

## “Pay Attention”

On this Labor Day weekend, I want to invite us to think for a minute about the role of work in our lives. Certainly, in addition to the cook outs and the celebration, this weekend is a time to be grateful for the contributions of the Labor movement that led to better wages and safer working conditions even as we realize we still have a long way to go to make sure all work is dignified and all workers can make enough money to live on. But for us as people of faith, it's also an opportunity to think about what role our work plays in our lives.

Think about a time when you just met someone. It's likely that pretty early in the conversation after you shared your name and maybe a few pleasantries, the question inevitably comes up, “So what do you do for work?” Or, if you're retired, what did you do for work? Our work is so tied to how we understand our own identity and the identity of others, that it comes right up there along with our name when we meet a new person.

And I know part of that is just what you say when you meet someone or, for those of us who are introverts, just the awkwardness of trying to keep the conversation going. But there's also an underlying assumption that our identity – and in some way our self-worth – is tied up in what we do for work. Now we may know in our heads that isn't true. Our faith tells us that our worth is found in being made in God's Image – our worth is simply that we are. But so often, that can sound like empty words when the world around us often judges us by what we accomplish – by how successful we are, by how good of a parent we are, by how talented or smart or funny or beautiful we are, and by what we do for work. We know those voices are lying to us because what we almost always find is that when we do accomplish something great and are praised for it, it might be fulfilling for the moment, but the fulfillment always fades. Ultimately, our happiness, our self-worth, is about who we are and not about what we accomplish.

We see this in our Scripture today from Exodus 3 where God appears to Moses out of a burning bush and asks him to go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the people go free. On the surface, this seems to be a strange scripture to talk about finding our worth in who we are and not in what we do. God was clearly asking Moses to do something, to do something that must have seemed impossible. Egypt was the most powerful nation of the day and Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world. Earlier in Moses' life, he had actually tried to stand with his people. He killed an Egyptian who was abusing an Israelite and then he tried to break up a fight between two Israelites. They responded to Moses by wanting nothing to do with his leadership and by letting him know that word had spread that he had killed an Egyptian. So Moses ran away. It's no surprise that Moses felt inadequate, that he didn't think he was up to the task of what God was asking him to do – in a way -- he had already tried and failed. The Israelites had rejected his leadership and Pharaoh wanted him dead. I think it's safe to say that going back to Egypt was the last thing Moses wanted to do.

But this time there was a big difference. Notice what God says to Moses: *“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.*

*Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.”* God promises that it is God and not Moses who will ultimately deliver the Hebrew people. Moses is asked to go to Pharaoh as God’s messenger but it is God who will do the work. All Moses has to do is trust that God will deliver the people. It’s not up to Moses and his ability. It’s up to the Almighty God.

It’s really not up to us.

It’s up to God.

And that probably sounds like the most cliché thing I’ve ever said in here. I mean when we are confronted with seemingly impossible situations – a cancer diagnosis, a loved one with addiction, injustice in our world – we often say things like this – things like well, just give it up to God, meaning that we know we can’t do it, so God will have to. And unfortunately, too often, we use that cliché to deny the very real pain someone is feeling – don’t worry about that cancer, just give it up to God.

But that’s not what we’re talking about here.

What we’re talking about here is that we can somehow find the courage to hope when it seems all hope is lost, to set out on a journey that scares us to death because it’s the right thing to do, to confront that part of our lives that we’d rather pretend doesn’t exist knowing that we can’t do it on our own. To give it up to God means that we trust the words we pray in the Lord’s prayer – your kingdom come, your will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. It means that we trust that love really is more powerful than hate, that justice will come upon the earth and the powers of oppression won’t last forever. It means that we never give up on hope no matter how bleak things may seem. But it doesn’t mean any of that will be easy or quick or painless. And it also means that there will be plenty of times when we doubt.

Moses, I think, doubts not only himself, but also God. This conversation between God and Moses goes on for the next chapter and ½ and Moses keeps doing two things – telling God why he’s the wrong person and asking God for proof that it will all work out. And so God says to Moses, *“I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”*

Does anything seem strange to you about this sign? I mean isn’t the point of a sign to prove to you ahead of time that it’s going to be alright. But that’s not what God does. God says, “After you’ve delivered the people, you’ll worship me on this mountain.” I mean come on. That’s got to be the worst sign in the history of signs. It’s actually no sign at all. The only way Moses will know if God is faithful is to set out towards Egypt.

Friends, it would be so nice if we always had proof that things will work out. I can understand the appeal of the televangelist who says if you send me \$50, you will be healed. We want insurance policies. But there simply aren’t any – not when it comes to faith, not when it comes to doing things that are hard and risky, not when it comes to trusting that God will be with us as we embark on the journey.

Our passage ends with Moses asking God for God's name and God answers "I am who I am." It can also be translated as God saying, "I will be who I will be." It's almost like God is saying to Moses, "You cannot contain me with a name. But that also means I cannot be contained – not by you, but also not by Pharaoh. I am who I am. I am God and you are not. I am God and Pharaoh is not. I am God and I have heard the cry of my people. I am God and I will act."

And if God is the one who will act, it means that the results are not all up to us. It really is the work of God.

It was Mother Theresa who famously said, "God does not ask us to be successful. God asks us to be faithful." And that's exactly what God is asking of Moses in this story – to be faithful. And for Moses to be faithful, I think it means he must start exactly where God starts – by paying attention to the suffering of the people.

Friends, it is not by accomplishing great things that we find fulfillment, happiness, and self-worth. Rather, it is by paying attention – to our own humanity and to the humanity of others, to our own suffering and to the suffering of others. Moses, eventually, got the message. Moses finally moved beyond his own feelings of inadequacy and his fear of Pharaoh and he remembered to pay attention once again to the suffering of the Hebrew slaves. When you get down to it, that was really the only thing he needed to do. The rest really was up to God. The rest really is up to God.

So today, I invite us to recognize that none of our self-worth is tied up in what we can accomplish or in how "successful" we can appear to be. The truth is that so much of what we can accomplish – whether we're talking about being successful in our careers or changing the world for the better – is often out of our hands, at least to a partial extent. Instead, let's remember that our worth is tied up in who we are and our calling is to simply pay attention – to our own humanity and to that of those who suffer and to trust that God is always near by.