have no hope of accomplishing anything important for Jesus or His Kingdom.

But such a mission and purpose is huge, and it is so difficult that most do not want to touch it. It is a mission to invite and support all of our members in listening for the ways the Holy Spirit wants each of us to serve with all of our lives – not just with the leftovers. It would call for far more prayer and awareness than most congregations even contemplate. It would cause us to know each other better and to support each other far beyond what is expected or experienced in any "normal church" we have ever known.

Such a thing cannot simply be dumped on a congregation from some outside logic or theory, no matter how impeccable. It must be considered, absorbed, prayed about, chosen, owned by a congregation on purpose. I have preached about it for years, from many angles. But it finally came clear to me that if I am serious, I need to ask you what you think of actually accepting VOCATIO as our mission. I need to find some way to set the choice before you so that this congregation can choose it or reject it on purpose. I do intend to do that: to set before you the possibility of choosing VOCATIO as our top and primary mission and purpose. And I do not mean in the vagueness of years to come. I mean sometime this Fall. Very probably at the same congregational meeting that considers revisions to our by-laws.

WHAT IS A WORK ETHIC?

A word to the wise: get ready; be prepared; do not wait until the night before the meeting to think or pray about it or to talk to each other about it. If such a mission should be accepted and chosen, it would have far-reaching repercussions on everything we do here. It has been said that a word to the wise is sufficient. We shall see.

So I close now with one of my favorite Scripture passages, Ephesians 4:1: *“I implore you then – I, a prisoner for the Lord’s sake: as God has called you, live up to your calling.”*