

Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: "Work Life"

Sermon Title: "Many Layers of Purpose"

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:10

Listeners Journey: I want my listener to see their work, paid or unpaid, as a God infused journey of discovery and identity as individuals and with others. And, I want my listener to explore the subtle differences between the layers and convergences of what we call "work," "careers," and "vocations."

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Early Church in the city of Ephesus that included theological reflections and words of encouragement. In chapter two he wrote something very provocative about the layers of work life: ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:10. NIV

In this brief statement Paul said that we have been created by God to be creators like God. And, because of Jesus we are re-created to do good. But, most provocatively Paul said that our Creator created us to be creators who do good works that are *pre-designed* for us such that when we do them, we are not only "doing" what we were uniquely created to do, we are being who we were created to be.

I have researched the topic of work, careers and vocation in preparation for this teaching series. In reading about the ways that people find purpose and meaning in their work, it is very clear to me that work, paid or unpaid, can be a mystical pursuit of meaning. Not everyone sees it that way, or reaches for the work-life purpose paradigm in those terms. Regardless, religious books and non-religious books, religious and non-religious people tell over and over again that the work they found, or they eventually found, or that eventually found them was like finding a piece of themselves, and that is a glorious mystery.

It is as if the Apostle Paul tapped into a universal law of the human experience that says "we are created for specific and practical purposes and it is our joy to either find those purposes or give ourselves permission to be found by our purposes within the timeframe of our lifetimes."

It was an American journalist once said: "Work is about the search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor (or lethargy); in short, for a sort of *life* rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying."¹

Finding purpose in work or finding purpose in a career--what's the difference? It would be an over-reach to make too hard edged a distinction, but whereas as a job is more often defined as a single thing that can be repeated with little variation, a career is often referred to a widening course of progress through life.² Career speaks to advancement and often times is accompanied by specific rewards and the sense that one is in a self-driven vehicle that is "going places."

¹ Isay, Dave. Callings: The Purpose and Passion of Work (A StoryCorps Book) (p. 3). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Career> (accessed 6-4-16)

Forbes Magazine reports that 91% of the Millennial generation will stay in a job for less than three years and have 15-20 jobs over the course of their working lives.³ But changing jobs is different than changing careers--its more like re-arranging the furniture in the same house if one continues to work in the same line of work, but for different companies.

Thinking about the trajectory of careers, then, what are some of the things that a Christ follower is to be aware of when pursuing a career? After all, in today's Scripture the Apostle Paul said that Christ followers were "created in Christ Jesus to do good works." There is a mountain of meaning in those eight words. To be created in Christ Jesus is to be re-created. Those who awaken to Christ and give their lives to Jesus and the ways of God are people who give themselves to the journey of transformation by becoming like Christ over a lifetime.

So, the good works in Christ that Paul was talking about is works that reach for specific Christ-like ethics such as compassion, mercy, justice, forgiveness, a desire to have diverse friendships across the spectrum but carry special concern and solidarity with the poor and marginalized regardless of our career pathway.

Earlier this year I was invited by a Catholic business person (who works downtown) to attend a series of lectures titled "Vocation of the Business Leader." The Catholic Church published a study on the intersections of work and faith in the 21st century. It was excellent with one of the main points of emphasis being that Christ followers are strongly encouraged to live an integrated life where careers serve our ethical social principles and not the other way around.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary calls an inversion of career over ethics "Careerism: the way of behaving that involves trying to do whatever you can to make more money or get promoted at your job, often at the cost of one's integrity and ethics."⁴

The series of lectures left us with three key questions to ponder:

As a Christ follower in the marketplace:

- Am I promoting human dignity and the common good in my sphere of influence?
- Am I supporting the culture of life; justice; international regulations; transparency; civic; environmental, and labor standards; and the the fight against corruption?
- Am I promoting the integral development of the person in *my* workplace?

The word "Vocation" is Latin and means "a call, summons."⁵ Christian author Parker Palmer wrote this about vocation: "Today I understand vocation...not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice 'Out there' calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be a person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God."⁶

³ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/08/14/job-hopping-is-the-new-normal-for-millennials-three-ways-to-prevent-a-human-resource-nightmare/#4a0cf08d5508> (accessed 6-4-16)

⁴ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/careerism> (accessed 6-5-16)

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vocation> (Accessed 6-4-16)

⁶ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, © 2000 Jon Wiley & Sons. Pages 10.

These words resonate with the Apostle Paul's belief that the creator of our souls prepares purposeful work for us in advance of us even knowing what it is. Although, it is very likely that our pre-ordained purpose or vocation that reflects our original selfhood is not like a time or punch card, and it is not the same thing as a career arc or path. Rather, it is a set of themes that lure us throughout our lifetime both in sync and sometimes regardless of the other layers of our work life.

Three Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think about the layers of paid and unpaid work? (Personal sharing)
2. In what ways do you see Scripture, and today's text in specific, informing the convergence of the spiritual life and work life? (Exploring the text)
3. What are some questions that you can begin to ask about the layers of your worklife? (Direct application)