

## **What Work is Yours as We Embody the Kindom of Heaven?**

Long-time friends and newer friends, the Love of God gathers us today for a time of reflection. The space we occupy has been in loving relationship with people and other species for millennia before the moments we share here and now. We also locate ourselves in time – on the ninth of twenty-five Sundays in the long green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of the church year and mid-summer – at the cusp between July and August).

Let's wonder together, what work falls or calls to each of us as we seek to embody a response to Jesus' lifelong prayer that we would co-create the kindom of heaven? Let us pray:

O God of each of our stories, as we wonder and stretch alongside King Solomon and Jesus this morning: grant us serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

What work is yours? What work is mine? I felt a gravitational pull toward the image on today's worship bulletin cover – one of a pair of hands kneading dough. Thus far in life, baking bread has not been my work. If anyone else gathered in person this morning has never baked bread whose dough required kneading, would you please consider raising your hand with me? Like me, some of these brave friends appreciate our dough-kneading bread-baking neighbors.

Now, does the fact that we do a set of tasks mean that it is our work to do? Likewise, does the fact that we don't do a set of tasks mean that it is not our work to do?

American theologian and novelist Frederick Buechner once wrote what are now widely cherished words about vocation (the work to which God calls us). Buechner wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Buechner suggests that an authentic call from God is found at the nexus between our deep gladness (that is: our passion, strength, giftedness) and the world’s deep hunger (meaning: God’s cries out to us through the needs voiced and embodied by others).

Does each of us claim responsibility for and engage in work that is outside a sense of call from God. Yes, we certainly do that work as well. But I would suggest that work is most fully ours when we can sense some degree of our own gladness responding to a need.

I offer an illustration from my own family of claimed and unclaimed work. My brother Sam is a baker and cook. I am neither. My long-running quip is that I have not yet learned to mix and heat multiple ingredients together. Therefore, my children and I eat a lot of scrambled eggs, leafy salad, oatmeal, and other less healthy foods. In contrast, Sam and my sister-in-law Martha hosted a family birthday party last week for which my newly-turned 6-year old nephew Will had requested pancakes as the entrée. So my brother Sam made buttermilk pancake batter from scratch and lovingly and capably took orders from 6 adults and 6 children, each selecting which fruits, nuts and chocolate bits we wanted cooked into our particular pancake. To watch Sam flip and serve pancake after pancake was a study in vocation – Sam’s gladness meeting our need. I can serve my children pancakes made from Trader Joe’s mix, but the forming of that food is not work I’ve claimed as mine.

Now, cooking and baking are forms of work that involve concrete tasks. They do answer the question of what - What work is yours?

Jesus' parables within today's gospel reading approach vocation through a subtler and profound question: how? How does my brother Sam work to embody the kingdom of heaven? By nourishing others with food to delight their taste buds and sustain their bodies. I ask each of us this morning, in some key context of your life (at home, at work, within our merging congregation): how do you work to embody the kingdom of heaven?

Let's listen again to four "how's" Jesus shares with us this morning. Listen for one that might resonate with you, either affirming work you are already doing or tugging at you to hear God's call. Also listen for which parable resonates with someone whom you love and toward whom you would like to find ways to express more specific appreciation of how they are embodying the kingdom.

Jesus said: *"The kingdom of heaven is like the mustard seed which a farmer sowed in the field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest shrub of all – it becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come to perch in its branches."* Are you like the mustard seed that grows into a large shrub? Do you show up in understated and faithful ways? Do you experience a sense of gladness when growing and branching out to where light and continued growth can be found, open to the windy nature of the journey? The kingdom of heaven needs mustard seed people.

Jesus said: *"The kingdom of heaven is like the yeast a baker took and mixed in with three measures of flour until it was leavened all through."* Are you like the yeast that leavens the bread, causing it to rise? Do you show up in bold and action-oriented ways? Do you experience a sense of gladness when a striking change occurs or an invitation to embark on a new adventure presents itself? The kingdom of heaven needs yeast people.

Jesus said: *“The kin-dom of heaven is like a buried treasure found in a field. The ones who discovered it hid it again, and, rejoicing at the discovery, went and sold all their possessions and bought that field.”*

Are you like the discovered treasure that inspires careful planning and investment when people truly see the strengths and wisdom you know in yourself? I long for all of us to recognize ourselves as treasured by God and, when they're paying attention, also treasured by other people. However, if it feels too much of a stretch to name yourself as an inspiring discovered treasure, it is equally valid to ask yourself if you excel at staying observant, recognizing and appreciating treasure when others around you may be slower to notice it? Do you tend carefully to resources, planning and investing energy and heart in ways that will cause deeper and broader benefit down the road? The kingdom of heaven needs treasure tending people.

Jesus said: *“Or again, the kin-dom of heaven is like a merchant's search for fine pearls. When one pearl of great value was found, the merchant went back and sold everything else and bought it.”* Are you like the merchant's search for fine pearls? Are you adept at recognizing when it is time to shift course (perhaps even radically so) in order to pursue what is more important? Do you possess the requisite humility to recognize when you have been moving in a futile direction compared to a clearer purpose that is calling you? Do you possess the tenacity to make an unpopular decision based in your principles or gut intuition and the discipline to follow through in pursuing that which is of greater value? The kingdom of heaven needs clear-eyed, pearl-pursuing people.

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."*

We can each do the work God is giving specifically to us. While it is often not simple or easy to discern what tasks are our work, we can definitely do the prerequisite work of self-compassion by which we learn to notice and affirm how we each work – how we are moving in the world. This will so true for us in coming months and coming years as a merging congregation – to recognize in ourself what we feel most called to do and to be listening and be attuned to one another speaking the truth of what we are energized and equipped to do.

It is work we are game for, but we need wisdom. So with King Solomon, I invite you to close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so to receive his request to God vicariously for yourself as well and as a blessing for the work ahead of us.

O God: *"Give me, your servant, a discerning heart, so that I may distinguish good from evil and govern your people with wisdom."*

God grant us each wisdom for the work that is ours, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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July 30, 2023 (9<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
1 Kings 3: 5-12, Matt. 13: 31-33, 44-46