

“OUR MOST IMPORTANT LABOR”

Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

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I read an article this week claiming we now have a gig economy in our country. That is new terminology to me but I think it is descriptively accurate of the current reality in the world of work in our society. A gig economy is a labor market characterized by a preponderance of short-term jobs or freelance work. It used to be typical for a person to be hired by a particular company at the beginning of one's employment life and then that person retired forty years later from the same company. The latest statistics indicate a person entering the workforce today will have an average of eight different jobs during the course of one's working years. Times, as they say, are a-changin'.

Not all work can be described in terms of the gig economy. I do not, for instance, go around telling people I have a gig as a pastor of the Market Square Presbyterian Church. But one of my daughters, now in her mid-thirties, had a six year gig on the production staff of *The Young and the Restless*, another gig as the executive assistant to the president of the multi-billion dollar Air Lease Corporation in Los Angeles that rents airplanes to airlines, and most recently, she has had a gig as a member of the staff of the Denver, Colorado Visitors Bureau.

Another daughter, five years younger, has had gigs as a front office associate in a New York City finance company, as a weekend bartender, as a recruiter for a temp agency, as a nanny for the children of two surgeons in Indianapolis, and currently she is working as a film and television actor.

Fortunately, my daughters' gigs have been good ones. Gigs are pretty much the way of things these days. It is what our younger generations know. For older workers who have to catch on to the new employment patterns, it is more difficult.

On Labor Weekend, the church celebrates opportunities for good, satisfying, and meaningful work. As Christians, we support fair labor laws, equality of pay for men and women, non-discrimination in the workplace, and the non-exploitation of workers. I suppose it would be a stretch in our society to implement the economy proposed by Jesus in his parable of the laborers in the vineyard¹ in which those who work for an hour at the end of the day earn as much as those who worked all day because they all were one in their need. But we ought at least to ensure that, to paraphrase an old saw, labor serves the needs of people and not the other way around.

Would that everyone enjoys his or her work and finds purpose in it beyond making a dollar. And would that all who work do so with integrity, responsibility, and focus. But whether we work as part of the gig economy or in longer term employment, are stay-at home moms or dads, or are steering through retirement years, our most important labor as disciples of Christ is to *“take up our cross and follow Jesus.”*² No matter the circumstances of our lives, taking up our cross is our central work. In every season and situation, taking up our cross is our preeminent labor.

“Taking up our cross” is a fairly common phrase in our religious and cultural lexicons but it frequently is used incorrectly or at least in a way that does not jibe with Jesus and scripture. When Jesus told his disciples that whoever would be his follower must take up his or her cross and follow him, he did not mean by “cross” a proverbial mother-in-law one must endure. He did not mean a rocky relationship one must navigate. He did not mean a thankless job or a physical debilitation. He did not mean having to settle for braeburn apples because there were no honeycrisps available. Not even being a Phillies fan is a cross no matter how much it may seem so! None of those things are “crosses we bear.”

In the world and time of Jesus, no one thought of the cross as symbolic of a burden or a weight we had to carry. A cross had only one meaning. It meant death by the most painful and humiliating means humanly possible. Taking up one’s cross, biblically speaking, means a willingness to give your all, including your life, to follow Jesus and to live in the manner of Christ’s gospel. Taking up one’s cross means dying to self in order to be alive to Christ. Taking up one’s cross means surrendering our own paths and plans in order that Christ may have his way with us and through us.

Taking up one’s cross, in the words of St. Paul he wrote to the church at Rome, includes *“blessing those who persecute you, blessing and not cursing them.”*³ It means *“refusing to*

¹ Matthew 20:1-16

² Matthew 16:24

³ Romans 12:14

repay anyone evil for evil."⁴ It means "extending hospitality to strangers."⁵ It means "letting our love be genuine."⁶

To take up one's cross is to acknowledge that to follow Jesus could possibly mean losing some of our friends, being alienated from members of our families, or the loss of our reputations or our jobs.

Several decades ago, Ernest Campbell, a former pastor of the Riverside Church in the City of New York and my own pastor in my early years at the First Presbyterian Church in York (when my father was his dentist), wrote an article that hovers over and through all of my years as a Christian. In it, he posed to Christians the question that spun him around when he first encountered it in Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino's penetrating book called Theology at the Crossroads. The question was, "Are you following Jesus or believing in Christ?"

Campbell wrote that in the church we often equate being a Christian with believing the "right things" about Christ. But, Campbell mused, how many times are we asked if and how we follow Jesus? Those are first-order questions because the gospels mostly are about following Jesus. I counted eighty-seven times in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that the word "follow" is found. The difference between believing in Christ and following Jesus is the difference between "talking the talk" and "walking the walk." It is possible to *believe* in Christ Jesus and not change much or anything in or about our lives. But to *follow* Jesus is costly. It asks and affects everything.

Campbell posed a few questions to help us to see if we are following Jesus or only believing in him:

- If I am following Jesus, why am I such a good insurance risk?
- If I am following Jesus, why when I have done my giving do I have so much left over for myself?
- If I am following Jesus, why do my closets bulge when so many people live in tatters?
- If I am following Jesus, why do I have so many friends among the affluent and so few among the poor?
- If I am following Jesus, why am I getting on so well in a world that marked him out for death?

⁴ Romans 12:17

⁵ Romans 12:13

⁶ Romans 12:9

It is easier to believe in Christ than to follow Jesus. Yet, our call is to follow the Lord. We are instructed and guided in doing so by the teachings of Jesus and by the way he lived his life.

But, following Jesus is not a matter simply of going to the Bible and finding direct answers to our questions or concrete solutions to our concerns. Jesus lived in his time in history and we live in ours. He had his enemies and we have ours. The world had its particular issues in the time of Jesus and it has its particular issues in our own time. Jesus did not tell us to take up *his* cross but to take up *ours*.

For us to take up our cross and follow Jesus, then, is a matter of praying and struggling with the decisions, actions, and course of our lives to determine whether or not they are congruent, consonant, and consistent with the gospel and spirit of Jesus. Does what we think and do and say lead us to live in the same direction as Jesus and with the same passion and willingness to give our all, to die to our own ambitions in favor of the work and way of Christ in and through us?

If we are following Jesus, we will find our lives, like Jesus did, being filled more and more with people who are homeless or hungry; people who are lonely, abused, or neglected; people who are bruised and battered by the brutality of bigotry; people who are trapped by addiction or addled by affliction; people who have lost their way, their mind, or their hope; people who are on the outside or underside of mainstream society and its benefits; people who are passed by or passed over. We are provided opportunities nearly every day to give our lives away for the sake of the gospel and to care for those who come to us in the ways of Christ's compassion and mercy.

The question of whether we are following Jesus or just believing in Christ is as apt for the gathered church as it is for us individually as members of it. Is our congregation's ministry geared mostly to satisfy ourselves or does the heart of it face outward toward others? We do not have lepers in the same way as Jesus did in his but we do have many people who are cast out and cast aside. Do we have a heart for the misfits and the unfit of our time as big as Jesus did for the lepers of his time? Can we see Christ in every color and in every worldly condition and in the broad diversity of human beings all of whom are our brothers and sisters?⁷

No matter what other work we do in the world, let us declare on Labor Day that our most important labor is following Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that as we give our lives for Christ's sake, that is, as we follow Jesus, we find life, the real deep down life for which every human heart hungers.

⁷ Matthew 25:31-46 and the Market Square Presbyterian Church mission statement (see website).

Thomas Merton, the well-known Trappist monk and writer, once offered a prayer that not only is one of the most beautiful I know but also is apt and apropos of following Jesus. I call it “the prayer for following Jesus” and it is especially for those who want to follow Jesus but who, like me, do not do it perfectly but want with God’s help to do it better. Merton’s prayer:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact I think I am following your will
does not mean I actually am doing so.
But I believe the desire to please you
does, in fact, please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all I do.
I hope I never will do anything apart from that desire.
And I know if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore, I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost,
and in the shadow of death I will not fear for you are ever with me,
and you never will leave me to face my perils alone.⁸*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

⁸ From Thomas Merton’s Thoughts in Solitude.