

Holy Laboring

Bible Reading:
Matthew 25: 14-30

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When people meet for the first time, it's one of the first things that tends to get brought up in conversation.

"So..... what do you do for a living?"

We go there because our work is so much a part of who and what we are.

Our identity quickly gets caught up in it.

Which makes unemployment and retirement such a difficult experience.

It's like a huge chunk has just been ripped out of you and tossed away.

Our work, our labour - a key part of ourselves and our place in this world.

I want to consider that for a moment with you on this Labour Day weekend.

How does God view our work?

Does He care about what we do with our lives and the tasks we perform?

Does He demand as many employers today, continually raising the bar?

Or - For those of you heading off to school -- Think of God as a teacher for the moment - what kind of assignments does He give? How tough a marker is He? Does He care if we get the work finished, or if we hand it in on time?

Join me in reading a parable, a story, told by Jesus and addressing this issue:

Matthew 25.14-30 p.1120

I don't know if you caught one of the big underlying assumptions of this story.

Has to do with work and identity.

The work that the servants do doesn't first of all make them part of the Master's household.

They **are** part of it right from the get-go.

And it is in the existing relationship with the Master that they receive their talents and do their work.

We want to note that up front.

As much as we can get our identities all wrapped around the axle of what we do

that our value as a human being depends on the value of our work

that our value as a believer depends on the strength of our faith and efforts for God

We need to note that Jesus **doesn't** make this kind of a connection.

Our place in God's eyes

Our membership in His holy family

Our eternity security

is not a function of whether we can turn a profit for God in this life or not.

What we **do** is not what brings us and keeps us in relationship with the Heavenly Father.

That's based on what someone **else** has done -

on what Jesus has done.

That's why there's a cross standing at the front here - to remind us of His work, His ultimate sacrifice.

One of the clearest bible passages is Col 1.21-22, which says:

"....Once you were alienated from God and were enemies.... but now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight...".

We are brought into a relationship with our Heavenly Father by accepting Jesus Christ's saving work on our behalf. All we do is open our lives to His divine presence and control.
Nothing we do can add to what He has already done.

Our identity is **not** tied up in what we do.
Our identity is tied up in Jesus.

And so it is, as people for whom Jesus gave His life,
people freely brought into the community of God,
people graciously, totally loved in an unqualified sense

- as SUCH people, we are given gifts - talents - to use for our Master.

So remember: **Receiving** precedes **doing** in the kingdom of God.
Grace precedes **work**.

In that context, then, this story -
The servants are entrusted with portions of the Master's estate.
Different amounts - each with a portion the Master deems fitting.
And off they go.

"The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work..."
As you may have picked up from the footnote in the Bible, "*talent*" was an ancient monetary unit. We need to understand it as representing resources in general. The servant is given resources from the estate and activates them.

Went at once... to work.... gained...: Those are action words.
This fellow's excited, eager. He sees the privilege of being entrusted with the possessions of the Master, and throws himself into their use.
He's active. He's got an opportunity to do good for His boss who has taken him in. The Master is counting on him.
What an honor! He's not going to let Him down!

The amounts are different for servant #2, but the attitude is the same.

It's an attitude that comes out when the Master returns and they present their results to Him:
Master, you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.
You entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.

The servants acknowledge the Master as the originator of the gifts.
They know they are working with HIS resources.
But -- then they are also willing to speak about the fruit of their labour, to take pride in it and celebrate it.
There is joy, satisfaction, in a job well done.
And the Master shares in that joy and satisfaction.

As God does with you.
On this Labour Day weekend I want to celebrate with you the talents which the Holy Creator has granted to us - individually and collectively.
I want to celebrate the opportunities presented to us to use them.
And I want to celebrate your faithfulness in doing so.

Because, friends at Calvin Church -
You **are** faithful.

While a huge chunk of the congregation is away getting a last kick at summer replenishment on this beautiful weekend - those of you present represent many resources. There's a great richness here.

Some of you have been blessed with great intellect. An ability to study. To do research. To design, harness and develop the potential God planted within Creation.

And you do.

Others of you work well with people - you can manage and direct teams; or you can teach new skills; or you can encourage people whose lives have come apart. You can nurture.

And you do.

Still others of you are excellent with your hands - you can manipulate tools; you understand things mechanical.

You build, you construct, you repair.

Others of you can make things grow.

And then there are those who know how to make the beautiful appear.

Friends - when I look around this room I see an enormous reservoir of talents:

God-given potential.

Which you have exercised, and continue to exercise.

Well done, good and faithful servants.

Today I'd like you to see your efforts within a larger picture -

The picture of a God who fathered the Cosmos - Creator.

A God who entered this world to save it - Saviour

A God who moves in this world today, empowering - Spirit.

This Holy God made the world to be explored, developed and managed.

And where sin, where pain, where brokenness have crept in - God wants healing brought.

Where uncertainty, half-truth and aimlessness is present, He desires restoration and direction.

God calls on those within His household to engage in these tasks.

There is a day coming when the Master will return.

It will be the day when the Master will complete all that was begun in His name.

It will be the day when finally all that produces tears, all that causes things and people to break, all that which distorts the good in Creation

when all that will be finally swept away.

We live in hope of that day.

We work towards that day.

And though it doesn't give precise mechanics or exact details of how things will all work, this parable of Jesus paints us a picture with a hint -

- a hint that somehow, in some divinely ordered and directed way
somehow what we do in this life carries echoes into the next.

What we do now, in devotion and service to our Lord and Saviour
will have ripples, echoes, effects into the New Creation.

Some of you are approaching the end of your tenure of service.

When that exactly will be, only God knows.

But you are aging. Perhaps you can feel that the time in this life is coming towards an end.

Let me encourage you not to confuse retirement with the end of the challenge of serving God.

That challenge, those opportunities only end on the day we stand face to face with the Master. Till then there will always be talents passed our way - resources and opportunities to serve Christ.

May I encourage you, within the bounds of health and means that God provides - to not grow discouraged; to not give up; to continue to make a positive difference in life in those perhaps few square meters where the Lord has put you.

Others of you know that you are in mid-stream.

Let me encourage you not to get mixed up by the messages that contemporary culture seduces you with - that the most important beneficiary of your paycheck and your work week and your leisure time and your home.....

Is you.

Or me.

'Cause then our Heavenly Father somehow gets nudged to the edge, and sometimes right off the page.

You can measure that, you know.

Not fully - but you can take a sampling.

By checking your budget - is there a significant portion that goes towards the development, the aid, the renewal of God's world and Kingdom in some way?

Or does it all disappear down that sinkhole called utilities, mortgage & rent, vacations, new purchases, retirement funds and whatever?

I've never known anyone to go broke because they devoted the first and best part of their resources to the Lord.

I've known **lots** of people to go broke because they overbought in housing or vehicles, or maxed the credit cards on many piddly purchases.

You can measure it in time.

What gets spent where? And who is the primary beneficiary?

You can measure it in the way of attitude on the job - are you doing what you're doing to get ahead? Or do you have a sense of responsibility and joy at being talented in certain ways and striving to cultivate those talents in a way that brings pleasure to the God who entrusted them to you - To impact others, somehow, in a positive, building up sort of creating way that reflects the positive, building up work of the Holy Creator?

It's not something that's always there at the front. I know that. But from time to time it's good to pause and do a check.

To reaffirm.

To rededicate.

Some of you are younger - heading off to school. Perhaps towards the end of your time of formal learning. Maybe graduation seems a long way off.

Let me encourage you in that world of education. What an opportunity you have! There are kids all over this world who would give anything for the chance to learn the way you do. Among the best education systems in the world.

God will go with you into the classrooms.

What you learn - and how you learn - matters to Him as you gain new skills and develop talents that can be used throughout your life.

We celebrate the amazing grace gift of being able to live for God under the protecting care and grace of Jesus.

To do that in every area of our life.

To know that He cares.

That what we do, while it doesn't make us more valuable to Him
it **does** matter!

He sees it as an investment, a building block in the eternity he's preparing even now.

Which is the whole problem with the third guy in Jesus' story.
He doesn't get it.
He doesn't care.

Look closely at him.

In contrast to the active, excited language of the first two servants, the language used to describe the third one is passive.

He "went off", dug a hole, hid....
Sloucho - slinkin'. Get away with as little as is possible.

He is, quite bluntly, preoccupied with covering his rear; playing it safe and keeping the skin on his nose.
Tries to justify that to the Master upon his return - comes up with some two-bit line about the Master being an aggressive, effective businessman who always gets his way in the end and who, in the end, really doesn't need his little contribution, anyway.

In the big scheme of things, one wee little talent don't matter anyhow.

And you know what - perhaps there's a hint of truth to that.
Ultimately, perhaps, we could say that **yes**, God doesn't **need** any of us.
But folks.....

the reality is that He has **chosen** to use us.
That's He's sovereign, holy **desire**.
He desires that we partner with Him
in the caring for Creation.
In the nurture of humanity.

The LAST thing He wants us to do is to pick the attitude of guy #3
shrug our shoulders as we walk away, calling back to Him,
"You're strong enough anyway. Why don't you do it yourself?"

Be it in science, in education, in developing social policy, or nurturing opportunities for play -
We have a divine responsibility - Our Lord is counting on us!

What an honor!
What a privilege!

It's no place for cutting the risks, hedging the investment, and holding the line.

Servant # 3 uses a Uriah Heap line of 'umbleness - *oh what would my contribution amount to, anyway?* - to justify unwillingness to take a risk, to stretch to the maximum, to strive for producing something worthwhile for the Kingdom.

And.... The Master doesn't buy it.
"You wicked, lazy servant!"
And he's given the boot.

Not because he underperformed.

But because in his lack of work he showed his true attitude toward the Master -
The Master was an after-thought who got the left-overs.

Dear friends, our lives have been graced with many gifts.

God looks to us to see what we will do with them.

Not because he's waiting to judge us on our success;

waiting to gauge whether he'll let us stay part of His heavenly team depending on whether or not we can
max out the rate of return.

Not at all.

Rather, He looks to see what we will do with those gifts because in our working we will eventually show our true
colours -

we will eventually show what we, in our heart of hearts, really think about the Master.

Our work may seem to us to be small.

But to the Lord it's value is immense.

Because **our** value to Him is immense.

He loves us.

He gave His life for us.

We are precious!

And now He entrusts us precious people with responsibility.

So let's take hold of it.

Let's each look at our lives.

What openings for service somewhere in Creation has Christ laid before you?

What natural gifts and abilities has He given you?

What doors seem to be opening for you?

When you offer yourself to Him in service in a prayerful manner, do you feel a nudging in your heart? If
so, to where?

Here in the Church.

And there - in that vast, beautiful Creation for which we are accountable.

Let's commit to work on this Labor Day - so that one day we, too, may hear, "Well done, you good and faithful
servant."

Get that - not "well done you good and **flashy** servant"

Rather "well done you good and **faithful** servant"

Faithful - it's said twice. Flashy is never mentioned. Not once.

See, there may be times - **will** be times - when we bumble, stumble and fumble. When we drop a whole
proverbial tray of dishes we were carrying for the Lord and everything smashes to bits on the floor.

It WILL happen.

But that's OK!!

God will be there to pick up the pieces.

He's in the business, you see, of New Beginnings.

What Christ seeks from us is faithfulness.

Faithfulness in the security of His love and acceptance.

A love and acceptance that won't suddenly go cold and toss us out on our ear in some fit of corporate
restructuring, or in some moment of spiritual recession.

A love and acceptance to which we can respond.

And with which we can labour.

With full, holy devotion.

