



SUNDAY SERMON

Nuances of Pride

Tomorrow we celebrate Labor Day, so perhaps today is a good day to take a look at the work we do or have done or hope to do. Let's look at our work and examine it in terms of the scripture for this morning. The readings focus on pride, pride as a sin. So how is our work connected with pride, for good or for ill?

How often in our culture do we assess people by what they do for a living? I think this is particularly common here in DC, although there does seem to be a nice unspoken rule here in church that we don't ask people what they do. But still, work is part of who we are, and to some extent it does define us. Finding good meaningful work, a vocation, is one of life's most important tasks.

One of my favorite theologians, Frederick Buechner, considers vocation to be a calling from God. He had this to say about it.

"The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need to do and (b) that the world needs to have done. 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."

Vocation is the where your own deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. Any of us can ask ourselves about the work we do and to what degree our gladness meets the world's hunger. My first full-time paying job was as a sales clerk at a W.T Grant five and dime store in Moses Lake Washington where my first husband was stationed with the Air Force. My job was in the baby clothes department, sorting arranging, occasionally selling. Fresh out of 2 years at Wellesley College, but equipped for little more, I was miserable. I would actually spend my breaks in the rest room, crying. Part of it was boredom; part of it was pride - I felt too good for this! I might have been meeting some need, but there was no gladness on my part. This was not a vocation!

I sold real estate as a single mom for awhile in the 70's - liked it pretty well because of the flexible hours and the occasional good commissions and sometimes because of my appreciation for historic homes in Old Town Alexandria, where I worked. So some gladness on my part, but no sense of meeting important needs. In fact I hated promoting houses that I knew were shoddily built or that were wildly overpriced, and eventually I concluded that I was a lousy sales person.

That all changed when I started trying to sell the Christian Gospel - a much better product! And you'll probably not be surprised when I say that my work as a minister has really felt like vocation as Buechner describes it. There have been

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PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

times when I've felt so lucky to be actually being paid to do something I love so much, times when I felt I've been a channel for God's grace for people in deep distress. Gladness, amazing gladness, and deep hungers, not always met, but at least engaged. Here is vocation for me.

However, the language of vocation should never be limited to work in the church, nor did Buechner intend it to be. Vocation is for everyone, and at best, the work of all of us in the world should meet real needs and afford real gladness. Sadly this is so often not the case.

And this brings me to Labor Day and the special Collect from the Prayerbook which we heard earlier. First, this prayer points out how much what we do affects all other lives, for good or for ill. It then expresses three important concerns about work:

- 1) That what we do is for the common good as well as for ourselves - again gladness meets hunger.
- 2) That we respect the aspirations of all workers as well as ourselves in seeking a proper return - i.e. fair and living wages, acceptable working conditions.
- 3) That we care about those who are unemployed.

So with a working definition of vocation, and some guidance about how we think about our labors - not just our own but the work of others - where does pride come in?

Pride is connected with our work in good and bad ways. It's natural to be proud of work well done, whether in school, as an athlete, on the job, in a profession. Being proud of what we do gives us dignity and a sense of worth, and we rightly want our children and others we care about to know when we are proud of them. Pride is not always a sin.

But the kind of pride that the writer of Sirach and Jesus warn about is different. It is not justified. When we tell our children that they've done a great job and we're proud of them when they haven't, it's a disservice. They see through the hypocrisy, and they also can get the feeling that only when they do a great job are they worthy of our love. Love is not being proud of someone; it's loving them for who they are, even when they fail or don't measure up. This is one kind of pride that is sinful because it is dishonest.

A worse kind of pride is the main point of the readings, and that is the kind of pride that allows us to feel superior to others. It's barging onto a stage or into a group and elbowing others aside; it's taking the most prominent seat at the banquet; it's bragging about one's job or educational pedigree, or even worse, one's fabulous lifestyle. And if we do engage in such behaviors, it's sometimes unconscious; we come across as prideful even when we don't realize or intend it.

This is the case with a woman friend with whom I occasionally walk. There is a lot I love about her, but she has a certain pride, really an arrogance, about the way she lives that grates on me. She has a way of making any conversation be about her, her children (all three went to the same prestigious college) her annual trips to Paris where she has "my little store" for this or that, her clean and spare ways of eating and drinking, her yoga routine - I know - I just sound jealous, but to me this is a kind of pride that does grate, that does imply a sense of superiority. Even if unconscious, it wounds our relationship.

And then there is the story of George. Way back, when I was just starting seminary, I met George at some fancy party. George was a rich, successful businessman, handsome and confident, with a wife and two daughters who were just like him. When he learned that I was headed for the ministry, he told me that although he attended church, he really didn't feel he had need of saving or forgiveness - that his life was really going well and he had nothing to

regret, no need for confession. He'd made it on his own. Here was pride - unabashed, a man too good to confess, too virtuous to need church. And it threw me because I think there are lots of Georges, but back then, I didn't know what to say.

If I met George today, now that I'm forty years older and after a divorce and a late miscarriage and money and career crises and an early stage cancer, I would know what to say. "George, we can't do it on our own. We can never make all good choices; we can never be sure that if we get things right, everything will be fine. We depend on our relationships, our vocations, our savings, our fitness practices, our real estate, a drink at the end of the day, all of our beloved familiar rituals - and that is fine, and normal, and good. And we can rightly be proud of what works well in our lives. But those things don't make us better than other people. We can't worship those things - we can't rely ultimately on any or all of those things and expect that by doing so, we'll ensure a happy life and a peaceful death." For all of us, there will be times when we need help, times when we need mercy and forgiveness. Times when pride just gets in the way.

The writer in the Sirach passage says "the beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord." That is what a person like George is doing when he claims no need of forgiveness or mercy - he is denying a need for grace, a need we all have. In a sense, pride is blasphemy because it denies any need for God - it renders God irrelevant.

And then there's this seductive thing about pride. It can end up being the result of trying to be really virtuous. My own experience goes like this. In trying to stay away from sin - all those ways we can miss the mark and fall short of what we are capable of at our best - I, like all of you, sometimes succeed. I do the thoughtful or generous thing; I say the kind rather than the brutally honest thing; I refrain from wasting time, I'm totally correct in my recycling practices - yeah right! But when I do, when I am, then I haven't avoided sin really - just some sins, and I'm left with what? Virtue? Maybe, but really, isn't it pride? Isn't it that nice little frisson of feeling I've been a good girl today, maybe a better little girl than some others I know?

There's that fine line between feeling justly proud when we get something right, and feeling we are better than others or more worthy - like the people who take the best seats at the Gospel banquet.

Thinking back to Jesus' parable - maybe that's exactly what's wrong with pride - it misses the point that the banquet of life is God's gift to us all, to everyone, and none of us, by virtue of our achievements, deserves a more special place in God's love. In fact, just the opposite, according to Jesus - it is the downtrodden who most need our care and our attention, the weak and powerless who merit help and support.

So as we celebrate Labor Day tomorrow, we might do well to examine the ways we regard our own work and the work of all others. Where does pride get in the way? When we look at pride in our own endeavors, are we complacent that we've got ours by dint of our own hard work? Because that's not the whole story. The extent to which this country, our government, our leadership, our own attitudes demean people who do certain work or prevent people from finding work and a fair reward, we are part of structural sin. We're sitting in all the best seats at the table. We've gotten there in part by luck and benefits and the help of others. If Jesus were our host today, how many of us would he usher to less prestigious seats in order to make room for others equally deserving, and how graciously would we yield our places? Amen.