

Work - January 24, 2010 – 3rd Sunday After the Epiphany
1st Corinthians 12: 27 – 13: 1-7

You know what gets under my skin?

It's when I ask the person at the grocery check-out counter, "How are you today?" and I get this answer: "I'll be a whole lot better when I can punch out and leave this place."

That's the exact moment when I begin to sharpen my focus on how my groceries are being bagged; because I now know that in the contest between the check out counter getting home on time and my eggs getting home intact, I will likely lose.

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You know what rubs me the wrong way?

Those little phone head sets that I still see on some employees in some office supply and hardware stores. In theory, those head sets are there so that the sales associates can take phone calls from inquiring customers and still have their hands free; but you and I both know that they are mostly used to chat with boy friends and girl friends and that the most business-related talk that occurs on those phones is when the employee on that phone tells his or her buddy that work is "boring."

I dislike those phones because they give the store employee yet another excuse to ignore me, the paying customer. Several years ago I rushed into one of those chain office supply stores with two primary and urgent needs" I needed to make a dozen copies of a five page presentation; and I needed to use the rest room.

The young man at the counter forced me do all the talking.

"How many?" he mouthed the words as he continued what was obviously NOT a business conversation.

"A dozen" I replied, handing him the originals. He sort of nodded and resumed his phone conversation.

"Do you have a rest room?" I asked. Without a word, he pointed to a door twenty feet away.

When I returned, he was still on the phone and the copier was going full blast.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to the copier.

"Your order," he shouted back above the noise, with a look that said, "What did you think it was?"

"How many are you making?" I asked.

"A thousand," he answered with a smirk.

"I ordered a dozen," I replied with a smile.

That's when he hung up the phone and put my dozen copies in a bag - and put the remaining three, four, five hundred wasted copies in the trash. Did he care? No, I don't believe that he did.

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The subject of which we are speaking here is work - and the aggravating - in fact, it's more than aggravating, it's depressing... the aggravatingly depressing feeling one gets when you encounter people at work who hate the work that they are being paid to do.

Cashiers and sales people who treat you like a potted plant... Service people of all types in all kinds of service industries who have come to believe that you will believe anything as long as they say these magic words, "The computer says..." Those disembodied voices in the drive through fast food places who ask "Can I take your order" before you've even had a chance to read what they are selling.

There are times when you are tempted to say, especially in these times, "don't like your job? I know at least a dozen people who would love to have your job! Don't like to work? I know hundreds of people who would be grateful to work."

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And, of course, there is the exact opposite of all that: those people whose love of the work that they do - whatever they do - is so infectious... so contagious that you take your business to them. I have been blessed to know more than my share of those kinds of people.

There was Jack Cosseboom, who managed a pricey and fancy men's clothing store where I worked for a few years in my early twenties. The story goes that Jack's Dad had been the local ice man - not a high paying job in those days; and Jack's Dad had two pairs of pants: thick rubber overalls so that the blocks of ice wouldn't soak his clothing and one Sunday go to church pair of wool trousers Jack decided that he wanted more and he saw that the way to have more than two pairs of pants was to sell men's clothing.

And Jack loved that work! Jack worked at that same men's clothing store for nearly thirty years. And to the best of my knowledge, Jack still holds the record in that store for the most sales of anything and everything - shirts, suits, neckties, and, of course, pants. As manager, Jack drove and pushed us constantly to meet the needs of our customers - and to listen. He used to tell us, "When you listen, you will learn what the people need and only then will you know what to sell them."

And Jack did it all, sales and managing, with a smile and a wonderful laugh, with focus and dedication, and yes, he even whistled when he worked. Jack has long since passed away; but **Jack has long been an inspiration to me.**

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My cousin Bill served as chaplain in the most dangerous and depressing neighborhood in Boston, Columbia Point Housing Project. It has long since been torn down. Where it once was is now the John F. Kennedy Library; but when it once existed, it was known as the "murder a month block" for obvious reasons.

I stayed with Bill and helped him at the storefront office in Columbia Point during the summer between my sophomore and junior year in high school.

And during that summer, I saw it all: the poverty; the violence; the lack of education and the seeming lack of interest in education; gangs and early versions of gang battles; teens, and I mean middle school teens pregnant; seemingly unending needs being put on Bill’s desk; parents, mostly mothers - the fathers were mostly absent - overwhelmed by those needs. **It was depressing. It was a depressing place.**

And yet each and every morning at breakfast, there was my cousin Bill, sitting across the table from me, with peace and joy in his face and with an excitement about what he would encounter that day. **Bill has been an inspiration to me.**

And then there is Tony Lepore, the dancing traffic police man from Providence, Rhode Island, whose acrobatic dance routines while he directed busy traffic was so popular that the mayor called Tony out of retirement where at the age of sixty two, he is still doing his routine.

These are people who love their work; and it doesn’t matter what the work is: selling shirts and ties and pants; ministering to a broken and chaotic community; or directing traffic.

Martin Luther King once said of work, “If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”

Christopher de Vinck, who supervises thirty two English teachers in a New Jersey high school, recently identified the traits of the best teachers he has known. He writes in *Christianity Today* “The best teachers know their subject matter, care deeply about the academic and social success of their students, and express a personality of **confidence and goodness.**” And then he adds, “These are valuable qualities no matter what we do for a living.”

And Kenneth McFayden, writing for the clergy journal *Leading Ideas* says this about pastors and what they must do to lead their respective churches.

“Leadership requires *energy* — physical and emotional, psychological and spiritual. Leadership calls for active engagement... It requires stick-to-it-iveness and stamina, since there are no quick fixes when leading churches.”

Teachers... street sweepers... pastors... No matter what we do for work, the same qualities are necessary to love your work **and** to do your work well. It requires not only loving your work but loving those with whom you work - and loving those whom you serve.

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Which brings us to church... and the work of the church...

In the passage that we heard this morning, the Apostle Paul names the following fully functioning members of the body of Christ – or, if you will, those who work in any given church.

There are apostles, prophets, teachers, people who heal; those people who exercise power and influence; there are the people who regularly help out at church in various ways; there are leaders of all kinds... let's call them "committee leaders and church officers;" and finally, those people who speak in tongues.

We know and we can identify most of these people in our local church. We know what teachers do and the functions of church leaders and those who are care givers. We know those who have the most influence and who want to run the show. Prophets are the preachers of the local church; and the best definition for apostles, in this case, is the traveling evangelist. I count eight, maybe nine types of workers that Paul names as likely and maybe even necessary workers in the church.

Now let's go the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* – the 2008 edition - and see how far we have come – or rather, how far a field we may have gone. Beginning with paragraph 247, and continuing for twenty-seven more pages to paragraph 258. 4 c, the *Book of Discipline* lists a dozen or more officers and an additional eight or nine corresponding committees that we as the modern church have decided is necessary just to have church. And that does not include the UMW or the United Methodist Men or all the "program ministries" - from church school superintendent to youth council to communications chair.

And all of us know that... really... even this long list from the *Discipline* doesn't begin to tell the whole story - that our work at church often if not always overlaps; that, for example, there are different kinds of lay leaders for different kinds of churches at different times in each church's lives. And that people will find a way to do what they love to do at church, no matter what committee in which they find themselves assigned.

And, frankly, that's not only just fine... that's the way it should be. People at church should do the work of the church that they love and they should love the work that they do.

It took me four years at the church where I am a member to finally take the leap and teach a senior high school class. I was scared to death to even consider doing that, but the education pastor persisted; and in time I tried - in time I was ready to make that leap - and doing so changed my life – and taking that step has led me here.

Burt it did take some time. We need to respect the time it takes for each of us and all of us to grow in grace and stretch a little, while in the meantime doing the things we love to do.

Because at work - and I believe especially at church work - everyone counts; every task is important; and **all work is holy**. Indeed we do this work to glorify God, not to advance or secure our place in church.

I cannot help but think with joy of Bo Clatterbuck who each and every Sunday hands out a bulletin and some candy, some with sugar and some sugar-free - to every person who enters that sanctuary at Bethsaida. Bo does a lot of good things for that church; but those moments of welcome and hospitality may be his most holy work.

At Mt. Zion, there seems to almost always be a bounty – an abundance - of skills and talent and experience and resources for which any wise pastor would be justly grateful. But, after all is said and done, the best work done at that church - and actually at every church - is the work that goes unseen: acts of generosity and kindness and comfort and peace that transcend and defy the limits of any committee.

And at Walker’s, there is one person in particular upon whom the church can always count to mow the lawn and rake and blow way the leaves; who is the last person to leave the building to see if the lights are off and the heat is turned down and is often the first person to open up the building. And that person is Buck White.

And why do you think Buck does all things? Is he especially fond of raking leaves or scraping snow from the driveways? Buck does these things for the same reasons that all of us do the work that we do for the life of the church: because we love the church; because we love the church where we grew up and where we believe we belong; because we love those people who share the pews with us, who worship with us...

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In the passage that we heard this morning, Paul lists his eight to nine jobs that make up the church – what Paul calls the body of Christ; and then he adds this final word, inviting and encouraging us, saying... “Now I will show you a still more excellent way.”

And what is that excellent way? **It is love...**All of the work that we do - in our workplaces; around our homes; in our churches - means absolutely nothing if we don’t love our work, don’t love our church, and most especially don’t love each other. Paul says that without love, all that work at church is nothing but noise.

And then Paul goes on to say what love is and isn’t: that love is patient and kind; that it is not rude or arrogant or irritable or boastful or pushy... but rather it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

In this morning’s words of greeting, Jesus speaks of love, saying, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, so that my joy may be in you and so that your joy may be complete.

So that our joy may be complete. We love one another not because we should or must but rather so that our joy will be complete – and so that the work that we do, in and out of church, will bear a clear and unmistakable testimony to our interest in, our involvement with, our commitment to, and yes, our love for other

It is that love that shines brightly in our work. And it is that love - of our work, of our work with others, and of others - that truly and fully glorifies God. **Amen.**