

Preaching for the Other Six Days of the Week

Rush Otey

St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Tucker, Georgia

Of all the proposed reasons for the eclipse of mainline Protestantism, one largely unaddressed factor is the inability of many preachers to reach people “where they live”—in the work place. Prayers and sermons rarely move beyond generalities when addressing dilemmas and issues related to vocation and labor. This article is intended to foster a renewed attention and urgency to such observations as those of Reinhold Niebuhr in 1925:

We are all responsible. We all want the things which the factory produces and none of us is sensitive enough to care how much in human values the efficiency of the modern factory costs. Beside the brutal facts of modern industrial life, how futile are all our homiletical spoutings! The church is undoubtedly cultivating graces and preserving spiritual amenities in the more protected areas of society. But it isn't changing the essential facts of modern industrial civilization by a hair's breadth. It isn't even thinking about them.

The morality of the church is anachronistic. Will it ever develop a moral insight and courage sufficient to cope with the real problems of modern society? If it does it will require generations of effort and not a few martyrdoms. We ministers maintain our pride and self-respect and our sense of importance only through a vast and inclusive ignorance. If we knew the world in which we live a little better we would perish in shame or be overcome by a sense of futility.¹

Even the one or two hour segment which conscientious church people set aside each week for the nurture of their faith is engulfed by concerns ranging from staffing the nursery to global warning. Yet despite predictions of the immediately preceding decades which anticipated a burgeoning leisure society, people spend more and more time at work. It is not uncommon for the work week to total sixty or seventy hours for those engaged in blue collar, white collar, and no collar jobs. And, whether one ultimately adopts Karl Marx's assessment that we are fundamentally materialistic and economically governed beings, it is difficult to argue with his insight that since the industrial revolution, people are alienated from their work. (Of course, Marx simply rediscovered the understanding of the writer of Ecclesiastes, “I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind. And there was nothing to be gained under the sun” [Ecclesiastes 2:10-11].)

The book by oral historian, Studs Terkel, entitled *Working*² underscores

the point. Said the man who is an ex-president of a conglomerate, "The executive is a lonely animal in the jungle who does not have a friend." The welder says, "I'm a machine." "I'm caged," says the bank teller, and echoes the hotel clerk. "I'm a mule," says the steel worker. "A monkey can do what I do," says the receptionist. "I'm less than a farm implement," moans the migrant worker. "I'm an object," believes the high fashion model. And the young accountant admits with despair, "There's nothing to talk about."

The perceived irrelevance of Christian faith may be founded not so much in the church's stands on war, capital punishment, sexuality, and other rather dramatic controversies, but upon the impotence or indifference of pastors in ministering to and alongside people grappling with the mundane industrial and commercial matters which occupy the great preponderance of human energy and time.

I. *The Pastoral Task*

Most, if not all, of the personal/private issues people bring to worship and to counseling have a significant work-related component. Substance abuse, meaninglessness of life, stress induced illness, child neglect, tensions and breakdowns in primary relationships, anxiety over basic food or shelter (or even second homes and the society pages), rising expectations of comfort in a decelerating economy, the "necessity" of two income marriages to maintain a middle to lower middle class life-style in the U.S.A., racial and gender prejudice—all of these originate in or are exacerbated by conditions in the workplace. Always ask, "What is happening and not happening to you at work?"

For years, the validity of the pastor's visiting people in their place of employment has been advocated in seminaries, yet how often is this attempted? One's own understanding of both the lure and the folly of Babel may be enhanced quickly by taking the elevator to a few twentieth floor offices; one's prophetic heart can be both strengthened and sorely tested by an afternoon in an inner city or rural classroom with a parishioner-teacher. The light beamed from a coal miner's helmet in Appalachia can illuminate the Word in fresh ways; an early morning stint in a labor pool waiting room can slice through seas of naivete; and a day on a construction site in August or February will diminish one's ministerial self-pity!

In his recent book, *U. S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches*, Tex Sample of the St. Paul School of Theology, underscores the relationship between personal pain and public ill. Sample says, "When the church focuses on the private sphere to the neglect of the public arena, the pervasive, implicit teaching of such a stand is that the private and the public are unrelated. Such a stance fails to see how personal the political is, and how political the personal." Sample cites the 1984 Gallup Report, *Religion in America*, which enumerates a study by Johns Hopkins University. The study revealed that a one percent increase in unemployment nationally is accompanied by an increase of 37,000 deaths, including 27,000 fatal cardiovascular cases, 650 murders, and 920 suicides—plus 4000 additional admissions to state mental hospitals and 3300

more criminals sentenced to prison.”³

II. *Linking the Church School and the Pulpit*

The curriculum of most adult church school classes approaches the work place obliquely, if at all. But as Carlyle Marney used to muse, the future of the faith lies not just with the youth, but with the present generation of adults. For a change, why not address this topic head-on for a year using a model something like the one that follows? Neither the fellowship of the congregation nor the preaching (if it is honest!) will ever be the same.

Devote the first couple of classes to people simply getting to know one another. In our transient society, people may sit next to one another in worship for months and even years without knowing anything much about how they spend the rest of their lives. In small groups, ask such questions as: What is your job? How long have you held it? What are the rewards? What are the stresses? Generally, people are eager to talk about these things with each other, often to the surprise of the teacher or the pastor.

Next, move into biblical and theological material. Does the Bible differentiate between labor, work, and vocation? A concordance is a starting point here. Does God *call* people to be assembly line workers, or doctors, or managers of fast food restaurants, or is this a matter of freely choosing to use one's talents contextually in order to earn a living? What is "good work," to use E. F. Schumacher's book title?⁴ What does scripture say about justice in work and justice of work (i.e., The Ten Commandments)? If a person's job is not the same as the person's Christian vocation, then how is vocation to be expressed? Is vocation just an after-hours, leisure time volunteerism? What have different branches of Protestant and Catholic thought had to say about work and vocation? Some delving into the teachings of Luther and Calvin are particularly useful here.

John Calvin, often cited for his emphasis on work as a means of responding to vocation, nevertheless saw discipleship as primary and job as secondary: "For it may happen that a person may fully discharge one's duty to all, with respect to external actions, and, at the same time, be very far from discharging it in the right way" (*Institutes*, III, viii, 7). Holding to a dialectical analysis Calvin also said, ". . .there will be no employment so mean and sordid (provided we follow our vocation) as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God. . . ." (*Institutes*, III, x, 6).

At this stage of the class one might be ready for discussion built around an exercise dealing with value judgments related to occupations. Have the members of the class to rate the following occupations, or a similiar list, on a scale of 0-3, with 0 meaning "I could not ever hold this job for reasons of conscience"; with 1 signifying "this job would present major conflicts for me from an ethical standpoint"; with 2 corresponding to "most of the time I could do this in good faith"; and 3 "there are no apparent problems." Occupations may be considered such as banker, police officer, prostitute, public school teacher, liquor distributor, realtor, developer, IRS employee, labor organizer, video store owner, lawyer, tobacco wholesaler, assembly line worker in the

armaments industry, private school teacher, minister, U.S. House of Representatives—make your own list according to your constituents.

The class now can move toward a series of undetermined length which will consider presentations by various members of the class or congregations or community. These people should attempt to address three questions: 1. Describe your work, your duties in a typical day and week. 2. What are the ethical questions with which you struggle at work? 3. How can the church/ministers of the church be more helpful to you in your work? Class leaders might consist of people such as a medical professional, who deals with confidentiality and personal issues of costs and technology, a member of a labor union who has had to consider a strike, a homemaker who deals with child raising, home management, family relationships, and volunteer work. The possibilities are endless, but could include a mental health professional dealing with stress and addiction in the work place, a politician, a military officer, an executive of a corporation, a general office worker, a law enforcement officer, a personnel officer. The members of the class should be able to relate their particular work situations to what is being discussed.

Theological seminaries are in the process of developing programs not only for clergy but also for laity who seek to integrate and juxtapose their faith commitments and their areas of employment. Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA is one of these institutions, which now has a full time Lay Institute of Faith and Life. A brief bibliography provided by Dr. Robert Smith of that Institute is included at the end of this article.⁵

III. *An Affront and a Summons to the Preacher*

A recent article in this journal by Ben Sparks poses the question succinctly:

Hearers have become accustomed to the assurance of their forgiveness after the prayer of confession, and want their moral imagination stirred by the preacher, for they have work to do each day that requires their moral discernment, their courage, and their loyalty. What signals do we send them that we understand? And what assistance can we be from the pulpit?

Our hearers do not need to be pastorally massaged, nor do they expect to be bloodied. They do not want, nor do they need our opinions about their moral choices, but apparently they would be grateful if they could understand at the end of a sermon, precisely what the Word of God and the collective wisdom of the church over the ages teach them about what they are to believe and what they are to do.⁶

The contemporary preacher stands on perilous footing unless he or she addresses the following themes clearly and consistently: 1. The nature of security; 2. The relationship between who one is and what one does, or as European theologians expressed it a generation ago, the tension between being and doing; 3. The interaction, the complementarity, or the opposition between one's job and one's vocation as a Christian—is one's

job merely instrumental, simply the way one survives, and is one's Christian calling something more? 4. An understandable process of ethical decision making. For example, though the language is outdated, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a still useful sermon entitled, "Six Ways to Tell Right From Wrong."¹ 5. Stewardship—what one does or attempts to do with the fruits of one's labor. Jesus had more to say about money than about any other subject.

Preachers regularly disappoint or even fail the congregation in the choice and use of sermon illustrations. Let the aspiring preacher review the most recent five or ten sermons from the "barrel" and survey the illustrations. Do they in any sense refer to, reflect upon or illuminate the dilemmas, stresses, challenges, and opportunities in the workplace? Whether consciously or subliminally, a preponderance of illustrations will likely reinforce the cleavage between spirituality and the "real world." While perhaps being helpful or "inspiring" in a personal individualistic sense, many illustrations have minimal bearing upon the public or economic lives of the congregation.

Look also at the protagonists in the illustrations. One might well decide generally to avoid those in which *ministers* are the agents. Rightly or mistakenly, people *expect* for ministers to do "good things" and for theologians to say words of lofty wisdom. By implicitly assenting to these notions, the preacher is close to clerical self-righteousness, and comes near to fostering a quick discounting of whatever truth is in the message. Dig for illustrations which portray the laity in action in their ordinary habitat and routines.

Preparing sermons and delivering them takes on new urgency and complexity after hearing regularly and profoundly from people in the work place such as this one: "The goals of a publicly held corporation in a capitalistic economic system and the values of the Christian faith are fundamentally inconsistent with each other. The living out of the faith for me can be simply summarized by loving God with all my heart, mind, body, and strength, and by loving my neighbor as myself. The goal of corporate America, however, is to make money and lots of it. And the products are really irrelevant. . . . I guess, all in all, I would rather not work for a corporation, for even in those shining moments when I am able, by the grace of God, to do the right things, I am haunted by the possibility that it may still be for all the wrong reasons."

If we fail in our teaching, our pastoral care, and our preaching to grapple with these struggles of our parishioners, we will remain irrelevant to much of their lives. If, however, we seek to encounter the "real world" where they work, to struggle with its grinding pace and alienation, then perhaps our ministries will touch the deep and often wounded places of their lives and find a welcome home for a gospel of grace.

NOTES

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1970), 100.

³ Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: Avon, 1972), xiv.

⁴ Tex Sample, *U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 118.

⁵ E.F. Schumacher, *Good Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). The author, an economist and ecologist who died in 1977, discusses three purposes of human work: to produce necessary and useful goods and services; to enable us to use and perfect our gifts and skills; and to serve, and collaborate with, other people, so as to "liberate ourselves from our inborn egocentricity"(x).

⁶ The following resources were recommended by Dr. Smith in personal correspondence: James D. Anderson and Ezra E. Jones, *Ministry of the Laity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

William E. Diehl, *Christianity and Real Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

Mark Gibbs, *God's Lively People* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).

Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist, 1977).

Roland Larson and Doris Larson, *Values and Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1980).

William P. Mahedy and Christopher Carstens, *Starting On Monday: Christian Living in the Workplace* (N.Y.: Ballentine Books, 1987).

Richard Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

George Peck, ed., *The Laity In Ministry* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984).

William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1973).

Graham Tucker, *The Faith-Work Connection*, (Toronto: Anglican Book Center, 1987).

⁷ *Journal for Preachers* (Pentecost, 1989).

⁸ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Riverside Sermons* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 203-211.