

Holy Work

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1 Corinthians 12: 4-13: Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, ⁵ and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

I love being a pastor, but I have to tell you, sometimes it's a little strange. In fact when I first became a minister, a friend gave me a book by John Robert MacFarland, retired minister, called *The Strange Calling* where he recounted some of the weird things he encountered as a pastor. I've experienced a few strange experiences myself. For instance, I once received a distressed call in the middle of the night from a woman who was a member of one of my former churches who was in a skilled nursing facility. I had my phone on silent so I didn't get the voicemail until the next morning.

"Pastor," she said, "you need to come here right now. It's an emergency. Someone brought me a box of chicken and my roommate tried to steal a piece. Now they're saying I slapped her and they're going to call the police on me."

When I entered the ministry, I never thought I'd be called to break up a fight in a skilled nursing facility over a piece of chicken, but...there you go.

I've got some other stories that you can look forward to in future sermons.

But maybe the strangest thing of all about being a pastor are the reactions I get when I tell someone what I do for a living. You know how it goes. You meet someone and start exchanging small talk and usually, pretty early in the conversation, the question comes, "So, what do you do for work?"

When I tell them what I do for work, I usually get several reactions:

One is I can tell the person immediately starts to think about on everything they've just said, worried that maybe they said something wrong. Worried they might have...cursed.

Or, I get the, "Oh well that is so nice." Or the, "Ohhh....that's....interesting."

It's strange, y'all.

But the longer I've been a pastor, the more I appreciate the strangeness of it all. It's actually quite a privilege to get to journey alongside people in their highs and lows but also it's a privilege to be invited into the weird and the quirkiness of people's lives. I like the strange parts of this job. But there's the other word in MacFarland's book title that I still struggle with – calling, this idea that God has called me to be a pastor. You could even say I have a bit of a love/hate relationship with that word.

It's not that I don't believe God is involved in inviting us down specific paths. I do think in some mysterious way, God has directed me to the place I am now. Rather, I think my discomfort with saying that "I'm called," is that we've often had too narrow an understanding of the notion that God calls us. What I mean is that far too often in the church we think being called is something that God only does to those whose professional work is in religious settings.

She is called to be a pastor.

He is called to be a chaplain.

They are called to be a missionary.

But that way of thinking assumes that God only works through those in religious service fields. If we've learned anything over these last few years, it's how profound and vitally important the work of those in healthcare or first responders or teachers is. And if we look a little more deeply, we can find that almost any profession can be a calling.

The truth is God calls all of us. One of our most profound religious thinkers of the last one hundred years has helped me see the truth of that reality. A few weeks ago, we lost Frederick Buechner and, if you've never read his books, I strongly encourage you to do so. Buechner has an interested take on the idea that God calls us.

He says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Hear that again, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

I've come to think that being called has more to do with the how than the what. Calling is not usually about God having one set thing for us to do and we have to discover that one thing to live out our calling. Rather, more often than not, being called is about finding our passion and figuring out a way to use that passion to make the world a better place all while doing whatever it is we do with the underpinnings of grace and love.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he wants to make sure his readers understand that one person's role is no more or less important than anyone else's. He says, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with

Christ.” Paul continues using the human body as an analogy. Just as the body has many parts and each part plays a vital role, so too it is with God’s calling on our lives. We are not all called to do the same thing and my calling is no more or less important than your calling. God needs all of us to find that place where our deep passion and the world’s deep hunger intersect.

Paul ends chapter 12 of Corinthians by saying, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” And then, we come to one of the most profound pieces in all of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 13.

“If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Because it’s a new chapter, it’s easy to think that Paul has moved on to a new idea. But the chapters were not part of the original letter. They were added much later for a very practical reasons – to make it easier for us to find specific scriptures. But chapter 13 was meant to be read as a continuation of chapter 12. The more excellent way that Paul refers to at the end of chapter 12 is the way of love. And it doesn’t matter what specifically we do, what our work is, we are called to do that with love.

Tomorrow, we celebrate Labor Day where we honor work in all its forms. We are grateful for all the ways the labor movement has created a more just society that maintains the dignity of all workers. But for us as Christians, today is a good time to remind ourselves that all work can be holy work when it is undergirded by love.

And so on this Labor Day weekend, I invite us to ask God’s blessing upon our work and upon all workers – both here in our community and beyond – as together we strive to live into God’s calling.

Please join me in the Labor Day Litany by Christine Longhurst found in your bulletin.

One: Lord, bless the work of our hands.

For all those who toil and labor:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For those who have lost their jobs, who are unemployed or underemployed,
let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For those who work in hazardous conditions without sufficient protection,

let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For those who face discrimination, harassment, or abuse in the work place,

let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For those who are not paid fair wages or who are denied legally due overtime pay,

let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For migrant agricultural workers and for all who work the land,

let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For all employers that they may seek to provide a just work environment,

let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For those who struggle to balance job commitments with the needs of their family,

let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands.

One: For all humans who seek to become the co-creators of the promised Kingdom,

let us pray:

All: Lord, bless the work of their hands. Amen.

Communion

One: Friends, this is the table of the company with Jesus, and all who love him. This table is for you who have much faith and you who would like to have more; you who have been here often, and you who have not been for a long time; you who have tried to follow Jesus, and you who have failed. This table is Jesus' table. Here we will find Christ's power and presence, forgiveness and renewal.

All: We come with assurance that at Jesus' table, we will be nourished as we walk in the Way of Love.

Let us Hear Once Again the story of our faith as we pray:

We give thanks to you, Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. You formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life. When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast. You delivered us from captivity, made covenant to be our sovereign God, and spoke to us through your prophets, who looked for that day when justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

When the time was right, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to live among us, to love us, and to teach us. Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when you would save your people. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners. By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your Church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit, calling each of us to carry on his work in the world.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

And so we ask that you pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his love.

By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father (God), now and for ever. Amen.

Friends, because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body. As we take and receive this bread, may we do so knowing that we are one.

Take and receive.

And as we take the cup, may we do so knowing that God was willing to go to any length to demonstrate God's love for us. As we receive this juice, may we do so knowing that we are loved and forgiven.

Take and receive.

Amen.