

What Work is God Giving to You This New Year?

Beloved friends, as we gather on this New Year morning of 2023, our scripture readings invite us to each wonder: what work is God giving to me this New Year? And a complimentary question: what work is God not giving to me this New Year? Let us pray:

Spirit of Emmanuel – God incarnated among us, you have gathered us today in a beloved space, developed by our ancestors in faith on this land that has been in relationship with your First Nations peoples for millennia. God, in this moment in time and space, be with us as we wonder to what work you call us. And as we wonder, grant us serenity to accept those things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

When have you last asked yourself, what work is mine to do now?

Has that question been a singular question about your work life – pondered a long time ago with a guidance counselor at your high school or college or perhaps with a parent?

Or have you asked it of yourself more recently when discerning a change in your employment path or the approach of retirement? What work is mine to do now?

Have you lived through challenging experiences in relationships with others that have taught you to self-differentiate, asking yourself as often as necessary, what work is mine to do now?

Do you ask yourself this question on a regular basis? I have come to understand that one's ability to ask with autonomy and integrity – what work is mine to do now? – hinges in great part on the person's level of self-differentiation.

I am entering my fifth year in the Next Generation Leadership Initiative program. The national setting of the United Church of Christ annually chooses fifteen younger local church pastors to form a learning cohort to study together across 6 years in order to strengthen our hands-on work with our individual congregations. In year one of the program, we studied family systems theory. It was then that I learned about the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family.

Murray Bowen, born in Tennessee, was a psychiatrist who lived across the arc of the twentieth century. He served on active duty in the US Army in World War II, which caused him to change his specialty from surgery to psychiatry.

Self-differentiation sits at the heart of the research and teaching work of the Bowen Center. I believe that it sits at the heart of how healthily we can each engage in the question (what work is mine to do now?) as frequently as our life circumstances call the question. I'd like to share with you the Bowen Center's lucid explanation of self-differentiation because I believe understanding it could launch us well into a new year. Here is their explanation:

"Families and other social groups greatly affect how people think, feel, and act, but individuals vary in their susceptibility to "groupthink," and groups vary in the amount of pressure they exert for conformity. These differences between individuals and between groups reflect differences in people's levels of differentiation of self. The less developed a person's "self," the more impact others have on [their] functioning and the more [they] try to control, actively or passively, the functioning of others. The basic building blocks of a "self" are inborn, but an individual's family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much "self" develops.

Once established, the level of “self” rarely changes unless a person makes a structured, long-term effort to change it.

People with a poorly differentiated “self” depend so heavily on the acceptance and approval of others that they either quickly adjust what they think, say, and do to please others or they dogmatically proclaim what others should be like and pressure them to conform. Bullies depend on approval and acceptance as much as chameleons, but bullies push others to agree with them instead of with others. Disagreement threatens a bully as much as it threatens a chameleon. An extreme rebel is a poorly differentiated person too, but [they] pretend to be a “self” by routinely opposing the positions of others.

A person with a well-differentiated “self” recognizes [their] realistic dependence on others, but [they] can stay calm and clear headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotionality. Thoughtfully acquired principles help guide decision-making about important family and social issues, making [them] less at the mercy of the feelings of the moment. What [they] decide and what [they] say match what [they] do. [They] can act selflessly, but [their] acting in the best interests of the group is a thoughtful choice, not a response to relationship pressures. Confident in [their] thinking, [they] can support others’ views without being a disciple or reject others’ views without polarizing the differences. [They] define [them]self without being pushy and deal with pressure to yield without being wishy-washy.

Every human society has its well-differentiated people, poorly differentiated people, and people at many gradations between these extremes.

Consequently, families and other groups in a society differ in the intensity of their emotional interdependence depending on the differentiation levels of their members. The more intense the interdependence, the less a group has capacity to adapt to potentially stressful events without a marked escalation of chronic anxiety. Everyone is subject to problems in work and personal life, but less differentiated people and families have greater vulnerability to periods of heightened chronic anxiety, which contributes to their having a disproportionate share of society's more serious problems."

(<https://www.thebowencenter.org/differentiation-of-self>) Those pithy words were from the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family.

What work is God giving to me in this New Year? What work is God giving to you in this New Year? This question leapt out to me from both of our scripture readings for today. And I think self-differentiation allows us to carefully respond to the question.

Let's return to the portion of our Psalm that I shared with our children in song form:

"When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you set in place—what is humanity that you should be mindful of us? Who are we that you should care for us? You have made us barely less than God, and crowned us with glory and honor. You have made us responsible for the works of your hands..." (Ps. 8:3-6a)

Let's appreciate the Psalmist's movement from appreciative awe in response to the beauty and wonder of creation to recognition of our responsibility in the web of creation. For each of us, the days of a human lifetime present countless opportunities to claim responsibility within the web of creation, embodying love in our own particular way.

I often return to words from American author, historian and Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale, who lived from 1822 until 1909 and once wrote this: *"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do. What I can do, I should do. And what I should do, by the grace of God, I will do."* Yes, we can each do the work God is giving specifically to us. Yet it is often not simple or easy to discern what our work is!

Our reading from Ecclesiastes this morning opened with the oft-quoted poem: *"There is a time for everything, a season for every purpose under heaven..."* (Eccl. 3:1). This week, I was drawn more to later verses in the reading, where we heard this reflection: *"What do workers gain from their efforts? I have reflected on this while learning all the kinds of work God gives to humankind... What I do know is that what is best for us is to be happy and enjoy life as long as we live. And God's gift to us is to eat and drink and find fulfillment in our work."* (Eccl. 3:9-10, 12-13)

I dare say that the writer of Ecclesiastes knew a thing or two about self-differentiation. Many factors affect a person's experience of happiness and fulfillment – mental health and societal injustice being among them. While the writer is not attempting to address other contributors to happiness, they do encourage us to remember that a loving God longs to empower us to engage in work that bring us measures of happiness, enjoyment, fulfillment.

Finally, let's turn to the third focal text for this morning – the hymn (or, I might argue, the Christmastide carol): "I Am the Light of the World." We opened worship by singing part of it and will close worship with the rest of the verses. It is inspired by a piece entitled "The Work of Christmas" by African American theologian, teacher, author and activist Howard Thurman.

I invite you to close your eyes as you let these words wash over you, challenging and encouraging you in your journey to understand what work God is giving to you in this New Year. I find that verses two and four related best to our private, personal lives and that the third verse relates well to our communal life as a progressive Christian congregation. Though, we know that a great gift of a small, hearty church is that we get to know one another personally quite well as we work publicly together. We hear:

*“To find the lost and lonely one,
To heal that broken soul with love,
To feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,
To feel the earth below the sky above!...
To bring hope to every task you do,
To dance at a baby's new birth,
To make music in an old person's heart,
And sing to the colors of the earth!” (NCH #584)*

In what circumstances in your personal life is God calling you to those pieces of work – to accompany, to bring healing and nourishment and hope?

*“To free the prisoner from all chains,
To make the powerful care,
To rebuild the nations with strength of goodwill,
To see all God's children everywhere.” (NCH #584)*

To what local circumstances is God calling our congregation to dismantle injustice?

Let us each and together discern what work God is giving to us in this New Year. And let's go do it because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Psalm 8, Eccles. 3: 1-13, *The New Century Hymnal* #584