

“The Satisfaction of a Job Well Done”

September 2, 2007

Dr. Kipp Wolfe

Matthew 25:14-30

It is Labor Day weekend 2007, and it seems especially appropriate at this time of year to talk about . . . football! Many of you probably watched football games yesterday. How about that Sam Bradford? I would be happy to visit with you after worship about football, but this morning I want to talk with you about work, work from a Christian perspective.

This sermon is addressed mainly toward those who work outside the home. I would never diminish either moms or dads who stay at home to care for their children. There is surely no more important nor difficult task than that. And I am not leaving out those of you who are retired. In fact, I'm going to tell a story at the end of this sermon about retired people that I think you retired folk will appreciate. But this sermon is directed mainly toward those who work outside the home.

This sermon is partly in response to something I read recently about a poll that was taken of workers. In this poll, those surveyed said they hated their jobs—95% of them said they hated—not just that they were unhappy or dissatisfied in their jobs, but that they hated their jobs—95% of those workers polled. Also, did you know that the highest incidence of heart attacks is on Monday morning between 8:00 and 9:00. What do most of us do between those hours on Monday mornings?

Most of us have mixed feelings about our jobs. There are certain aspects of our work that are enjoyable; there are other parts of our jobs that we dislike a great deal. I had something happen a couple of Sundays ago. When it happened at the time I thought, “Somehow I need to work that into a sermon.” On the way up to church one Sunday I caught up with an old rusty pickup in front of me. This pickup was so rusty that I think rust was about the only thing holding it together. When I got beside the truck, I looked over and the driver of the truck was a young man. Let's just say he looked a little Rusty, too. In fact, I'm going to call him Rusty.

What I noticed about the truck, however, more than the rust, was this: on the back window of the pick up were two stickers. One sticker said, “I ‘heart’ bad girlz.” The other sticker said “Spank me.”

Now then, keep this in mind. Say you have a cousin who is a young single woman and she is coming to visit you and she asks you to set her up with a blind date. Would you call Rusty for that blind date? If you did and your cousin looked out the window and saw him driving up in this pickup, would she not have mixed feelings about that? She has a date, but is that the kind of date she really wants? Most of us

have similar feelings about our work. There is a part of our work that we love—it is very satisfying. But there are other aspects of our work that are not so pleasant.

Our parable today speaks to our mixed feelings about our work. You need to understand this first. In the parable the *talent* that is mentioned is not the kind of *talent* that we usually think about when we talk about a *talented* person. The talent in this parable stands for 15 years' wages. That's quite a bit of money. Even one talent. Fifteen years of work. Five talents represented 75 years of work, so you can begin to understand that there was some value to the talents. First lesson from the story is this: from a faith perspective we believe that God has created us to work, God expects us to work, and through our work we can honor God.

The author and writer, John Killinger, has said this about our work:

“Our faith is a faith that grows out of and exalts all kinds of work. It celebrates the work of God in creating the world, and shaping the nation of Israel, and sending Christ in our midst. Our faith remembers the work of Christ for our redemption. It invites the work of the Holy Spirit to continue among us. Our faith recalls that Peter and James and John were fishermen, and Matthew a tax collector, and Paul a tentmaker. Our faith speaks of Holy callings to a variety of secular vocations, and regards all labor as something done in the imitation of God.”

One thing this says to me is this: “In our work we need to find something to do that we love.” Last Sunday night a group of parents met to talk about our youth and children's ministry. The one thing that the parents said more than anything else was this: “We want a youth minister who is passionate about his work, who loves our children.” The same can be said of all of us in our work, but how sad recently on one college campus when graduating students were asked what their number one priority was.

You can imagine, they wanted a job that paid them a lot of money. It said nothing about their love for their job or satisfaction in their work, but understand this: those college students don't get those values in a vacuum. Those college students learn their values from their parents, their teachers, their professors, from us. Find something that you love to do.

Paul Tillich is a famous theologian that some of you know about and have read some of his work. Paul Tillich wrote in one of his most famous writings about emptiness and meaninglessness. Tillich said that in all of life we can expect there to be emptiness—in our jobs in our marriages in our friendships, in our relationship with God, even. That's just a part of what it is to be human. But Tillich said the danger is this: in any of those relationships when emptiness turns into meaninglessness we are in trouble. Life is not meaningless. Your job should not be meaningless. If it is, you need to have the courage to find another job. Through the years I have known many

people, close friends of mine, who were unhappy in their work and they gave up their jobs at great risk, maybe, to take a lower paying job. But they found more satisfaction and happiness in that second job. Don't be afraid to take that risk.

Recently I read something I loved. It was a story about a ship that had been created. The ship was sitting in the harbor and this master builder wanted to keep the ship there in the harbor. That's not the purpose of a ship. That's not why a ship is created. A ship is created to go out onto the high seas in storms or smooth water, and so we are created in our life to take risks, even if it means failing.

I believe also our faith teaches us that we are called to take pride in our work. I don't know if you have ever thought of this, but I would ask you to consider going into a woodworker's shop to buy some kind of furniture. Let's say you are looking for a cradle. Imagine going into Joseph's carpenter shop where Jesus was employed as a carpenter. Imagine buying a cradle that had been made by Jesus. Could there be a finer piece of furniture? Jesus knew about cradles and mangers. Imagine if you were a farmer and needed a yoke for your oxen. Would you not expect the very finest work from Jesus? Our faith calls us to take pride in our work.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I think this parable teaches an important lesson about the nature of God. The one talent man believed that the master was harsh. I read it wrong, really, when I read the scripture the first time. He said, "Master, I knew you would be a hard man reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow, so I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground." How I should have read it was "I was afraid" (read in a high, whining voice). This one talent man, with the whiny voice, was living his life based on fear instead of faith. God is not a harsh God. God cares about our work as God cares about every aspect of our lives, and God is waiting to help us in our work if only we will ask.

I mentioned earlier that we had visited with a group out at University Village. Carol and I went out there this past week and I told you that I would tell you what some retired folks said. Some of these people, one man, Forrest Winston, who just turned 100, shared wonderful stories about their faith journey but the thing that struck me most was this: I shared with them what we are going to be doing about the building program in our church, to build the church. I said that we are going to have a miniature church and we are going to have the members of the church sign commitment cards that they will pray for the church, they will attend regularly, they will invite a friend to church, they will support the church financially . I said someone will be visiting you to have you sign one of these commitment cards and we will ask you to pray for what we are doing in the church. Then we will take your card, that's in the shape of a brick, and put it on this little miniature church building, and you will help us to build our church. My goodness. You would have thought I had told them that they had won the lottery. They were so pleased that their lives still had value—that they had work to do for God, even as we have work to do for God.

I believe this parable toward the end of Jesus' ministry might have indeed been autobiographical. In other words, it was a story that Jesus told about himself. I can imagine that at one point in his ministry when Jesus realized that his calling was a cross, he might have prayed this prayer to God: "Father, I have important work to do. I need to be healing people and teaching and preaching and serving and loving. God said, "Your work is a cross. The work that I have called you to do is a cross." When Jesus hung on the cross and said, "It is finished," he wasn't giving up. He was saying, "Father, my work is done for you." Can't you imagine God saying to Jesus at that moment, "Well done, my son, well done."

As a part of the body of Christ, we are called to do important work for God—to pray even as those residents of University Village will be praying for our church, and to share our faith perhaps in ways that they can't. If we will do that, and if we will honor God in our secular work that can seem so common but can become uncommon when we honor God through our work, God will say to each of us "Well done, well done." Amen