

Following Examples
Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

I remember the conversation at the dinner table when my Father informed my brother and me that if we wanted to eat, we must work! That meant that we had to work at home and would later be expected to have jobs outside our home. On this occasion we were being instructed about our responsibilities at home, keeping the house clean, clothes washed, our homework done, and the evening meals prepared while both my parents worked long hours in their respective businesses. Each of us had a role to play in the success of our family.

I want to be very clear that when I talk about work, I'm not just talking about people who are out in the workplace. I read a study that said the skill set required of an effective modern homemaker, were they out in the workplace, would be valued in excess of \$70,000 a year! It takes us all, working together, but all must work.

Dr. Tony Campolo is an internationally renowned speaker, and while Tony has spent much of his life traveling around the world speaking, his wife, Peggy, chose to stay home and pour herself into raising their two children, Bart and Lisa. Peggy Campolo found that when she traveled with her husband, she was often in conversations with some of the most impressive and sophisticated people in the world. She related in an interview that she often felt intimidated and even questioned her own self-worth when conversing with some of the people she met. After this interview her husband said to her, "Well, honey, why don't you come up with something you could say when you meet people that will let them know that you value what you're doing and think it's important?" Not long after, they were at a party when a woman said to Peggy Campolo in a rather condescending tone, "Well, my dear, what do you do?" Peggy responded with pride and confidence, "I am nurturing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time." The other woman said, "Oh, well, I'm just a lawyer."

Believe me, if you are a homemaker, you have work. If you're an active volunteer in the community, you have work. If you're a student – oh, you have piles of work. If you happen to be a retired person who serves in your church, you do work that makes your church all that it is. We are all called by God to work.

The Christians of Thessalonica had decided to opt out of the work force. For what they believed were deeply spiritual reasons, they decided to abandon the routines of daily life and just wait and pray for the second coming of Jesus. Word made its way back to the Apostle Paul, the scrappy little tentmaker who worked his fingers to the bone to support his ministry was not amused. He dashed a letter off that said, "Fine, if you don't work, you don't eat." No daily bread for you.

"For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule, "If a person will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and

urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is right.

You may recall the classic Disney movie "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go!" they sing as they sling their pickaxes over their shoulders and with joy and purpose in their faces off they march to the mines, singing "Hi ho! Hi ho!"

You've probably also seen the bumper sticker that says "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." What propels you out of bed in the morning? Is it "Hi ho, hi ho" or is it "I owe, I owe"? Is work a blessing or a curse to you?

In the Bible, work is one of the most Godlike things a person can do. In Genesis 1 we see a working God who makes the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the rivers and the trees, the forests and all things living and breathing. And then God says, "Let us make humankind in our image." As a working God, I will create a working creature – a human being – and I will give him and her dominion over the works of my hands.

Jesus of Nazareth carried a lunch bucket to work. He was a carpenter. His disciples would rise early before dawn to drag smelly nets through the water to catch fish in the Sea of Galilee. When the Pharisees criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, remember what he said, "My Father is working and I am working still." In 1 Cor. 3:9, we read, "We are God's fellow workers."

And so the most Godlike thing you and I can do is to get up in the morning and go to work. That's one reason the unemployment rate in society is a spiritual issue. For Christians, the reason welfare is so insidious is not that it costs too much. It is because welfare runs counter to everything necessary for a human to live a happy, satisfying life. The Bible says we should care for the widows and children, for those who cannot work, but those who are able must work. In fact, in the book we are studying in Sunday School, Will Willimon says that church is not a place that we get what we need out of God, rather church is God' means for getting what God wants out of us. Church is where, if we are doing our job, we meet Christ whose main work is accomplished not be healing and helping but rather by vocation. Christ helps and heals by giving us outrageous assignments.

I believe that we can spend our money on schools and jobs or we can spend our money on police and prisons. You know, my grandmother was right. An idle mind is the devil's workshop. To work is a blessing. But more than that, we need work because work is how we fulfill the image of the Creator in our lives. Work is following the example set for us by Creator God, by Redeemer Jesus, and by the Sustainer Holy Spirit.

While serving on the faculty of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte, after referring to the Trinity as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, Dean Tom Curry, cautioned me that those were not names for the three-in-one, but rather job descriptions.

Sometimes a word is worth a thousand pictures. And so it is with that word vocation. It's a Bible word. It comes from the word kaleo meaning, literally, to call or summon by name. We

believe that God calls us to our work. This is the very heart of what I want to share with you. Among Christians, there are myriad occupations, but there is only one vocation. The one vocation all of us share is to faithfully serve Jesus Christ every hour of every day. And next to that one vocation, all of our occupations don't matter very much at all.

There's a marvelous passage from the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 7 in which Paul radically relativizes our occupations in light of our one vocation. Here's what Paul says in 1 Cor. 7:21: "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you although if you can regain your freedom, do so."

In today's terms, we might think Paul is saying, "Were you a parking lot attendant on the night shift when you became a Christian? Do you intensely dislike your job? Well, if you can get a better job, be sure and do so. But don't get so agitated about your occupation that you lose sight of your vocation which is to love and serve Jesus Christ every moment of every day."

I love the conversation a pastor friend of mine had with a new member of his church. A young woman was joining, and he asked her, "What do you do for a living?" And with a sly smile, she looked at him and said, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ secretly disguised as a legal secretary." Isn't that wonderful? I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ carefully disguised as a carpool mom. As a financial advisor...as a bank teller...or even as a McDonald's hamburgerologist; the attitude we bring can change almost any occupation into the call of God. For whatever our occupation, our one vocation is always to be a servant.

Mother Teresa was asked by a reporter, "What is your biggest problem?" Mother Teresa answered with one word: "Professionalism." She said, "Here are these servants of Jesus who care for the poorest of the poor. I have one who just went off and came back with her medical degree. Others have come back with registered nurse degrees. Another with a master's in social work, and when they come back with their degrees, their first question always is, "Where is my office?" Then she said, "But you know what I do? I send them over to the House of the Dying where they simply hold the hands of dying people for six months, and after that, they're ready to be servants again." Whatever our occupation, our vocation is to be a servant.

One year ago this week you all voted to "do whatever is necessary" to transform this church. I warned that it would take a lot of hard work on the part of everyone. We have begun some of that work. In many ways people outside these walls have experienced your Servant hearts. I pray that you have been blessed by the work that has been done.

When we are working to glorify God, there are moments when you feel God's pleasure. When is it that you feel the tingle of his presence? When we do what God is calling us to do, we feel the satisfaction that comes with God's pleasure if we have done it for Him. Even the most menial job done well gives God glory.

Eric Liddell's father goes even further. He says, "Aye, and ye can peel a spud to the glory of God, providin' ye peel it to perfection." Jesus put it this way, "So let your light shine that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Someone once wrote these beautiful words:

And what is it to work with love?

*It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your own heart, even as if
your beloved were to wear that cloth.*

It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house.

*It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your
beloved were to eat the fruit.*

It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit.

Work is love made visible.

My friends, I pray that in the coming year you love your work and your work be love. May you hear God's call: It's time to go to work building the Body of Christ called First Presbyterian Church.