

Work, Vocation, and Finding Joy on Broadway

Exodus 35:30-35, Acts 18:1-3

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Then Moses said to the Israelites: See, the Holy One has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; God has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. and inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. God has filled them with skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of artisan or skilled designer.

Exodus 35:30-35

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers.

Acts 18:1-3

On this Labor Day weekend, it is good time to think about the world of work and labor. Over the past few years, we heard some new phrases that made me rethink some of my assumptions. Remember during the pandemic when most places were shut down, we heard the phrase “essential workers” and “front line workers.” This was a very broad category – doctors, nurses, hospital staff, truck drivers, grocery store workers, farm workers, in addition to police and fire firefighters. Essential because of medical care and providing food. There are many kinds of work and workers that I realized I may have taken for granted.

Work. Jobs. Vocation. I remember a conversation with someone that has stuck with me. Karen was considering a career change. We were talking about work and job history and choices. She did not know much about churches. She asked me, “What does a pastor actually do? What do you do?” That was a good question.

As a pastor, I write and preach sermons, plan worship, choose music for worship. I visit and pray with people at home or hospital. I work with the staff to keep the church running smoothly so many groups can use the space. I work with church leaders to plan ministries for children and adults. I help leaders do long range planning. I talk about the ways God is at work in people’s lives, in the world, in the church. I meet with community leaders & other pastors.

Truthfully, everyday the first thing I do is make a list. Then I know what I am supposed to do! But I realize a lot of what I do never makes it on my list. I listen to church staff and people in the congregation. I pray to God for guidance. I check my email and make phone calls. I read

articles and books. I spend time thinking and reflecting. As a wife, I do things to show Jeffrey I love him. This often involves going for a walk or going out to breakfast on Fridays. As a mother of young adult sons, I check in with them.

When I think about people asking me the question, “What do you do?”, I tend to give the expected answer. I say what I am paid to do and what my job as a pastor entails. But what I do is so much more.

How do you answer the question, “What do you do?” Or maybe people ask you – “You’re retired, right? So what did you do?” The question is - what did you do to earn money, to make a living? How do you answer that question about what you did and what you do now?

Our passage from Exodus describes an interesting connection between people’s work and God’s work. Moses has received the 10 commandments from God and it is time to build a place, a tabernacle where the tablets will be kept and where people can draw close to God. Moses says that God has called a certain man, Bezalel from the tribe of Judah to be the artistic director of the tabernacle. Bezalel will use all of what God has given to him and all his experience to craft the gold, the stone, the wood for the tabernacle. And God has called him to teach others so they can also do this work of bringing beauty to God’s dwelling place.

In chapter 36, verse 2 we read “And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom God had given skill, everyone whose heart was stirred to do the work.”

Skill and call, faith and work, art and sacred space. I wonder if someone asked Bezalel “What do you do?” what he would have said. “I am an craftsman who works in gold, bronze and silver and carves wood” or “I am make beautiful art for God.”

People’s work changes and sometimes skills are combined. How would Paul have answered the question “What do you do?” One answer may surprise us. He was a tentmaker. He probably learned that trade from his father. When he was in Corinth, he joined up with Prisca and Aquila who were also tentmakers. Tents were always in demand as people were forced to leave their homes because of military occupation or natural disasters. Paul could make a good living as a tentmaker.

And yet when we think of Paul’s work, his legacy, his vocation, his calling from God, we answer the question in many ways – He was a missionary, he was a preacher, he was one called to share the good news of Christ and start new churches. He was a philosopher, a writer,. So his work as a tentmaker supported his calling as a start new churches and guide them. On this Labor Day weekend, I give thanks for all people who work and for the labor movements that made it safer for people to work and better wages.

And I am grateful for singers, musicians, writers, dancers and those who write Broadway musicals. This past month I have heard many of you share experiences of seeing a live production of a show that touched your heart, made you laugh and maybe made you cry.

What do you do? This weaving together of a calling, vocation, work, spirituality and using our skills is complex. I think one of the most helpful reflections on this question comes from an essay by pastor and writer. Robert Fulghum. Here are some adapted parts of his essay.

Well, so, what do you do? Your basic strangers-on-a-plane question. Comes up at potlucks and parties and just about any other stand around and make small talk situation you get into. It's a politely veiled status inquiry to clarify social standing. The bureaucratic version of the question is terse: Fill in the blank marked "Occupation." The IRS wants it that way and the passport agency and the bank. Say what you are paid to do and we will know who you are and how to deal with you.

When I ask people what they do, they often hand me their business card that summarizes their identity – Name, company, title, address, lots of numbers – phone, email.

I don't have a business card. Can't seem to get me down on that little piece of paper. What I do is kind of complicated and takes such a long time to explain that I often avoid the question and just pick something simple that's true but not the whole truth. Even this tactic has left me painted in some difficult corners.

What do you do? Suppose that instead of answering that question with what we do or did to make money, we replied with what gives us joy or makes us feel useful or fulfilled. If you happen to get paid to do what you love, feel blessed because many people do not.

I am inspired by one of Fulghum's ideas. If I could make up a new business card, I think I finally figured out what I should put on it. One word, Cynthia. That's what I do. That's my occupation. And if I would give my card away, I think it would lead to many interesting conversations. What I do is be the most Cynthia I can be which means being sister, mother, wife, friend, eater, breather, sleeper, janitor, dishwasher, singer, walker, hiker, preacher, citizen, dreamer, lover of Broadway musicals, storyteller, peacemaker, traveler, a pilgrim who seeks to follow the ways of Jesus.

You and I – we are infinite, rich, contradictory, living, breathing miracles, human beings, made in the image of God, in need of God's saving and amazing grace. We are called by God. That's what we do. That's who we are.

I believe the church is a community that helps people discern and live out their callings. That the church, at its best, is a true call center. It is the place where people are helped to discover

what they are called to do and be in the world. We need to help each other discern a call whether we are 47 or 87.

Let's be open to some new answers to the question - What do you do? What do you do that connects you with God's holy love? It is not how much you do, but how you seek to live in gratitude, hope, kindness, and openness. And know your name is Beloved. Amen.

Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Laid Down on It*, pp. 74-80., Ivy Books, Random House, 1988.