

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“THE WORK SPECTRUM”  
Luke 5:1-11  
February 7, 2010  
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

At opposite ends of the work spectrum are those who work to live and those who live to work. Simon Peter had no idea that allowing Jesus to use his fishing boat would transform his own life's work. He had always been a fisherman, but Jesus called him to become a fisher of people, to draw Jews and Gentiles to the kingdom of God through the gospel.

Some of us work to acquire the resources we need to survive or prosper. Others of us work for the satisfaction and sense of fulfillment we find. Some people find both of these needs met in their work. All of us can strive to do the same.

We can enhance our lives by building God's kingdom as well as earning a living through our mental and physical labor. Our work should provide for our family's needs, for our world's betterment, and for God's glory.

Few words elicit as many different reactions as the word “**work.**” This is because work is one of the most multi-faceted of human realities. Consider the vast distance between these two sentiments: “**I hate my job**” and “**I love my job.**” Between these extremes, work means many, widely divergent things to different people. What should it mean? What is the attitude of our faith toward work? Is work a blessing or a curse? Believe it or not, from the Bible's perspective, it can be either.

One hundred years ago many African-American families would not read from the New Testament epistle to the Ephesians. Now keep in mind, these were nearly always Christian families who were devoted to the Bible. But some of them had been slaves in the Deep South. Their masters had conducted services for them when there was no minister present. The custom was to read the passage from Ephesians 6 that begins: “*Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly*

*masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ.*” This was a way of keeping them obedient and in subjection. This devious and cruel misuse of Scripture was justified by slave masters because the work of the slaves was indispensable to the plantation economy and because the work was demeaning and extremely difficult.

Unfortunately, even today, many people feel like slaves in relation to their work. It is like bondage. It is meaningless drudgery. It is necessary activity, and in some cases it is monotonous motion, but it is essential if people’s basic needs and those of their families are to be met. When the unemployment rate reaches double digits, people have no choice but to accept even the most demeaning and demanding kinds of work. Still, the work itself may seem like an unwarranted curse.

Jesus’ first disciples were fishermen who made their living on the Sea of Galilee. One day when the crowds were pressing in on Jesus, he spoke from Simon’s boat to the people on the shore. When he had finished, Jesus told Simon to move into deeper water and let down the nets. Poor Simon! He was dead tired from fishing all night and catching nothing. But he did as Jesus said, and caught so many fish that the boat was in danger of sinking. On that occasion, at least, the curse of unproductive labor was transformed into overwhelming success.

Even the most menial tasks bring occasional moments of satisfaction and joy. When Jesus said, *“Put out into the deep and let down your nets,”* Simon would probably have preferred to do almost anything else. If you have ever been fishing, especially if you have been fishing with other people, you may have experienced the abrupt change that takes place when someone finally catches a fish. The mood of discouragement is lifted. Everyone is reinvigorated and filled with renewed hope. It is a new day. Now anything is possible.

Simon’s fishing fortunes changed in the most dramatic way imaginable. Immediately on putting down the nets, the fishermen caught so many fish that the nets started to break. Simon had to beckon his partners in the other boat to come and help them. Then both boats were so full of fish that they were in danger of sinking. Simon fell down and said, *“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”* Jesus said, *“Don’t be afraid. From now on you will do a different kind of fishing!”* Whatever the fishermen took this to mean, when they returned to shore Simon, James and John left everything and followed Jesus.

In any task the difference between failure and success is sometimes an extra bit of perseverance. Giving up on a task, or quitting a difficult job, always runs the risk of missing the breakthrough moment and the accompanying satisfaction. Even our most odious tasks provide a degree of fulfillment in simply being finished. And some of history's greatest achievements have occurred because someone chose to stay with their work a little bit longer. The meaning of work is most often found, not in the nature of the work, but in the attitude of the worker.

**“Vocation”** comes from the same root word as **“vocal,”** and means **“calling.”** We often make **“vocation”** a synonym for **“job”** or **“occupation,”** but one's work is not always a calling. For some people work has no meaning except in its compensation. In their experience with Jesus, the work of these ordinary fishermen was transformed into a vocation, a calling. They had chosen, or decided, to become fishermen, but they were called, or were chosen, to become fishers of people. The rest of their lives the energies they had used in making a living would be devoted to serving the purposes of Jesus Christ. The future would be full of struggles, hardships, and even persecution and death. But it would never be devoid of meaning. They would be living for something so much larger than themselves that the cost of their calling would become secondary.

Some Christians find a sense of vocation in their daily work. They may find a way of serving other people through what they are already doing. They may find a way to bless and encourage others through their attitude about their work and their attitudes toward their fellow-workers. A vocation is often a matter of finding a purpose in your work that is larger than the work itself. Then your work becomes fulfilling, and can be offered as a contribution to the common good and as a holy offering to God. Digging a ditch may seem meaningless until you learn that you are helping lay the foundation for a hospital. At its best, our work should be a medium by which we offer ourselves to God.

In the movie, **Lilies of the Field**, Sydney Poitier was building a chapel. The same materials and labor can build a chapel or a brothel. We have a certain degree of freedom to decide where we will invest our efforts and how we will use our skills. The lines between useful and useless labor are not clear cut in this world. The distance between the work of our hands and the product of our labor is too great for us to completely control the two. But we can do our best to make our work a hymn of praise to the God who created all things and saw that they were good.

Simon Peter probably thought he had it made. After all, he owned his own fishing boat. He was a successful small businessman. He had his work, his family, his health. What more could anyone ask? Peter didn't know the answer to that until that fateful day when he crossed paths with Jesus of Nazareth. It was after his encounter with the Lord that he suddenly realized just how empty and meaningless his life had really been. His complacency was shattered the day he met the Master and discovered the truth not only about Christ, but about himself.

**“O Thou, by whom we come to God,  
The life, The Truth, the Way:  
The path of prayer thyself hast trod;  
Lord, teach us how to pray!”**

If you have found opportunities in your work to serve God's divine purposes, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.