

III

Making Work Prayer

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future's sakes.

From Robert Frost's Two Tramps in Mud Time

Much has been written on the meaninglessness of work in the modern and now postmodern world – the mindless and repetitive assembly line of the industrial age, and the monotonous hours writing code, tediously entering data, staring at anesthetizing screens day after day in the postmodern age. Not long ago someone who manages computer programmers for a living told me how much he hates his job. “I wish I could have been a farmer instead,” he said. He hates his job, but makes too much money, that makes too many things possible for his wife and children, for him to just walk away. Indeed, no matter how wearisome or mind numbing people may find their jobs they are nevertheless usually grateful to be earning an income. Even in books on spirituality authors frequently struggle with work as “that which we do for income” and play as “what we do for joy.” But notice how Robert Frost in poetic simplicity untangles that knot.

Two hulking tramps, lumberjacks, come out of the woods. They need work and see Frost cutting wood, not in order to buy bread, but for the pleasure of it, for the sheer joy of it. True it needs doing, but for Frost it is a joy to chop the wood. Frost says of these two wood cutters: "They thought all chopping was theirs of right. . . As that I had no right to play with what was another man's work for gain. . . My right might be love but theirs was need. . ." Frost does not deny the logic of need but he unites it with the right of joyful love.

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In sharing the discovery that his avocation and vocation are just as much one as his two eyes are in making one in sight, Frost points the way to poetic enlightenment. The contemplative way is not about distinguishing between need and love as used here, or differentiating between vocation and avocation, but in seeing the two as one. Only in this way can the wisdom saying of Saint Benedict, "My work is my prayer," ever really make sense.

A vocation, from the Latin *vocatio* meaning a "call or summons" is an occupation to which a person is especially drawn, suited, trained, or qualified. Though "vocation" is now generally used in a secular sense, there are even professionals who do vocational testing and counseling, the use of the word originated in a religious context. Whether understood more specifically and "supernaturally," for want of a better term, or more generally and "naturally," Christians have traditionally tended to think of each individual as created or endowed by God with certain gifts, and talents orienting them toward a specific purpose and way of life. Before the sixteenth century its primary reference was

to the “call” of God to all human kind to that large, spacious and free life Christians are talking about, or are supposed to have in mind, when they use the word “salvation.” Beyond that it was used in speaking of the “call” or “vocation” to the priesthood. The Roman Catholic Church actually recognizes four vocations – marriage, single life, religious and ordained life. Martin Luther went further to include what we would recognize as most secular occupations. In its broadest sense the Christian idea of vocation includes the use of one’s gifts in work, family, church and civic life for the sake of the greater common good.

Alfred Adler, the brilliant Viennese medical doctor who with Freud and Jung was among the earliest pioneers of depth psychology, developed this theme in his concept of *gemeinschaftsgefühl*. This rather unwieldy German word coined by Adler is usually translated as “social interest,” but for our purposes is perhaps better and certainly more simply rendered as “community feeling.” One’s “style of life” is the set of construals and personal narratives one has devised in order to cope with being-in-the-world. If one has social interest then one evidences or enacts a “useful” style of life. If one does not have social interest or community feeling then one is self-absorbed and is concerned only with one’s own interests. Such a style of life is “useless.”

The condition of being useless is not pathological. Such people do not “have” (possess) a defined set of psychological symptoms. Rather, they “use” them in dealings with others and live within their parameters, confines and restraints. Those living a “useless” life believe there must be some benefit to deploying these symptoms and that life would change for the worse if they were not able to do so. In this sense neurosis is a form of reality-evasion. The useless person is not sick, but rather just “discouraged” because his or her dysfunctional relationships lead to the loss of feeling “fully human, fully alive.”

Those who have social interest, Adler said, develop a “style of life” that extends beyond their own individual and private interests to concern for the well-being of the larger community. This community feeling will be evidenced in a “useful style of life.” Without community feeling the individual is entangled in a self-absorbed, self-centered, self-aggrandizing style of life that can only be thus characterized as “useless.” As already noted, then, Adler saw neurosis as a form of reality evasion. Mistaken about the goal of human relationships, the how and the why, of human relations, the neurotic individual lives within a dysfunctional set of self-created and self-imposed behavioral confines and restraints that are always, in the end, self-defeating, and increasingly lead to feelings of having done nothing and of having been nothing that truly matters. The “mistake” is, of course, made in the individuals early childhood, the mistake that one’s primary aim in life is self-gratification, attention getting, or power and control. The mistake is that ultimate fulfillment lies along the lines of self-interest rather than community concern.

Adler’s work led him to further explore feelings of “inferiority” and to investigate issues we would now think of, at least on the popular level, as involving questions of self-esteem. The simple fact is that every occupation and every “accomplishment” has a limited stress bearing load; that is, its capacity for providing a sense of meaning, satisfaction and fulfillment is limited, is finite. The Jesuit priest, psychologist, spiritual director and author Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote in *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life*:

It is not difficult to see that, in our particular world, we all have a desire to accomplish something. Some of us think in terms of great dramatic changes in the structure of our society. Others want to build a house, write a book, invent a machine, or win a trophy. And some of us seem content when we just do something worthwhile for someone. But practically all of us think about ourselves in terms of our contribution to life. And when we have become old, much of our feelings of unhappiness or sadness depend on our evaluation of the part we have played in giving shape to our world and its history. As Christians we even feel a special call to do something good for someone. . . . But although the desire to be useful can be a sign of mental and spiritual health in our goal-oriented society, it can also become the source of a paralyzing lack of self-esteem.

It is perhaps important to make a small clarification here. Adler and Nouwen are not in contradiction. Social interest, or community feeling, is not in opposition to Nouwen's insight that "even doing good for someone" can lead to "a paralyzing lack of self-esteem." The two are in complete agreement in observing that anything, even something good, when done with a self-enhancing purpose becomes the antithesis of the spiritual life and its power to do either ourselves or others good is diminished or negated all together. The rule of Jesus is that whatever good that is done must be done with no thought of reward, otherwise we lose the greater reward of knowing the ineffable presence and reality of God.

At the risk of being thought of as engaging in simplistic proof-texting, searching for and citing a passage or passages of scripture that support whatever position an author or speaker wants to uphold, I am going to reflect on a Biblical text that has been a rather pivotal passage in my own personal meditations. The text is the first chapter of Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. I have personally found this passage to be of what I can only describe as ultimate significance in that it reveals to me the mysterious meaning of my life, of every sentient being, and of the existence of every atom in the universe. It is not within the scope of this conversation to do an exegesis of the entire chapter, and it would most likely be helpful for you to reflect on it in the quiet of your own mind and in the stillness of your own heart, but there is time and space to note what I think is of special relevance to our discussion here.

First read verse three through fourteen as a whole:

³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵ He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace ⁸ which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight ⁹ He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him ¹⁰ with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, ¹² to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. ¹³ In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who

is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory.

This is not a passage of scripture that is easily outlined or followed sequentially, that is because from verse three through fourteen it is all one sentence. It is more of a lyrical song that it is a well-reasoned statement or argument. As he writes Paul the Apostle is not thinking in a sequential fashion, but rather he is overwhelmed, filled, with a sense of wonder at the mysterious workings and purpose of God:

- 1) By a consciousness of having been chosen by The God Who Is, along with all human kind, before the foundation of the world.
- 2) By a consciousness that we are chosen to be lavishly blessed spiritually.
- 3) By a consciousness that we have been chosen to be holy (different from everything profane, and counter cultural), and blameless (consecrating what is best within us to the purposes and compassionate concerns of God).
- 4) By a consciousness of having been set free, “delivered,” from that blind self-will which imprisons all humanity – liberated from our obsessive compulsive life-styles.
- 5) By a consciousness of God’s great eternal and cosmic plan.

I use the word consciousness above because what Paul longs for us to know can be caught in the poetic feel of a song better than it can be said in ordinary prose.

As Paul writes the words come spilling out and tumble over one another in spiritual ecstasy. The blessing, the “inheritance,” the grace, the sheer wonder of God’s mysterious movement and mystical rhythm defy all dictionary definitions, all theological theories, and all philosophical speculation. Here Paul sings of God’s purpose, and therefore the ultimate meaning of our own lives, in polyvalent lyrics.

Paul’s way of singing it is, “That we might be holy and blameless before God. In love.” The Hebrew word for holy is “*qodesh*” and means “apartness, set-apartness, separateness, sacredness.” We might reasonably extend the meaning then to include “otherness, transcendent and wholly other.” In the New Testament, the word for holy is “*hagios*” and means “set apart, sacred, what holds special and precious significance, and what is worthy of reverence or veneration.” A chalice, for example, may be holy not because it is materially different from all other chalices, but because it has been set apart, set aside, consecrated for use in the Eucharistic

worship of God, and is used for no other purpose. To the extent that any man or woman has his or her heart consecrated to God he or she is holy.

“The word “blameless” originally had to do with ritual sacrifices. It had to do with what is *whole*, or *integrated*. An animal offered on the sacrificial altar could only be offered if it was whole, healthy, complete. In the New Testament James captures the essence of the term in assuring his readers that the life challenges we face on our journey can, if it is our desire, work in such a way as to make us “perfect and complete.” Biblically what is perfect is not necessarily beyond all further improvement, but it is appropriate to and fulfills the purpose for which it was made or intended. A colt bred and trained as a race horse is perfect if it runs fast. A tool is perfect when it is just the right tool for the job at hand -- functions in the way it was intended to function. The sacrificial lamb in ancient Hebrew worship was perfect when it was appropriate for representing the giving of one’s self to God. A blemished lamb – sick or injured and therefore of little market value, could never be appropriate for signifying deep gratitude, remorse for serious wrongs, or profound commitment and devotion. Human beings are perfect when it can be said they live in the way they were created to live. We are perfect when it can be said that the pattern of our lives reflects a harmonic convergence with kindness, caring, and the Divine Mystery

The Divine intention, according to our text, is that we live “to the praise of God’s glory.” The early church father Irenaeus said: “The Glory of God is a human being fully alive.” In his helpful little book written in 1976 John Powell, S.J., who is both a priest and psychologist, modified Irenaeus to say in one of his books: “The Glory of God is a man or woman fully human, fully alive.” What is the glory of an artist? Isn’t it the beauty of a painting, a sculpture, or perhaps a piece of music? What is the glory of a parent? Isn’t it children who grow to live well as adult men and women. These are the sorts of questions Powell sought to explore in his book. But here we only need to note that the Apostle Paul says that whatever else it may include, the great cosmic plan is that we live “to the praise of God’s glory. In love.” When we live with integrity and joy, when we are fully human and fully alive, when we, to the best of our ability, live love

each day that is the glory, the shining, of God; and, therefore, the essential meaning of our own life.

Look at verses 9-10: "He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth." Notice how God's intention, how the eternal mystery of God's will, is "kind." And notice how God's desire is for all things to become one, to be united, to be summed up in Christ who is the incarnation of love.

So what is our vocation? What is that to which we are summoned as Christians? Isn't it that we are called with and in utter simplicity to be love as Christ was and will always be love? Isn't it to love as God loves in every circumstance, in every situation, at all times and in all places, to love in light and in darkness, in joy and in sorrow, to love and to keep on loving in success and failure and toil and ease and boredom and excitement? Love, the God, who in the words of Saint John is love, is the reason for our existences and the meaning of our lives. There are no higher or lower vocations – whatever the means by which we earn a living there is only the one vocation of love.

I met Jim when I began a year-long chaplain residency at Saint Anthony's Hospital in Denver Colorado. Jim was the oldest in our group. After a terrible tragedy which, as often happens, led to further troubles and sorrows, he closed his successful real estate business and moved to Portland Oregon where he looked for any sort of employment that had little stress and few responsibilities. He applied for every job sweeping floors he saw posted. One employer became so angry when he found out that Jim had a college degree and had owned his own business that he threatened to physically throw Jim out of his office. Eventually Jim was employed by Sears selling luggage. One day while driving in the hills around Portland he came across a Catholic monastery. Jim is Roman Catholic and found the monastery somehow intriguing. He went in became acquainted and was introduced to meditation. Over time Jim's in depth practice of contemplation made him one of the most fascinating people you could ever

meet. When we first met in the Clinical Pastoral Education program he had the rather disquieting habit of speaking only when he thought a response was actually called for; more significantly he had the unique ability to enter the room of a hysterical patient and, using very few or no words, help calm the patient by simply being genuinely present.

Jim had, obviously, returned to Denver, by the time we met. He and his wife had remarried and in looking for something to do he had gone to the hospital's Human Resources Department. He asked if there was something he might do as a volunteer – perhaps as an orderly. It didn't take long for Human Resources to recognize how much Jim had to offer and that's how he wound up in the Chaplain Residency Program.

I think that Jim's practice of spiritual disciplines like meditation and contemplative prayer had brought him to a place where all of life, including his work, was prayer and spiritual practice. There is a Zen proverb which says, "Before Enlightenment chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment chop wood, carry water." The contemplative life requires an unusual appreciation of the present moment. Most human beings show little awareness of the here and now; they neither appreciate nor live in the present. The experiences we have had can become not simply memories offering good guidance in the present or part of the mysterious consciousness that is who we are, but nostalgic attachments, anchors, to the past that impede us on our journey. Or, rather than allowing hope for the future to carry us gently forward we become preoccupied with what might be – literally attempt to fill our time and place before we are there. Life is beautiful just as it is right now. Yes, with "all of its glories and all of its faults life is a bitter sweet waltz" – a breathtakingly beautiful waltz. Beauty, meaning, and consciousness of God are all in us and available to us each moment as we labor for food and shelter and clothing if we are but awake enough to see them through sleepy eyes.

When Jim first inquired at the hospital it was not a search for gainful employment or for a position with any status attached to it. He acted out of a simple desire to serve which was also the desire to be a caring healing presence. His quest was for horizontal rather than vertical growth. Growth along the vertical axis is the quest of ambition and the desire to be better than everyone

else – to be at the top of the heap. Sadly, even if one succeeds at vertical growth and somehow manages to make it to the very top, whatever that means, they usually remain unhappy and anxious, knowing they may be displaced and thrown back down to the bottom at any moment.

Horizontal growth on the other hand comes from the longing to make a genuine contribution to the good of the people around us. A woman in our California coastal village decided to go to India and work with Mother Teresa. I mean if you want to be at the top as a helper, you can't climb much higher than that. But once Mother Teresa found out this woman had left a thirteen-year-old daughter in California while she had "altruistically" traveled those thousands of miles to work with the poorest of the poor, Mother Teresa said to her: "No you cannot come to help us here. Not yet. You must return home and finish raising your daughter with love and good care. When you have done that we can talk again." Mother Teresa was pointing her to growth along the horizontal axis. Horizontal growth has nothing to do with what is big, or important, or dramatic and everything to do with what is simple and loving – awake to the requirements and possibilities of love in the present moment. A thousand things beyond your control may prevent you from achieving big success, earning big money, gaining high status, or finding exciting employment, but only you can prevent you from growth in love – the practice of which results in the experience of ultimate meaning and ultimate satisfaction. Wherever you are your heart is either awake to love or it is not.

Nicholas Herman was born in what is now known as eastern France. As a young man he fought in the Thirty Years' War and was wounded in his leg so that for the rest of his life he walked with a limp. He served for a time as a footman or a valet but said because he was large and clumsy he was not very good at it. One winter, in the depth of winter, Nicolas looked at a barren tree, without leaves or fruit, and saw it as waiting patiently for the abundance of summer. Gazing at the tree, Nicolas grasped for the first time the extravagance of God's grace and the meaning of divine providence not just as concerning humanity in general but for himself in particular. He pictured himself, like the tree, as seemingly dead, but with God's life waiting in him. He said, that in that moment he looked at the leafless tree the fact of God first flashed on his

soul, and a love for God that never after ceased to burn. He said that it was not a “supernatural vision,” but a “supernatural clarity.” Sometime after this experience he entered the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Paris. Because he did not have the education to become a priest Nicholas entered the priory as a lay brother and took the religious name, "Lawrence of the Resurrection". He spent almost all the rest of his life within the walls of the monastery, working there first as a cobbler, a repairer of sandals, and then in the kitchen. Despite, or perhaps because of, his rather “lowly” position, the spiritual quality of his character grew and drew people to him. Even as he continued his mundane work in the kitchen word spread beyond the monastery of his spiritual character. Learning of the profound peace that clothed him as obviously as the monk’s habit in which he was dressed, people came to seek spiritual guidance from Brother Lawrence. After his death the wisdom that he had passed on in conversations and a few letters became the basis for the book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. It is considered a spiritual classic, and often is recommended by spiritual directors. In the monastery kitchen where amidst the tedious chores of cooking and cleaning and at the constant bidding of his superiors, Brother Lawrence developed his rule of spirituality and work. In his *Maxims*, Lawrence writes, "Men invent means and methods of coming at God's love, they learn rules and set up devices to remind them of that love, and it seems like a world of trouble to bring oneself into the consciousness of God's presence. Yet it might be so simple. Is it not quicker and easier just to do our common business wholly for the love of him?" Brother Lawrence must have spent long hours meditating on Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians (6:5-7): “Servants, respectfully obey your earthly masters but always with an eye to obeying the real master, Christ. Don't just do what you have to do to get by, but work heartily, as Christ's servants doing what God wants you to do. And work with a smile, always keeping in mind that no matter who happens to be giving the orders you are really serving God.”

For Brother Lawrence, "common business," no matter how mundane or routine, was the medium of God's love. The issue was not the sacredness or worldly status of the task but the motivation behind it. "Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do. . . We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is

nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God." And so it has been said that together, God and Brother Lawrence cooked meals, ran errands, scrubbed pots, and endured the scorn of the world. Brother Lawrence died at the age of 80 in relative obscurity and perfect joy.

Before I began this meditation I read a number of books on the theology of work, none of which I found satisfying. For the most part they debated definitions of work and whether work should be fulfilling or must necessarily involve frustrating toil. Often they explored distinctions between prayer or contemplation and action. They were well written books by people with a far greater understanding of theological and philosophical subtleties than I am capable of grasping. They just did not answer the question that continually haunts me, "How can the presence of God be practiced in all things and at all times?" And how is it that it can be true for me as it was for Saint Benedict, "My work is my prayer."