

Sermon for Labor Day Weekend, Sept 4, 2011, traditional 8:30 and 11:00
Is Your Business God's Business?
Romans 13:9b-14

Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

T.S. Eliot questioned:

Where is the life we have lost in the living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of heaven in twenty centuries
bring us farther from God and nearer to dust.

Is your business God's business? Does your life's work change the world in which you live? Scripture tells us, Whatever we do, in word or deed, we should do all for the glory of God.

On this Labor Day weekend, we consider:
those who are training for work,
those who are employed,
those who are unemployed yet seeking work,
and those who are retired.

Find your life in one of these categories, and determine if your life's work reflects God's glory? Is your business God's business?

First we consider those who are training for a vocation. My youngest son is the only child in our family still training for his life's work. At his recent White Coat Ceremony in Memphis, TN, after he had donned his white coat to signal the commencement of medical school, one of the professors on the podium said, "This crisp, new white coat which you now wear is not a uniform; it is a commitment. A commitment to place aside your selfish ambitions and, instead, promise to use your talents and skills for the service of humanity."

That should be true for our Christian vocation, as well.

We each embark upon a journey of education to acquire skills and experience that will enable us to work, not solely for our personal gain, but primarily for the betterment of our world, our neighbor.

Our present culture teaches otherwise, however, and the illusion of happiness promised through wealth and the acquisition of things, directs many a student down pathways of unattainable fulfillment.

When we work only for ourselves, we do not love neighbor and do not fulfill God's law.

Those of us who are employed, with years of training and education behind us, hang diplomas on our walls. Perhaps as badges of courage, or a means of impressing our neighbor.

See where I studied! See how many degrees I earned!
See the number of awards I have received from my colleagues!

Again, the desire for our neighbor to see only us, places us at risk of great disappointment.

But if in our life's work, we seek to love neighbor and honor God, and recognize the dignity of our neighbor's work, we will have opportunity, as Apostle Paul penned, "to live honorably." With this mindset, we can avoid the pitfalls of jealousy and the temptations of the works of darkness.

Whose work is most important, anyway?

The engineer who can design such structures as this church? The electrician who can wire it? How about the skill of understanding the intricacies of acoustics? Some folks did a marvelous job in here!

Or is the work of those who built our parking lot or the streets and bridges that bring us here? Or those with the skill and nerve to place shingles upon a roof pitched as steep as this? Whose work is most impressive?

Perhaps more important is the work of our government officials, law enforcement officers, fire fighters. Or those who faithfully remove the ever-growing mounds of refuse that we leave at the curb each week.

Whose work can we do without? Whose work is unimportant?
Those who teach your young child who struggles with attention deficit issues? The medical personnel who saved your life recently?

Who is deemed worthy to classify the value of our work?

Some may say, “I just wish I had work. My employer recently thanked me for decades of service and rewarded me with a severance check.” Facing such a crossroads, we are well reminded that while God has made us to work in partnership with God, our work and training do not define who we are.

We are much more than skill sets or technical qualifications. We are beloved children of God...made to glorify the God who fashioned us.

And many of us are finding great meaning in second careers, journeying down unexpected paths that we had never considered before. God’s grace goes before us, helping us reconsider our worth and purpose.

Finally, there are many among us in this congregation who have retired from their life’s work.

The flexibility and freedom are only sobered by the issues of aging, perhaps having to deal with new health concerns or family responsibilities.

I have been watching some of you driving these city streets; I think you need to buy used school busses to haul around those grandchildren from soccer to dance class to church choir! Life is full, but life is different in retirement.

Some retirees struggle with depression, feeling their reason for being is over. Their work defined them, and now that definition is gone. I hope you will be inspired by Paul’s letter to the Romans to not give in to laziness or unfruitful activity, but instead, to allow God to help you have new eyes that see other tasks that need to be done.

With the increasing numbers of people joining the workforce in order to meet financial needs of growing families, the church is in great need of volunteers who have flexible hours. Small deeds done as we love our neighbor will perhaps bring more self-fulfillment and purpose than you ever knew in your career.

The work of your life, even in retirement, can change the world.

John Wesley who started this gathering of people called Methodists, respected the work of his neighbors. In an era when manual labor was considered almost a curse, when England’s workforce could not come to the formal service of worship, Wesley went to them in the fields, outside the mines.

He did not regard them as lesser neighbors, but called them to find purpose and meaning for their lives through the grace of God.

As Wesley helped them discover God’s love, he changed a nation. Through the accompanying efforts of others such as William Wilberforce, John Wesley changed the whole world.

So can you.

Love and serve your neighbor through the work of your hands. Honor the work of all. And most importantly, keep your life's work vital and alive.

Many in this congregation are aware that one of my daughters recently gave birth to a special-needs child. With her permission, I share with you a part of the story of her life's work.

At the age of nine, Victoria was running to our car following a soccer game; she stepped into a hole...an innocent accident that forever changed her life. After multiple orthopedic devices and three surgeries, Victoria's gait is still abnormal. She learned very early to live with chronic pain and with physical limitations. As is common in such scenarios, she learned to be brave and stoic and strong. She had uncommon compassion for others. As I remember those years of childhood and adolescence, I realize that she made gallons of sweet-tasting lemonade from the bushel of lemons that life tossed at her.

As Victoria's mother, I often wondered what her life's work would be. She considered medicine but eventually majored in religion, minored in music, and began a career of working with troubled youth – a decision that took her to Texas, Wisconsin, Guatemala, and Colorado. It was on that final stop that she met the love of her life, a young Lutheran minister. It was a moment ordained by God.

After marrying and relocating to North Carolina, this young couple welcomed into their home a healthy baby boy. And 23 months later they again prepared to bring home another baby boy. There was no indication throughout the nine months of waiting that anything was amiss. But a diagnosis of Down Syndrome changed their world. Victoria's life work was turning in a new direction.

And now as she cares for this child as they await his heart surgery date, I see that same resolve in her eyes. "I can do this. I can do hard things. God gives strength to the weary."

So every night as this young family stands in a circle at bedtime, they do not read stories or say, "Now I lay me down to sleep." Instead, they take turns making the sign of the cross on each other's foreheads, "The Lord bless you and keep you." Even the first night that they brought home that newborn son, their 2-year-old placed his tiny hand on his baby brother's forehead and said, "Blessings."

Life did not turn out the way this family had planned. Perhaps you can relate. Perhaps you also have found an unexpected turn in the road. But my daughter's family walk it with courage, and so should we.

Be courageous enough to work in partnership with God. God alone knows what all you could do!

In training...

In employment...
In unemployment...
In retirement...

Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep...the night is far gone, the day is near.

Let the business of your life be God's business.