

**TO BE OF USE:  
A SERMON FOR LABOR DAY**

Genesis 1:26-31

Genesis 3:17-19

Genesis 4:17-22

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 31, 2008, Labor Day Weekend, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**Focus Text**

**Genesis 1:26-31**

*Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'*

*So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

**Genesis 3:17-19**

*And to the man he said,  
'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,  
and have eaten of the tree  
about which I commanded you,  
"You shall not eat of it",  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.*

*By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.'*

**Genesis 4:17-22**

*Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. Lamech took two wives; the name of one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.*

If I am in danger of succumbing to an addiction, it would be an addiction to work.

- I preached my first sermon in a Presbyterian Church when I was sixteen, and it was not even Youth Sunday.

- I have known that I wanted to be a Presbyterian minister since college.
- I went straight from college to seminary.
- I was ordained at 25.
- And I have always thrown myself into my work.
- There is very little about being a parish minister that bothers me.
- And in more instances than any human being is entitled to, I have received enormous pleasure from the churches and people I have served.

One of my favorite poems is by Marge Piercy. It is called "To Be Of Use." Her description of the feelings she has about working hard and well match what I feel most days of most weeks:

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
 who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
 who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
 who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
 in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
 and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
 who stand in the line and haul in their places,  
 who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
 but move in a common rhythm  
 when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
 Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
 But the thing worth doing well done  
 has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
 Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
 Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
 but you know they were made to be used.

The pitcher cries for water to carry  
 and a person for work that is real.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this month I took the first vacation of my life that lasted more than about ten days. The first part of our three-weeks took us on a cruise in Alaska. I had no access to email, no cell phone contact, no newspapers, minimal cable news. When we returned to port in Seattle, I bought the first newspaper I could find.

Even though Russia had invaded Georgia while I was gone, it was a different headline that grabbed my attention: "*Oldest working CEO...dies at 107.*"

It seems Jack Weil, founder of Rockmount Ranchwear Manufacturing Company in Denver in 1946, had still worked as a greeter at the company headquarters for four hours a day until a few weeks before his death at age 107.<sup>2</sup>

I would love to be like Jack Weil. And I suppose if my wish comes true and I do live to 107, you, and your children, and your grandchildren, will have many more of my sermons to endure!

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<sup>1</sup> "To Be of Use" by Marge Piercy © 1973, 1982. From *Circles on the Water*, © 1982 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and Middlemarsh, Inc. First published in *Lunch* magazine.

<sup>2</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, August 14, 2008.

I love people...  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I love the Jack Weils of the world.

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But I am also aware of the downsides of work.

When this thing that gets us up in the morning and keeps us awake at night becomes an obsession, a compulsion, an addiction...nearly everything else in life suffers:

- Marriages rot
- Friendships dissolve or never form in the first place
- Children are orphaned emotionally if not physically
- And death can come ever too soon.

What leads one person to die and another to live is known only to God, but when in the span of twelve otherwise-glorious weeks we watch Tim Russert, Karen Blomberg, Isaac Hayes, and Stephanie Tubbs Jones pass away with absolutely no warning, we cannot help but be haunted by the notion that their dedication to their respective fields – journalism, ministry, music, public service – played a part in their premature deaths. Work has its downsides.

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The Book of Genesis is profound about work.

(a)

As part of being created in the image of God, we bear responsibility for everything around us:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

So God created humankind in his image...

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

Work, vocation, service, responsibility: these are primary ways that we exercise dominion, that we live into our status as those created in the image of God. “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...”

(b)

But Genesis also knows the pain of work:

Cursed is the ground because of you...[God says to Adam]  
By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.

In addition to the pain of work, Genesis also knows the division of labor into which humanity falls after the death of Cain and Abel.

Jabal...was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools.

As the human race develops,

- Some become farmers
- Some become artists
- Some became laborers and manufacturers

and conflict increases.

This division of labor is even more complex today,

- as we argue about jobs overseas and jobs at home
- as we watch labor-management divisions reach into the highest levels sports and entertainment,
- as we all become so specialized that
  - for every new symptom we have we need to find a new specialist,
  - for every new job we seek, we need to learn a new language.

We are so divided and specialized in our work that we can understand what even the person who works next to us – or who shares our home and our bed – does in their work. Brett Favre cannot even come out of retirement without learning a whole new offense.

While Genesis extols work – “fill the earth and subdue it” – its dark warnings about work remind us that we corrupt the thing that is good if, through our work,

- We mistreat the earth
- Mistreat those who work with us or for us
- Mistreat our minds and our bodies through our work.

Reading Genesis about work, we do leave untutored!

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So where does all this lead on this Labor Day Weekend? It leads me to say at least this:

- 1) There are subjects in which our faith, as expressed in the scriptures, places dilemmas before us rather than resolves them.
- 2) Work is one such subject. The Bible will not tell us to work more or work less, to change jobs or keep a job, to stay at home and rear children or re-enter the workforce. It will not tell us to slow down or speed up, retire or keep working. While it calls us to rest and observe the Sabbath, it leaves us to work out the details as to how we rest and how we worship.<sup>3</sup>

Because the Bible is largely unspecific, I am willing to give you personal words of advice, based on my own experience. As Paul sometimes said, in this matter, “I not the Lord” say this:<sup>4</sup>

- First, do what you need to do – in Piercy's words – “to be of use”; in the words of Genesis – to “fill the earth and subdue it.”
- Second, forge your understanding of what you need to do with the people with whom you are the closest: spouse, parents, and children; partners and friends; church members, clergy, counselors, colleagues. Forge your understanding of what you need to do with them, for they likely know you best, and they can best accept and support you as you seek to be of use.
- Third, pray about it: Because what you do “to be of use” is one of the two or three most important decisions you will make, it is a decision worth lifting to the ears of God, and, if God so speaks in return, listening to what God says.
- Fourth, give yourself the courage and permission to live by trial and error, to make a change, to start over, even to fail. God has grace toward you in this matter; please extend God's grace to yourself.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Genesis 2:1-3, Exodus 20:8-11, Exodus 16:23-30, Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Matthew 12:1-8.

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 7:12.

Not I but the Lord<sup>5</sup> says to you:

Be fruitful and multiply,  
fill the earth and subdue it,  
have dominion...  
over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

“The pitcher cries for water to carry,” writes Piercy, “and a person [cries] for work that is real.”

When we find what that work is for us, and when we use it within appropriate limits, we live toward “the image of God” in which “God [has] created [each of] us.” Our work is “real,” and we have come “of us.”

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 7:10.