



Summer 2005

The Re-forming Power of Work...

This past fall, I was invited to contribute a chapter to a book currently in publication by InterVarsity Press. Its focus is those things that God uses to reform our broken and twisted lives. The topic I was given was: WORK.

Summer is, for most of us, a time to vacate our work for a week or two and be renewed. Perhaps these excerpts will be meaningful as you retreat from yours.

Work is an inescapable reality. It's what occupies a significant portion of our days. It's how we manage to pay our bills. But its significance is much farther reaching. It reflects our unique place in the world as God's created daughters and sons...

Work can be inspired and praiseworthy as well as vicious and numbing, but regardless of its effect, work is what the vast majority of us have to do much of the time and most of our lives. Some of our lives are enhanced and others depleted by work. Whether the work environment is our home or an office building, industrial plant or retail store, indoor or outside, whether our dress is formal or casual, many of us leave work less alive, wishing we had more time and energy for those facets of our lives we find more meaningful and enjoy.

Work is not a nuisance to be avoided or punishment to be endured. Work is a gift given from the hands of a benevolent and kind God. Holiness and work are not mutually exclusive. Work is what we do to continue what God wants done. Sitting at my laptop this moment searching for just the right words to say about work continues the work of God. Maintaining a garden that's attractive, colorful and inviting is a continuation of God's work. Building homes that provide housing for individuals and families is co-creative. This is God's design for the ongoing work of creation that God began.

To each person God has given gifts and talents to be used for our pleasure and to

meet the needs of others. For that reason, there's dignity and honor imbued in every job given and accomplished by a child of God.

My father was the first to teach me about the sanctity of work. I remember, as a young boy, going with him to the garage where we had our car serviced. Standing on the front bumper I watched the mechanic as he worked on our car's engine. Near the completion of his work the mechanic brought his greasy covered hand up to scratch his nose, leaving a thick smudge of grease on his face. Disgusted, I looked at my dad and shouted, "Yuck, I'll never be a mechanic. Greasy hands are gross!" Immediately, my dad lifted me from the bumper and took me to a private area where he explained my offense. "Son, that man is doing something very important that neither of us is able to do. He's providing a service that God gave him to pass along to us. Never say anything about a person's work suggesting it's unimportant, insignificant, and least of all, gross!" When his work was done, my dad let me pay the mechanic. I recall my surprise at the cost to make the repair. After paying, my dad asked if there was anything I wished to say to the mechanic. Having already been coached I was prepared to say, "Sir, thank you for getting your hands dirty so we could drive our car home. My dad told me that if I wasn't grateful I could walk home and use the time thinking about the importance of your work." Graciously he accepted my thanks and thankfully I was given a ride home...

As men and women who yearn to live a life reflective of Paul's words, "...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" and "For in him we live and move and have our being." (2 Cor 5:17 & Acts 17:28), these are issues that we must ponder: Does the time and energy we spend working to earn our needed income also enrich our lives? Is there a definitive link between the huge effort required to maintain our home, contribute to our community, provide for the well-being of

our family and the intimacy of our relationship with God? To each question the declarative answer I would offer is, "It all depends."

When my identity is enmeshed in my work; when the measure of my worth is my productivity, monetary success, or renown; when remaining constantly busy is the thing I do to feel important or to avoid feelings of emptiness, then in all likelihood my work is toxic and hazardous to my health. Whenever I'm looking for myself or trying to escape myself in my work, I'm flirting with that horrible dependence or addiction that is workaholism. One very clear symptom is being constantly consumed with work, such that, even when I'm not at work, my mind is working on my work. Whenever this occurs, it's certain that all the things that I claim matter most in my life are suffering; relationships, personal health, the perspective needed to enjoy the little things in life, and being able to rest in the awareness that my work is an important means and not an end...

For some, vocation becomes like a "road to heaven" and it's possible for all. I've known many who would pay for the privilege of doing the things their vocation allows and some who, in fact, do pay. I heard of a western journalist, watching Mother Teresa care for one of the dying, who couldn't help observing, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars." To which Mother Teresa replied, "Neither would I."

Our deepest calling is to be the person God created. There's no gift you or I have to offer that will provide God, you, or me more pleasure, delight, and good. What we seek in a vocation is discovered and expressed when we engage wholeheartedly in the task that is at hand.

Years ago, with rapt attention, I listened as story teller, retreat leader, and author Bob Benson offered some deeply personal and insightful reflections on the apostle Paul's words, "...think of what you were when you were called." (1 Cor 1:26)



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"Think of what you were..." Bob then began telling a simple story that at first had me wondering where he was headed. "Early last spring I was planting my garden." Explaining that it was late in the evening, with plans for leaving the following morning on an extended trip, he was hurrying to finish before darkness fell. Having run out of sticks to mark the rows, he was about to retrieve some more, so the beds would be neatly marked and labeled upon his return.

Suddenly, he wondered what was the purpose for labels anyway. By the time he returned the plants would be up and he could see where they were growing. From prior experience, he knew how to identify the plants, the animals that typically came to feast on his garden knew the identity of the plants, and certainly the seeds knew what they were. "Who needs labels?"

Heeding this new insight, Bob simply covered the seeds with the moist earth and gently patted the beds and said, "Go ahead and sprout. You know what you are."

It's always been a huge mystery to me what is meant when we say we're made in the image of God. Yet I have a profound sense that the voice of God is calling out in the deepest darkest place of my soul. The great challenge and test of my faith is to trust that voice enough to heed what it's saying and thus discover who I really am and what I have the potential of becoming.

Therefore, if it seems that I'm hearing nothing from the outside (where I'm accustomed to hearing) then I have only to listen to the voice that is deep inside me. That, I have come to believe, is the calling voice of God.

The problem oftentimes is not having enough confidence in myself to listen to the whispering voice...or the time...or the patience. Most of the time I don't hear it. But it doesn't really matter, because in all likelihood, if I did, I wouldn't trust it. So, like most others, I search for what I'm to do in some other

way. I ask for advice from friends, family members, and professionals. I read books and listen to tapes. I put out fleeces, flip coins, take aptitude tests, and personality inventories. Not bad things to do...unless they keep me from doing the most important thing. And that is, to believe that I have the answers deep within.

Paul's simple, yet profound, words suggest that the calling does indeed come from within the lives of the most unlikely and "foolish". No doubt, I think I'm unlikely, but God doesn't. I have difficulty believing that God could do great things in me, but God doesn't.

The point is; if God can take a tiny seed and in the process of giving it life, help it to become what it was intended to be; and that, when it's all supposed to occur, and even perpetuate itself, why is it so unbelievably hard to believe that God can do the same for and inside me?

Since, having clearly and without a doubt done this for beans and squash and tomatoes and corn, it shouldn't be too much of a stretch to believe that God's image is in me, calling me to be who I've been called to be.

The trick is to listen for the voice, to hear it, to believe it, and to trust it enough to act upon it. It's all that easy and it's all that hard.

A Note From Fil:

The most important thing I wish to express is my profound gratitude for your prayers, financial support, and personal interest in the work God has given us.

Would you please prayerfully consider two requests?

- The summer months often result in a decline in contributions. If you are not currently partnering with us and are inclined to help, we would be most grateful. All gifts to Journey Resources are tax deductible. No level of support could be too small to matter.

- Would you prayerfully consider e-mailing us, indicating your interest in receiving a "Monday Morning Note", via e-mail, informing you of opportunities for which prayer would be appreciated? Just drop me a note at: filanderson@triad.rr.com

May the love of God flood your life!

Fil's Summer Calendar

June

10-11 Directing retreat for Campus Ministers for Georgia Conference of United Methodist Church

July

No scheduled events

August

9-11 Our Lady of Grace Faculty and Staff Retreat, Indianapolis IN

14-19 Private silent retreat Loyola of the Lakes Jesuit Retreat Center, Akron, OH

19 Speaking for combined campus ministries at UNC-G, Greensboro, NC

21 Speaking to combined adult classes at Christ United Methodist Church, Greensboro, NC

25-29 Personal men's retreat, Vail, CO