

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Let It Shine

The Reverend Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, September 6th, 2015

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"

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To Be of Use, by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

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 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.

A reading from Martin Luther King, Jr.

March, 1968, to the sanitation workers in Memphis, AL.

You are doing many things here in this struggle. You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.

An excerpt from Carrie Newcomer

*I believe we should bless every shirt iron and pressed
salute the crews out on the road, those who stock shelves and carry loads,
whisper thanks to the brooms and saws, dirty boots and coveralls.
Bow my head to the waitress and nurse,
tip my hat to the farmer and clerk,
all those saints with skillets and pans,
and the work of their hands.
It's humble and physical – it's love made visible.*

SERMON

On this Labor Day weekend, I want you to imagine for a moment, think of a time – when in your work, in your labor; whether that be a paid job or a labor of love or hobby or other labor and work you have done in life – when have you felt it had dignity. That it was worthy, that it was meaningful, fulfilling, purposeful; that it mattered to you, to the community, to the world.

This prayer comes from Hebrew Bible scholar and pastor, Walter Brueggemann:

We are again at our annual moment to honor labor, to remember those who do hard work, to recall tales of depression poverty, to wonder at our economy.

As we remember, we are aware that “labor” today is surrounded by hostile euphemisms – downgrading, outsourcing, minimum wage, 401(k)s – all strategies to cut costs, with the result that laborers are put at more risk, all the while we indulge in endless extravagance.

We are mindful on this day:

That most hard labor in our country is performed by people who may lack advanced skills and connections, and who settle for being labor that is cheap, while food and housing continue to grow more expensive;

That we are here because our mothers were in labor for us, loving us before we were born, available for inconvenience and for pain, and as we grew . . . for worry in the night.

That there is other work to be done, what Jesus called, “my Father’s work” – healing the sick, caring for the poor, casting out demons, doing the hard work of justice. We give thanks for those who do this.

On Labor Day, with many of us so privileged that we do not sweat unless we play tennis or jog, give us fresh perspective on our labor, that our lives consist in more than earning and eating, in making and selling, that our lives consist in the hard, urgent work of the neighborhood.

Empower us as you did our mothers that we may birth new well-being, that neighbors may live in justice, that we may know the joy of compassion that overrides the drudgery of our common day.

Amen.

The hope in our liberal religion, with our focus on this world here and now more than the world hereafter; where we see the natural world as sacred and an incarnation of the Holy, then one would think we feel the Spirit, or God, or beauty, or love, all the time. Every moment. Every day. In our job, in our homes – in all of the labor that calls to us each day.

And yet the culture and society around us, of which we are part, isn't always as uplifting or affirming. There is a leveling that occurs in our world, a leveling and hierarchy of jobs of greater or lesser importance. Jobs of greater or lesser worth. Jobs of greater or lesser dignity.

Of various jobs I had growing up, a recurring one was custodial work – at my church, in public schools and a family store, and at theological school.

In theological school, working with a classmate in summer custodial work, it was one of our annual jobs to clean, scrub, and wax the tile floor in the basement of the castle-like seminary. After we did the initial deep scrub with the intense, weaving back and forth at times beyond control the electric floor scrubber – then mop rinsed, then mop rinsed again, and set the floor fans for it to dry completely. Ate our pizza – drank our beer, and moved to the final application – wax.

We made it part way down the hall just fine, using the old rusty pail since modern plastic would deteriorate – we won't think about the fumes we had to breathe. And then, it happened – we kicked the bucket. Literally kicked the bucket of wax over. It was full of wax – which dries quickly and could ruin the floor if over applied. We quickly jumped out of our laid back pizza and beer daze to crisis mode.

As my senior classmate Jake, now a Lutheran pastor in North Dakota, screamed “Oh my God! Oh my God!” in the halls of the seminary, I yelled, “what do we do? What do we do?” And we were both thinking, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

We grabbed our mops and quickly, carefully, spread it all along down the long hallway – thinning it out, trying not to step in it; and instead of stopping it, we just had to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

That's what happens sometimes, isn't it. Literally at times, but also in other ways. Something unexpected happens, we kick something over, something spills all over the landscape of our life, and all of the sudden our moment, our work, our labor, our sense of identity or vocation changes, whether we planned it or not – and if we're lucky, we work our best and quickest and most carefully to smooth it out and make it all okay, and, just sometimes – it shines. Maybe not how it was supposed to – but we do our best, and let it shine.

This liberal religious tradition, honoring common work and the miraculous in the ordinary day to day routine, comes from a particular theological history – one we trace in

part to the protestant reformation of the mid 1500s CE. Perhaps by now, a few of you who know my Lutheran heritage are thinking, “oh, here he goes with Luther again...”

And you’re right. So, Labor and Luther: a brief history.

Well – really brief. The concept that is central to our understanding of work and dignity in the modern world; a concept trampled by rulers and tyrants and resurrected by social activists and prophetic voices, was this concept from the protestant reformation: the priesthood of all believers.

What this concept means, which was a radical social transformation in the time of the reformation, is that there is no difference in spiritual or moral status between any type of profession or calling, or vocation.

The common wisdom of the time was a separation of status that said: priests, bishops, the pope – those are the most worthy, the most dignified, the highest callings.

Luther, among others, flipped this on its head. He wrote, in 1520 in a treatise titled, “to the Christian nobility”:

... there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do...

...A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another

We are all consecrated, so says the liberal religious tradition – we are all consecrated priests, bishops – not in means of work but in status of work – which is to serve each other in love and humility.

To live a life of vocation is to be the best minister, the best teacher, the best plumber, the best custodian, the best baker, nurse, board chair, officer, activist, artist, parent, brother, sister, citizen, mechanic, burger flipper, floor layer, painter, poet or priest you are meant and called to be – and often, if not always, being the best of many different roles and identities at once – which sometimes means re-defining what your “best” in any one role might be – it is a precarious, and precious, and ever important balance between personal and professional, family and work – all of it intertwined; sometimes indiscernible in difference.

Frederich Buechner has a wonderful phrase about Vocation, which many of you may know – Vocation is where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need. Vocation is where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.

And sometimes that feels right – and sometimes that is really hard and unclear. I’ve joked with colleagues that perhaps vocation is where your deep gladness meets your student loan payments. Because, at it’s best, vocation must be both pragmatic and practical, as well as visionary and hopeful.

Some work leans toward the world’s need, or your deep gladness, and does not support you or your family – or maybe it supports you and your family quite well but gives you little joy and doesn’t seem to serve the world.

And this is what the labor movement, at its best, could provide – a communal understanding of the dignity of every type of work, and the need for jobs to be well-paid, and treated with dignity and respect. It seems as though we still have a long ways to go for that to be a reality.

One of the people that comes to mind, when it comes to work and vocation and labor, was the lead custodian at the elementary school whom I worked for during the summer in high school. Ron.

Mr. Ron was a little rough around the edges. In my first few days working with him, as he showed me the school, he would look at the fingerprints on the walls in early June and say, “...grubby little fingers.”

He could be seen as a little gruff, perhaps even harsh at times, when things would get dirty or messed up, when spills would happen, and he’d go into custodial crisis mode to fix it, not leaving much grace or mercy between himself and the poor child who made the mess – but he embodied a stern respect with the children.

As I look back at it, he held his work with dignity and purpose and meaning and a deep sense, whether he called it this or not – vocation. Part of his calling, it seemed, was to be the best custodian he could be. To make that school shine, to be spotless – if only for a few moments.

When the district-wide lawn mower would come over with the large tractor mower, he would look out the window and say, “he’s just scaring the grass – you have to take a little time to do it right.”

When members of the school staff would see the custodial office they would say, “it’s so clean!” with surprise – and Ron would reply, “Well, that’s what I do – clean things.”

In his sometimes gruff, but always respectful way, he would exemplify a life of doing work well. He would clean the cleaning supplies to a shine – I’ve never seen such

spotless carpet shampooers and mop buckets – they were not slop buckets – they were shine buckets.

Over and over again, in not so many words, he would say, “*Why would I waste my time doing it if I didn’t do it the best I knew how.*”

That’s part of the balance of vocation. To let your work, your labor, whatever you set your hand, heart, mind, or spirit to, to shine – to shine with the best you can offer it, knowing that your vocation is not just a job or paid work – it is your identity in the world. So sometimes letting your life shine means letting go of perfection on a project so you can hold your child – letting go of the demands you place on yourself, or others might place on you, and tend to your own balance.

The poet reminds us,

*I believe we should bless every shirt iron and pressed
salute the crews out on the road, those who stock shelves and carry loads,
whisper thanks to the brooms and saws, dirty boots and coveralls.
Bow my head to the waitress and nurse,
tip my hat to the farmer and clerk,
all those saints with skillets and pans,
and the work of their hands.*

Vocation means naming the work of another, the work of each of us, as dignified, sacred, beautiful – *different in work – equal in status.*

In just under two weeks now, you, the members of this congregation, will ordain Laura to the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

This act is a sacred responsibility and privilege of a local congregation in our tradition – no bishop, or hierarchy ordains a person – but the local church (or perhaps, it’s a room full of priests and bishops, since we all are priests and bishops.)

The first ordination I went to for a Unitarian Universalist colleague was at First Universalist in Minneapolis, and I remember one of the speakers naming the true and profound truth – “I wish we could do this everyday – each of us having a service recognizing and blessing our ministry, our callings, whatever they may be – because each of us, and our labors in the world, are just as important.”

She explained that this ritual is simply a particular tradition within religious communities, but in the reformation spirit – no better than, no greater, than other professions, of course. If anything, they are less tangible and productive – as we sometimes joke here, “to be a minister is to think holy thoughts”

Which of course, is untrue, Laura, as you know.

But that is the type of honor and dignity to which we are called to see and name on all work. The dignity, as Rev. Dr. King, called it, of work.

As David read to us from Dr. King's speech in 1968:

But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this.

One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.

If the old reformation idea is still true – to what work and labor, to what is your heart called to? If each person in this room is doing consecrated, holy, sacred work in a myriad of ways – what are your vows ordaining you to that work? What ministry do you take up that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity? Not necessarily the *what* of your labor, but the *how*?

How might your heart and strength and spirit enter into your work, and in turn honor the work of another – enough to say – this work, mine, theirs – is sacred.

For all the saints, with skillets and pans, brooms and saws, canvas and brush, trumpet and banjo, mind and heart – what tools are yours for the building up of humanity?

Whatever they are – kick over the bucket, let it spill down the hall, and *let it shine*.