

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
September 1, 2013

Genesis 3:17-19; Ecclesiastes 3:9-22; Luke 13:10-17
“For me, it’s work”

This sermon is the first of three sermons inspired by incidents on our recent vacation in Germany and England. I mentioned in the Redwoods Log that I shall be open to the ways God is present to me in our travels.

Today’s sermon is equally determined by the fact that this is the Labor Day weekend. It’s appropriate to preach on the meaning of work, the relationship between faith and work, and how we experience the holy in our workplace.

It is fitting that I speak on the subject since we have a “spirit and work support group” that meets monthly here at the church. It’s a small but very meaningful and supportive group. We discuss our lives at work and pray for each other during the month. Everyone is invited to be part of the group – whether we hold a so-called 8 to 5 job or not.

Suellen and I were in a long, snake-like re-entry line at San Francisco Airport last Sunday night. It so happened that a roadie for the rock bands Green Day and the Eagles was with us in the line.

We shared notes about the little sleep we had on the plane and he said he had about four hours sleep in the last three days. The reason: he was setting up food and lodgings for Green Day and serving their every need. I mentioned that it must be quite a thrill to be the comfort and support person for these prestigious bands and to be so close to the musicians and their music. He replied: “For me, its work.”

My conversation with this delightful gentleman reminded me of another on our trip at the Holy Island of Lindisfarne in northeast England. The island is linked to the mainland by a causeway which is covered by the sea at high tide twice each day and is inaccessible to vehicles and pedestrians during these times. We timed our trip just right one morning to get on and off the island during low tide.

We walked around the island and through ancient churches and stopped to meditate on a hill with enormously beautiful views over the sun-dappled island and the ocean’s clear expanse. It felt very spiritual. At one point I needed to find out where I could get money from an ATM machine. I enquired from a young man who had just stepped out of a building in the small main street.

In our conversation, I asked what for him was holy about Holy Island. He said. “Nothing really, I just work here.” The official answer to my question is that

Christianity began in the region in the six hundreds with the work of St Aidan and St. Cuthbert. Suellen and I were encouraged by Scottish friends to go there because one feels strongly the presence of God on the island.

With a little prompting, the rock band roadie admitted that he did make it possible for fans to enjoy the bands. The Lindisfarne worker did the same for the many visitors to the island and therefore his work was extremely significant.

Their initial nonchalant responses however tended to reflect the Genesis account of labor: "And to the man God 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 3:17-19)

Work is seen as drudgery, at best "just work" – and perhaps it was for many at the time of writing 3,000 years ago. Not all work is a bed of roses but it is something we engage in for most of our lives and therefore is blessed by God. Work is holy or can be holy.

Suellen and I happened to be in the center of Protestant Reformation country in Germany. In Dresden there was a huge stature of Martin Luther outside a huge church in the old city which later reminded me of Luther's theology of work.

He wrote that "the idea that service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice, and the like is without doubt the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in a church and by the works done therein? The whole world could abound with the services to the Lord, Gottesdienste - not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, and field."

We came across an unbelievable private high school in England called Cheltenham College and noticed that the school's early motto was "Work overcomes everything." Work is a kind of salvation. Suellen affirms its value for psychological health.

There are stresses at work; there can be difficult people in the workplace; and it can be monotonous but by and large work is good. Work is beautifully affirmed by the scholar who wrote Ecclesiastes.

"I know," he writes, "that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should

eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” And, “So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work...”

God enjoyed creating the world in Genesis. He created and it was good. Jesus affirms God’s good work in the gospel text today and even in times of emergency on the Sabbath and so we affirm and appreciate the emergency workers we hear in sirens during worship. We also appreciate Sabbath rest.

Work is essentially holy, good and enjoyable but one must work at making it so. There are great ideas about doing so in a book our support group looks at from time to time. The book is called, *spirituality@work*. I shall share one quick counsel from the book before this sermon ends. Author Gregory F. A. Pierce writes:

“How do we allow the transcendent, the holy, the divine, the eternal that is already present everywhere and in everything to break through to our consciousness on a regular basis? What’s more, how do we accomplish this task not away from the hustle and bustle of life but rather in the midst of our daily work, with all of its accompanying stresses, deadlines, competition, injustice, and so forth? And, finally, how do we use disciplines that grow out of our work and workplaces themselves, rather than trying to adapt traditional contemplative practices?

I would say that one can adapt traditional spiritual practices for the workplace with Pierce’s criteria in mind, which are:

We must be able to practice the discipline in the workplace.

We must be able to practice the discipline without disrupting our work.

We must be able to practice the discipline regularly and consistently.

The discipline must be triggered by some event, task, or situation that occurs in the workplace.

We must be able to practice the discipline without anyone in the workplace knowing that we are doing so.”

One can be in a difficult board meeting and pray for everyone around the table without anyone knowing; one can visit the sick in a hospital and pray while walking to the room; one can sit silently for a minute and recall the fruits of the spirit communicated by Paul in Galatians 5:22. The possibilities are endless for calmness, peace and focus in the workplace.

Excellent spiritual disciplines for all of life are garnered in the prayer group that meets in the sanctuary after the worship service on the last Sunday of the month. Everyone is invited to this group.

Spirituality in the workplace enables us to be centered and centered people know the value of work and realize that people are so much more than their work.

I wanted to tell the roadie and young man on Holy Island how important, holy and wonderful their work and lives were but there was no time and I didn't want to sound presumptuous. I hope they know this and I hope the same for all of us. Amen.