

Our True Vocation
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Introduction to the Morning Lesson

In Luke 14 we read about Jesus going to dinner at the home of one of the leading Pharisees of the day. This was a formal dinner party — in our terms, a dress-up kind of affair — and what Jesus did and said were scrutinized carefully. One of the rabbis of that time had a proverb¹ which was frequently quoted about table manners: “My humiliation is my exaltation, and my exaltation is my humiliation.” The proverb means that to be humble is to be exalted and vice versa and we should act this way when we are together at table.

So in the middle of dinner, Jesus says something very similar. He probably even quoted the rabbinical proverb. But Jesus was not speaking about table manners. He was talking about the kingdom of God, a kingdom based on humility. Let’s read it in Luke 14.

Luke 14.1, 7-14 (NRSV)

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He said also to one who had invited him. “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Introduction

Next Sunday is the Sunday before Labor Day but several months ago I already had planned to begin next week a sermon series on prayer. When I made those plans, I wasn’t planning on preaching today. But then the vacation schedule changed and I decided to preach today about our labor, our vocation as Christian disciples. So this is sort of a “pre-Labor-Day-weekend Labor Day” sermon.

I learned some interesting things about Labor Day while working on this sermon. I learned

¹ The proverb is usually ascribed to Hillel. But for Jesus it is an expression of the nature of God’s kingdom. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 583.

that Labor Day is celebrated in most industrialized nations to honor working men and women and that it was devised mainly by trade unions and Socialists and first observed on May 1, 1889. Congress established it as a holiday in the United States in 1894 but placed the observance on the first Monday of September to avoid any identification with socialist celebrations on May Day.² But universally it is a day to honor the dignity and value of work and workers.

Almost everyone recognizes that labor or work is a necessity of life. Even young children know that when they grow up they will get a job, earn money, and use that money to live. This appears to be one of the most basic facts of life, as basic as growing up itself.

Actually, however, this form of earning a living — exchanging hours of work for money — has become common only within the last 200 years. Primitive peoples lived in small groups and organized the work necessary for survival along task lines: some hunted or gathered, some prepared food, some took care of children, and so forth. When societies became more complex, labor for most people meant some kind of obligation to others: slaves to owners, serfs to masters, and gradually workers to bosses or employers and these relationships came to define people's identities. So in our time, who we are is what we do.

This is so much the case that if you ask people about themselves, they will almost automatically answer with what kind of job or profession they have or did have (because people who are retired still talk often about the work they did). Our identity is often tied up with what we do or did for a living.

But if Jesus were to come to one of our dinner parties, I think he might challenge us with a different kind of vocation: not what we do for a living but what we do for life. Let's work this for a few minutes.

ONE: Our work leads to distinctions

A couple of years ago when we were still living in Spokane, there was an article in the newspaper about the high school reunion up in the little town of Northport. (Northport is due north of Spokane, almost on the Canadian border.) This little high school invited every graduate since 1908 to return for a big Labor Day reunion and parade. They were not sure what they would do with all the people who might come back. But it sounded like a grand occasion.

I've only been to one reunion, the 25th reunion of my college class of 1970. There were about 30 of us there for the Saturday evening dinner and what interested me was that most of what we talked about was the work we had done over twenty-five years. There was some talk of children and families but most of the talk was about work. And probably without thinking about it we were making mental calculations about success and failure depending on what a person had or had not done.

I suppose that's why some folks describe class reunions as judgment day — a time of reckoning what we've done, whether good or bad, and of judging one another's success. Who drove up in the nicest car? Who managed to marry above themselves? Who is no longer married? Who did about what we expected? Who has the most prestigious job?

That's the thing about work. It not only defines who we are. It also defines many of the distinctions in life. We still talk about blue collar or professional class workers. Or labor and

² Compton's Online Encyclopedia.

management. And since certain levels of compensation go with certain kinds of work, we also make economic distinctions on the basis of work, distinctions visible in cars, homes, neighborhoods, clothes, and the kinds of vacations we take. Even political distinctions, at least traditionally, have a basis in work. If you are a wealthy business leader you are somewhat more likely to be a Republican. If you belong to a union, chances are you may be a Democrat. Those distinctions are blurring a bit in our time but many of the differences or distinctions in life are first based on our labor.

That's the problem of defining ourselves by our work. It means that our success in life is tied to our success in work. And success is America's national battle cry. As one person said, "We eat it, breathe it, caress it, baby it and, even worse, judge ourselves [and others] by it."³ So if our jobs are a success, then we're a success. If not, then we feel like we've failed and are worthless. Without success, success largely based on the distinctions of our labor, we may think we've missed out on life.

TWO: God would have us live without distinctions

I think this is where Jesus would challenge us to a different way of thinking. I think he would challenge us to live without all these distinctions because that's the way the kingdom is.

Now of course the distinctions Jesus confronted in his society were somewhat different than the distinctions we face. But every society has distinctions and I think Jesus is challenging us to live on the basis of the way the kingdom works, not the way society works.

At a dinner party in that time people were seated according to their social, political, or economic distinctions. Jesus warned guests about sitting in the wrong place because it would be extremely embarrassing if the host moved you to a lower position in front of all the guests. So take a lower seat and then you might be exalted if the host moves you higher.

But we can easily miss the point of this. We are quite clever. We hear that taking a low seat may not only avoid embarrassment but lead to moving up to the head table. So in our minds we convert Jesus' instruction about humility into a new strategy for self-exaltation, a new way of getting ahead. We get what we want by being humble. But Jesus does not offer a divinely approved way for a person to get what he or she wants. Taking the low seat because one is truly humble is one thing; taking the low seat as a way to move up is another.⁴

So in that culture, accepting an invitation to a dinner created an obligation. You were expected to repay it by inviting your host or hostess to your own party. So the text assumes that the host who invited Jesus had invited only those guests who could benefit him in the future. Jesus exposed his self-seeking. Jesus' said to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.⁵ In other words, invite those who cannot repay you and then you begin to understand the way God's kingdom is.

Jesus is trying to get us to see that God does not honor our distinctions so why should we pay so much attention to them. For in the kingdom these distinctions don't matter at all. We are in the kingdom because of God's grace, not because of our success. So why should we treat others as if

³ Mike Cope, *Living in Two Worlds* (Nashville: Gospel Advocates Co., 1987) 56.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 177.

⁵ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 197.

success were important. Therefore, our real vocation in life is not our jobs. Our real vocation in life is humility. That's the labor, the living to which Jesus calls us all.

Now humility is not an "aw, shucks, I'm not worthy" kind of attitude. It's life without calculation. We don't have to keep score or worry about whether relating to someone else will benefit us or move us up. When we are humble, we can live and love and serve without regard for distinctions and we can do so because that's the way God and God's kingdom are. Humility is our true vocation.

Conclusion

I don't think any of us would really argue with this. But it's hard. We are so use to thinking according to distinctions of labor that we find it hard to think otherwise. So I want to close today just by telling a story about how hard it is and maybe that can encourage us.

In the 1990s I served for six years on the General Assembly Council which oversees much of the work of our Presbyterian denomination. One of the things I enjoyed the most about that was the opportunities I had to meet a lot of people. At one meeting I met Helen Walton of Wal-Mart fame and fortune. She was serving on another national board at the time and as you may know Helen is a good Presbyterian as was her husband Sam before he died. So I had a chance to meet her and talk with her for a few minutes.

I can still remember that meeting. It took place in Dallas. I remember exactly where we were standing. I can remember how she shook hands. I can remember that she was wearing a brown and tan dress. I can remember what she said to me. Those moments are well implanted in my memory.

The problem is that over the years I served with the national church I met dozens, maybe hundreds of people, many of whom I don't remember at all, not their names, not the way they looked, not what they said, not anything. In other words, because of Helen Walton's wealth and fame, I was paying *a lot more* attention to her than I was to most of the other people I met. I was then and probably still am living by distinctions. I'm still calculating what might be for my benefit. That's embarrassing to me.

Jesus wants me to learn humility as a way of life. To the extent that I can embrace that vocation, that labor, I can put others first and not worry about myself. I still have a ways to go. I suspect you do too. I hope you'll help me get on with it, in Jesus' name. I'll try to help you too.