

Sermon: The Sacrament of Work

September 6, 2009 - Labor Day

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May all be fed.
May all be healed.
May all be loved.

The Food Revolution - John Robbins

Over the last several weeks I have been trying to address the cards you filled out in June and honor the work of our ministry teams. The overall theme since August 16th is the Ethic of Stewardship.

On the 16th we looked at education and we examined how scandalous it is to put “stumbling blocks” in the life paths of our children. The concept I want to emphasize is the *‘Two Fold Opportunity Equation’*. The *‘Two Fold Opportunity Equation’* acknowledges that we must provide equal opportunity *for* education if we are to realize opportunity *from* education. What we do as a society on one side of the equation surely effects the other side of the equation. We need an Ethic of Stewardship to guide us and shape public policy and priorities because the Ethic of Dominance is causing more and more children to lose opportunities to learn and succeed.

While the Ethic of Stewardship was certainly the philosophical and theological foundation for our assessment of education, the terms were not used until the 23rd. It was in the context of the Genesis poetry about creation that we were faced with a decision. Should we live in a loving and caring relationship with all things and all beings or should we continue to strive for dominance? Should we work to always expand our circle of love and care or should we strive to secure the quality of our lives at the expense of others and the world we are to share? I encouraged us to choose the ethic of stewardship over the ethic of dominance.

Last week we explored the idea of sustainability. We defined sustainability as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This idea of sustainability has been articulated by spiritual and political leaders of Native American communities and we can thank them for what this adds to our world. The Ethic of Stewardship encourages us to see ourselves in loving and caring relationship with all things and all beings in the present. When this ethic is tied to the spiritual concept of sustainability then our ever expanding circle also includes future generations. As a species we can live an ethic of dominance and remain determined by our “survival of the fittest” biological destiny or we can use the uniqueness of our species and transcend our biology by expanding our circle of love and care by at least seven generations.

So, we can sum up the Ethic of Stewardship with these phrases;

Two Fold Opportunity Equation
Ever Expanding Circle (of love and care)
Seven Generation Sustainability

This morning I add one more; the Sacrament of Work. When I speak of work I am referring to that activity that takes up a third of our lives and is usually our most important financial means by which we achieve our material and leisure goals. Sometimes we find great fulfillment and satisfaction in our work and sometimes we are counting the hours, days, and years until our work is over. Karl Marx stated that in a capitalist society the worker is not only used as a means to someone else's end, but work itself becomes a means to an end and so workers become alienated from any sense of purpose that may be or could be associated with work. In other words, many people may find that their jobs are sucking the life out of them, providing no sense of purpose or contribution to the greater good, and they will continue the same job for 30 plus years, because it pays the bills, provides for the family, and allows for a few luxuries. In a very real way we are fortunate to have the quality of life we have and it has everything to do with the way we have structured our capitalist society. Most people in the world are struggling to get the basics needed to survive the day. However, do we recognize the challenge in our own society?

Our children are asked about their career goals when they are barely 13 years old. Our society shamelessly promotes a view of material and financial success that is not attainable for most people and even for those who can acquire such success we hardly ever talk about the price that is paid by our families and our spirits. What would happen for us if we decided that success was not defined by prosperity but by stewardship? What kind of freedom would we discover for ourselves and our children if we went counter-cultural and defined success not by how much we acquire but by how much we give to the greater good and welfare of the world. I want to acknowledge that some of this is going on with our families and what they are doing and the kind of encouragement they are giving to their children is a model for many people who are lost, tired, and tied up with the dominant culture. These counter-cultural steps are gifts. They point to a dimension of life, hope, and spirit which goes beyond the work itself. This is the essence and function of a sacrament.

A sacrament is a visible means of conveyance of an invisible grace. A sacrament is a sign and symbol. The power of a symbol is not in the object of the symbol but in what the symbol points to. Bread and cup are sacraments in our tradition and they point to the realities of unity, service, inclusion, presence, fellowship and love. All of life is sacramental. Even a can of corn is a gift of grace to a starving man.

Our work and how we work can be a sacrament. It is not just what it is. It is what it points to beyond itself.

Let me give an example. Last night Peg baked peanut butter and chocolate chip cookies, cooked chicken for a pasta salad, made a Swiss cheese and ham quiche, spicy bites and

Rueben bites, brownies, and a cream cheese pastry dessert for our Confirmation Retreat. We can look at the work. We can and will eat the results. However, the most important thing is the reality beyond the work that the work points to. She told me she did it for the confirmands and it is a hospitality issue. I believe she did it for Susan, for me and for Shadow Rock. She did it because it is a hospitality issue. It is a gift that says I value you and I care for you. It is work as sacrament.

This is happening all around us everyday at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ. Many people are working everyday. Work is happening in our pre-school, in our offices, and with our non-profit partners. It is being done by people who are paid and it is being done by volunteers. Work upon work, blessing upon blessing, sacrifice upon sacrifice; the sacrament of work is poured out and blessing the world. I hope you find your work to be a blessing and a means to grace others. I hope you find joy and meaning in the sacramental qualities of your work. Happy Labor Day!