

## **Sermon – Celebrating Work Sunday, September 6, 2020**

### **Introduction**

Welcome to this sermon video of Atwood United Church and Trinity United Church in Listowel recorded at Trinity United Church for Sunday, September 6, 2020.

My name is Beth Kerr and I am the minister for these two congregations and we are delighted that you decided to check out our sermon video. You are also invited to join us on Sunday mornings on Zoom at 10 a.m. for a more interactive worship time. It is possible to participate in Zoom through the internet or through a home phone line if you prefer. Contact either church for information about how to sign on.

Next Sunday, September 13 we will be doing something different. Instead of having a sermon on Youtube and a Zoom service, we are having an outdoor worship service with COVID protocols in place. Please join us at 10 a.m. at the Atwood Lion's Pavilion for worship. Bring your own lawn chair. Please self-assess for COVID symptoms before attending and practice physical distancing throughout your time at the park. Our theme next week is Celebrating Creation.

This week we start our September Celebration theme with Celebrating Work as this is the Sunday of Labour Day weekend here in Canada.

**Scripture** – Matthew 5: 13-16 (The Message Paraphrase)

“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.”

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God”.

May God bless to us this reading from our sacred story. Amen.

### **Sermon**

What do flour, yeast, pressure treated lumber and yarn have in common? Take a moment to think about it.

Did you know that they are all things that have been sold out at different places and times during this pandemic? They are also all things which remind us of the importance of meaningful work to our well-being as humans.

In March, when many people were laid off from their jobs and required to stay home most of the time, people started looking for other worthwhile creative activities that they could engage in. At first, in the throes of winter, when warmth and enticing smells coming from the oven are so comforting, many people turned to baking and people who had not bought yeast in years were suddenly searching everywhere for it and flour milling companies ran out of their usual brightly coloured bags and started selling flour in plain brown paper bags that looked like something from yesteryear. Similarly, other people said, “let’s make some warm and cozy clothing and blankets” and on-line yarn retailers did record business, selling out of some popular types of yarn for a while. When Spring came, folks took a look at their decks and porches and fences and said, “if I am going to be spending the summer at home, let’s fix this up” and shortages of lumber became a problem in some places. You see, people need work to do.

Now admittedly, in our busy world, lots of us need rest too. We need to find a balance in our work that allows us to replenish our souls with play and rest as well as work. It is possible, even encouraged sometimes, to become driven by work to such an extent that there is no space left for other soul-sustaining activities. This is not good for our well-being and should be resisted. The ancient practice of Sabbath – taking one day a week off from all work – is a reminder of this.

However, human beings also need work that is meaningful. Without work, something in us finds it hard to sustain a sense of purpose. Now work does not have to be paid work. In fact, for many of us, the most vital work of our lives will not be what we get paid for. It will be the care of children and elders and other vulnerable people. It will be the work of nurturing friendships and sustaining community. It will be creative pursuits such as cooking or baking or knitting or deck-building. It will be the pursuit of knowledge or the writing of poetry. Meaningful work comes in all shapes and sizes and only a small fraction of those activities help to generate income for our households.

Most of us have probably observed that for some people, retirement is a rich blessing. They thrive. While for others, it is a time of struggle. They don't know what to do. I think the difference in many cases has to do with meaningful work. For those who can find something meaningful to do with their time that isn't what they used to get paid for, then new possibilities open up. For those who cannot, it is hard to find a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Marge Piercy captures the need for meaningful work beautifully in her poem 'To be of use' which goes like this:

*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.*

Using our gifts in the world to work for God is also part of our sacred calling as people of faith. When you want to flavour the soup, you don't leave the salt in the shaker, you pour some into the pot. Similarly, if you want to illuminate a room, you don't put the light under a garbage can, you put it in a prominent place so everyone can see. In the same way, as disciples of Jesus we must use our gifts to bring flavour and light to the world.

Each of us has gifts. Those gifts vary and they may change throughout our lifetime but part of the life of faith is to find the

places where we can participate with God as co-creators in the work of building up the world.

As we seek to discern what work we are called to in each phase of our lives, I find Frederick Buechner's reflections on vocation in his book Wishful Thinking particularly astute:

*There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-Interest.*

*By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.*

*Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*

Neither a hair shirt nor a soft berth will do. As the Talmud, a collection of Jewish rabbinical teaching, says "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Work is a key part of the life of faith. We don't have to get paid for it. We don't have to complete it. We don't even have to fully understand the importance of it. It doesn't depend on our

strength alone. Nevertheless, as people of faith we are called again and again contribute whatever saltiness and light are ours to the good of the world. We are each asked to do our part as co-creators with God in the building up of the world.

So this week let's celebrate work in all its many forms. Let's notice and honour the work we do – both the formal paid kind if that is part of our life and the informal, unpaid kind which is part of everyone's life. Let's appreciate the effort of everyone whose work contributes to our well-being. Let's advocate for employment justice for those whose work is undervalued or unsafe.

I'd like to close today by inviting you wherever you are to join me in a prayer of blessing for the hands. If you are willing, I invite you to hold your hands out in front of you now and look at them as we pray. This prayer is written by Carol Penner.

### **A Prayer of Blessing for Labour Day**

*Bless the work of our hands, O God.  
Bless the hands that work the land;  
hands that move earth, plant seeds and harvest,  
hands with callouses and dirty fingernails, strong hands.*

*Bless the hands that use machines;  
hands that drive cars, trucks and forklifts,  
hands on computer keyboards, capable hands.*

*Bless the hands that make things;  
hands that manufacture and create,  
working wood and metal and plastic, practical hands.*

*Bless the hands that clean;  
hands that wash, mop and scrub,  
hands that know what to do with soap, determined hands.*

*Bless the hands that make music and art;  
hands that play instruments and hold paintbrushes,  
hands that are creative tools, artistic hands.*

*Bless the hands that care for people;  
hands that cook and feed, heal and nurture,  
hands with a gentle touch, loving hands.*

*Bless the hands that are generous;  
hands that give away money and food,  
hands that are always trying to be empty, Christ-like hands.*

*Bless the tiny, baby hands.  
Bless the strong adult hands.  
Bless the hands that are folded in prayer.  
Bless the hands that are lifted in praise.  
Our hands do the work of your hands,  
O God our Creator. Amen.*

~ written by Carol Penner, and posted on her **Leading in  
Worship** blog. <http://carolpenner.typepad.com/>