

***HOLY ORDERS***  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Mark 1: 16-20, 2: 13-14**

**While he was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, Simon's brother, casting their nets into the sea, for they were all fishermen. So Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. He went a little farther and he saw James, the son of Zebedee, and John, his brother, who were in their boat mending their nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after him.**

**So Jesus went out again to the lakeside, and the whole crowd came to him, and he went on teaching them. As he walked along he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting in the office where he collected the customs duties. He said to him, "Follow me!" He rose and followed him.**

I have been working since I was ten years old. My first job was mowing lawns. My grandfather loaned me the money to buy a lawn mower and edger and set up a repayment schedule. He taught me to charge not only by the hour for my labor but also by the hour for the use of my equipment. I had about ten customers that I mowed, edged, and weeded for. I mowed our own lawn, worked in the garden nearly every day after school, and helped my dad on major projects like re-roofing the house.

Since then I have been a dishwasher who graduated to a busboy and then salad maker. I worked as a counselor in the Methodist Youth Camp through college, and served as a Camp Superintendent. While in college I had various jobs including assistant to the chaplain and research assistant in the history department. In graduate school I worked in a psychiatric hospital full time and started serving churches during my doctoral studies. I was a graduate assistant in seminary, every student's most hated friend in upper level studies. I worked for a while for the Mental Health Association leading mutual support groups for families and friends of the mentally ill

and Viet Nam veterans who suffered from PTSD. I have worked in parishes for several decades and for nearly the past ten years have been an adjunct instructor for Phillips Theological Seminary.

That is not the sum total of my work. At our house I do most of the cooking and laundry. Lately I have taken up bread baking. I mow the lawn and pastures. There are animals that need to be fed every day, hay to be hauled, and barns to be shoveled and swept, work that I share with Mimi. Horses require constant discipline and I only regret that I do not spend enough time with their training. And like any homeowner there is always something that needs to be repaired, replaced, or painted.

I will bet that most of you could tell a similar story. Frankly, my life has been enriched by the variety of work experiences that I have had. I have never thought of work as a curse, which is not to say that I never curse while I am working. My mother taught me this jingle when I was just a boy: “How thankful I am for that syllable damn, that rolls of my tongue with such ease. It’s kept my heart pure and saved me, I’m sure, from certain mental disease.”

As a minister I have never been able to escape the common assumption that ministers only work on Sunday. I am astonished, for example, when someone will ask me at the conclusion of a sermon, “Did you write that?” I always tell them no, that I open my computer, press ctrl-alt-delete, and a sermon magically appears. The only other requirement of me is to press the print key.

For the longest time the church has distinguished between the work of the common man and the vocation of ministry. Those who entered the ministry or monastery were said to take “Holy Orders.” It used to be the hope of many mothers

that their son would become a priest, a rabbi, or a minister. Today, of course, women have entered this solemn profession. Frankly, I never recommend to anyone.

Historically, Holy Orders indicate ordination into the priesthood. Holy alluded to the church and the Latin word *ordo* referenced the hierarchy of the church's corporation. In both Protestant and Catholic traditions those who are ordained are said to be "set apart" for the ministry of the church. The concept of setting apart members of a congregation for the ministry of the church is as old as St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians. It is a practice that we continue to find in Congregational Churches. The Congregation ordains qualified persons for the ministry. The Congregation, and the Congregation alone, calls a minister and installs him or her. It is understood by laity and clergy that there are unique roles and responsibilities of the ordained minister that is different from the laity.

The problem that I have with this issue is two-fold. The first is the idea that the vocation of ministry is better than the vocation of carpenters, teachers, physicians, or farriers. We have been trained differently than other people; we have skills sets and responsibilities that others do not bear; and our work puts us into unique roles with human beings who are seeking meaning, suffering disease, and celebrating milestones in their lives. Clergy bring to their work a language, I call it the language of the heart, to speak to the broad spectrum of being human within the mystery of God. But none of this makes me a more decent or good human being. The minister is finally a human being. Every profession has a language be it the language of law, science, math, ranching, and so on. This language makes us distinct in terms of work but not in terms of value.

The truth of the matter is that as a minister I need the work of doctors and plumbers, butchers and tailors, educators and coal miners. Every person's work is necessary for the economy of life. It makes no sense to me to elevate one profession above another and take on airs of superiority. I think of the old image of a body that decided to go on strike. Its members were unhappy with the stomach because they thought that it did nothing for the good of the order. They thought the stomach was a lay about. The hands complained, "I do all of the work, lifting, making, shaping, holding. Without me the stomach would never receive the food."

The feet said, "Yeah, well whom do you think carts this body around? The stomach would get no groceries if I did not take us out to the garden, or walk through the stores, and transport it to the car and kitchen."

The mouth protested, "Without me it would all be for naught. I am the one that finally chews the food and sends it on its way to the stomach. You can't swallow this stuff whole."

None of them believed that the stomach contributed anything to the common good. "He's lazy," said one after the other. So, the hands, feet, and mouth went on strike. After several days they all began to feel weak. They had no energy or strength. One after the other came to the conclusion, "I'm hungry. I need something to eat." And they all went back to work.

Every one who labors is essential to the well being of the other. Professions, skills, and talents do not make some human beings more worthy than others.

The second issue that I have is the battle of the professions often makes us blind to the larger calling. I am not sure that God destined some people to be clergy

and others to be bakers, yet others to be economists. I am quite certain that God calls us to be in compassionate and just relationships with every other human being. Irrespective of our profession, trade, or business we are meant to love one another and care for the common good.

While serving a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, I was very involved with Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry, an active interfaith agency. I chaired the Legislative Issues Task Force. We worked to eliminate the sales tax on food, defeated title loan legislation of the time, and sought to expand Oklahoma's hate crime legislation to include gender orientation. I also worked closely with African Americans in the historic Greenwood community of Tulsa. Greenwood was once called the Black Wall Street of America because it was an economically thriving community.

In 1921, a race riot occurred that burned Greenwood to the ground. Homes, schools, clinics, and churches were destroyed. One of the churches was the Mt. Zion Baptist, which had just completed construction of its building at a cost of \$90,000, a lot of money in 1921. The new sanctuary was totally razed. It was my privilege to speak at that church in 1996. This was part of the Tulsa Race Riot Commemoration Commission. The Tulsa Race Riot Commission and Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry were also working to have reparations made to survivors of the riot.

The deaths, injuries, and destruction of the property were bad enough. But not a single insurance policy was ever paid out to policyholders in Greenwood. It was our belief that this was a grievous injustice. It was our hope that the State of Oklahoma would offer some form of compensation to the remaining survivors because the state had sent the National Guard to quell the unrest. That never happened, of course.

In the midst of this work a member of my church confronted me with angry words and a shaking finger, “You love the people in Greenwood (meaning African Americans) more than you love us!” Another member stated, “You were called to work for this church. That’s what we pay you for.”

I took a long deep breath and said to him, “No sir. I am first and foremost called ‘to do justice, to be merciful, and to walk humbly with my God.’ That is my first calling. I serve this congregation in that greater context.”

I humbly submit to you that this is the first vocation of every person who is claimed by the family of God. The covenant of University Congregational Church declares, “we join with one another to worship and work so that peace, justice, and brotherhood may prevail in this world.” Peace, justice, and brotherhood in *this world*.

That is the mission of every one of us: painters, authors, attorneys, therapists, teachers, fishermen, and tax collectors. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, partners, and neighbors called to bring restoration and wholeness to our homes, congregations, and commerce. Reconciliation in the pew and the public square is our shared purpose as the children of God. This is ultimately what it means to follow Jesus.

To follow Jesus does not mean that you have worked through your theology of Jesus. It does not mean that you have reasoned through your affirmation of faith. In fact, I believe the question, “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal savior,” is the wrong question. To follow Jesus does not depend on affirmations, acceptance, or belief. To follow Jesus means that you get out of the boat and take the Way of the cross – the way of service to the poor and oppressed. In fact, if your

discipleship depends on your comprehension of Jesus you will never get out of the boat, or up from the desk, or away from the machine. Let us take seriously the caution of St. Augustine, “*Si comprehendis, non est Deus.*” In other words, “If you think you comprehend, then it is not God you are talking about.”<sup>1</sup>

This is one of the reasons why congregationalism is not creedal. Your membership does not depend on a doctrine or articles of faith. The only question is whether you affirm our covenant in the “name and spirit of Jesus Christ...to worship and work so that peace, justice, and brotherhood may prevail in this world.”

We are all “set aside” for the ministry of peace and justice. Such are the Holy Orders we are all called to. This is the labor of everyday. All of our work can be an avenue for God’s love and mercy, regardless of our occupation. It reminds me of an old story about the gifted English architect, Christopher Wren.

Wren was traveling on the continent and one day stopped to visit a cathedral that was being built in France. At the construction site he stopped a man and asked him about his job. “I am a stone mason,” said the worker. “I cut and set the stones that make the walls.”

Wren approached another worker and inquired about his craft. The man replied, “I am a carpenter. I shape and place the beams that hold the roof and ceiling.”

A third laborer answered Wren’s question this way, “I am a glazier. I cut the glass that makes for windows, even stained glass ones.”

Finally Wren saw an old man bent over a workbench. “What, sir, are you doing?” Wren asked the man.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Douglas Hall, “Cross and Context,” *The Christian Century*, September 7, 2010: Vol. 127, No. 18, pp. 34 – 40. Print.

The old fellow replied, "I am building a cathedral for God."

What about your work? Are you an artisan, craftsman, tradesman, or mechanic? Are you a professional or a work at home parent? What if you are retired? Does your work build the Kingdom of God? Are you fulfilling your Holy Orders? For God's people that is the labor of every day.

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