

Joy in the Work

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

I love the comic strip, Zits...the typical teenage boy, distracted by texting and video games, lounging on the couch while eating huge plates of sandwiches, driving the car into the mailbox, losing his keys...and his parents, baffled and well-meaning...constantly surprised by their son Jeremy's ineptitudes...recently it came to Jeremy's attention that teenagers are expected to get summer jobs...and so he decided to work with his friend Hector who was launching a lawn care business. His friend called him saying "A job just came up, pick me up in an hour!" Jeremy's response as he sat eating a huge bowl of cereal was "I quit." His father couldn't believe his ears- or that Jeremy would pass up the chance to earn some money...even if it was short notice- but Jeremy exclaimed... "I can't work under these conditions!"

The world of work is a complicated world...and our relationship to it takes many twists and turns throughout our lives. Work has changed much in our lifetime. The national shift from a production to a service economy and the introduction of ever-new technologies challenges young people to guess what jobs will be available in the ever-changing economy.

It challenges older people to expand their skill base every few years, every few months, just to keep up- just to keep their job.

More and more jobs have moved from the factory or the garage to the office or the hotel.

Labor unions have little negotiating power- government workers in Wisconsin just lost bargaining power completely, a high school diploma no longer leads to a decent job, a college degree doesn't offer any certainty and joblessness affects more and more families.

Father's Day is a good time to consider issues of work...for things have changed radically since our fathers gave us advice about work.

Most of us work because we need to provide for ourselves and our families. We need a paycheck. In the United States of America, we are all expected to

pay for our education, work hard, save money, contribute to society, stay healthy, have no disabilities, pay for our own health care, take few vacations, work as long and as hard as we can, and then retire gracefully without being a burden.

The amazing thing is that so many manage to fulfill those expectations. But for those of us who are human and flawed, or who want something else out of life...or are unlucky in the competitive world of work, or are driven out of the workforce by circumstances beyond our control...our personal work history can be a painful story indeed. And the problem of paying the bills keeps us awake at night-stretching marriages and self-esteem beyond belief.

And then we get up of a Sunday and come to church. I wish I had jobs to hand around like grapes in a cup, I wish I had checks to pass out rather than an offering plate, I wish we could get a single payer health care plan passed, and raise the minimum wage, and stop the harassment of immigrant workers, and give every high school graduate a City Year internship and every college graduate a good job in their chosen field...and raise everyone's self-esteem through the roof...

Our first principle is so very necessary as an article of faith in these difficult times...we affirm the worth and dignity of every person. Too often dignity is tied to the kind of work we do.

And here at UUCR we do more than affirm this statement of compassion...we create opportunities for every one of us to experience a sense of our worth and the truth of human dignity. We do this, in part, through what I call the work of the church.

The work of creating worship, of singing, or volunteering for canvass, greeting and ushering, teaching and taking food to the shelter, and repairing our building and caring for our trees, and cleaning out the closets and participating in committees and classes and sharing the good news of our liberal faith...all of this and more is the work of this congregation.

This morning I call us to joy in the work - to find and express the joy in whatever work we undertake. Work of the spirit ought to be joyful work. All work ought to lift the spirit.

Finding joy in work is not always easy, especially if we don't get to choose our work. Too often we get stuck on the value or status attributed to a

certain kind of work...or we conflate the person with the role...or we engage competitively or critically rather than with cooperation... I worry that too often people volunteer for church work out of obligation rather than a desire to share their gifts and grow their spirit.

But we can choose our attitude, our perspective about our work. We can choose to find the joy in it.

When I was a kid, my father used to let my brother and me wash and wax the family car. It was a big job for us and my father was particular. With the passing years, I have a clearer memory of the pleasures of the task-- the toil and tears of the project have receded.

I can almost feel the goosebumps on my arms raised by the blending of cold water from the hose and the hot sun on my shoulders.

The feel of the soft rag as I rubbed the wax round and round on the fenders is still on my fingers and the olfactory memory of Turtle Wax is still in my nostrils. It took us hours and hours to get the job done...and to clean up afterwards. As we worked we became part of the neighborhood scene...friends came by to say hello, mom brought us a cold glass of Koolaid, and our younger siblings looked on with envy.

We were given a task that mattered greatly to Dad...and so it also mattered to us. The job done well brought lofty praise...and we took pride in our accomplishment. It was a moment in time when my brother and I shared our frustration, our thirst, our challenge and our reward. Time held still during those labored hours and we knew ourselves to be given a sacred task. I look back upon that shared work with inner joy.

Though at the time I could not see or feel the joy, there is something hidden within work that is greater than the work itself.

Even if a job is considered low status in a particular culture, there may be satisfactions to be gained- there may be unexpected opportunities waiting to be discovered. One year my husband was working at the River Road UU Church Bazaar...he was working in men's clothes with his men's group. The night before the bazaar the group was preparing the room...hanging the clothes up and making the room look nice. They always go through the pockets of the pants and suit jackets...and in the pocket of an old coat, Dave

discovered a wad of bills...there turned out to be a lot of money hidden in that coat. What a surprise that bit of work brought forth.

A difficult or unwanted thing can turn out to be a great gift.

There's an old story of a young king who was very popular with the people. After his coronation, the people brought many gifts to the king. One night there was a knock at the door...the servants answered the door and there stood an old man dressed like a beggar. The old man praised the king and had brought him the gift of a melon. As it happened the king hated melons, but he was kind and took the melon thanking the old man. After the man left the king had the servants throw the melon into the back garden.

The beggar came to the door the next week and the next, each time bringing a melon...and each time the king thanked him and threw the melon into the garden. One day the melon burst in the garden and scattered a shower of diamonds in all directions- they hurried to break open all the melons...and found precious jewels inside them all.

Often hidden within something we find distasteful or difficult is the light of a great jewel or a great learning. This can be true of the work we do. There can be something inside that is greater than the work itself.

It is this something hidden that we must seek- that greater thing may be revealed as joy or pleasure. On my morning walk last week, an elderly woman stood just inside her screen door and as I walked by she called out to me, "you look great!" Boy, did that make me feel good. Did she say that to every walker, I wondered. Had she made encouragement her job? Clearly, it brought joy to me...and to her.

While on sabbatical I attended a writing workshop at the Quaker community of Pendle Hill near Philadelphia. That 80 year old community knows the value of work shared – of joy in the work. At Pendle Hill, all tasks are rotated. Everyone takes a turn in the garden, in the kitchen, in the classroom, in the meeting for worship, in the bookstore, in the office, on the cleaning detail.

No one holds onto a single job, or a single identity, or a singular status. Thereby all tasks are valued and all participation recognized and appreciated.

At Pendle Hill I could feel that something was hidden within the work. There was a light, a wonder, a joy in the sharing, in knowing the work so intimately that the members of that community also came to know each other in a new way.

This is also my wish for our work here at UUCR. For us to engage in the work of our community with a spirit of sharing and respect...to know one another better through this shared work...I believe this would bring us great joy and satisfaction...this would be work at a soul level...it would bind our community in new ways. We might move beyond obligation or responsibility to joy. The work might help us grow in love.

Things are not always what they seem. And much is hidden within the work we do or the roles we hold. A friend of mine moved to Nashville, TN...and soon after moving in, had to call for a plumber. The plumber came and was hard at work when a song came on the CD player...it was a well-known song, by a popular artist- it was "Once in a Very Blue Moon" by Nancy Griffith...the plumber listened a while and asked my friend if she liked that song...I love it she said. Well, said the plumber, I wrote it!

Don't take work or workers at face value...affirm worth and dignity and look for the joy.

The work of the church, like all work, is part practical...nuts and bolts- and part imagination and creativity. And we can't always know what might be revealed.

My father intended to teach my brother and me the details, the method of washing and waxing a car. But we learned other things as well. We learned how to have fun in the midst of a difficult chore. We learned how to share the labor. We learned about pride and seeing it through to the end. And over the years I have learned that working with my hands is a need and a pleasure, that working only at a desk is not enough for joy.

I love the Ted Kooser poems that illustrate so vividly the something more that is hidden within ordinary tools...and ordinary work.

If we are about a spiritual journey, a life of faith, then we too must look for what is hidden in our work together. Using our sense of wonder and our imaginations, and sharing the labor...we may well reveal sacred truths and divine joy.

Look deeply into each day's task and find the hidden joy.

So May It Be/Amen