

What Makes Work Good?

Disciples of Jesus, beloved community: I invite us to be together in prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for the freedom to be gathered today – by live stream and on this land loved by First Nations and many others across time. We trust you to challenge and encourage us as we sit with the call to worship you by placing our bodies and minds in paths of transformation. We pray this all in the name of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

When did you last finish a project or pause in an effort and think to yourself, ‘I feel good about this!’? What was the work at hand? Were you working in solitude or alongside someone else? In what way was the work good?

I appreciate Carrie Newcomer’s lyrics in our contemporary reading for today, “Holy As a Day is Spent.” Throughout the song, she honors the goodness inherent in the efforts of daily living.

Moments ago, I would have shared with our young people a set of ways in which work can feel purposeful or have good impact.

There are times when work is good because we’re good at it. We might think to ourself, “I was made for this.” We would be living in the way of **the geese** who *“fly overhead and spread their wings like their parents did.”*

Other times, work is good because we love doing it. We might think to ourself, “I could do this all day every day.” We would be living in the way of **“the dog that runs in her sleep to chase some wild and elusive thing.”**

Sometimes, work is good because we know that we are meeting someone’s need. We might think to ourself, “It felt right to do this to help out my neighbor.” We would be living in the way of the **one who tends to household chores** – *“folding sheets like folding hands to pray as only laundry can.”*

And other times, work is good because we are paid for it and that compensation is a resource that supports our household's well-being and dignity. We would be living in the way of, "*the **check-out girl** counting change.*" I am always moved by those words. I find myself hoping that fictional teenager in a low level job is learning skills and developing confidence through good work. More importantly, I hope that for today's young people in the St. Croix Valley and beyond.

We sometimes observe a glowing goodness in a person – maybe bright, maybe more subtle – when they are going about work that seems to be good or fulfilling for them. Let's be on the lookout for that goodness glowing in each other and risk expressing what we observe. We just might help one another feel seen in our efforts (not unlike the way in which Carrie Newcomer sees those around her engaged in goodness).

If we pivot and face toward our scripture reading for today, we read over the shoulder of a church member in first century Rome. The portion Sharri read to us falls close to the end of the long letter. The people in Rome were living under oppressive tactics of an overbearing empire. The Apostle Paul challenged and encouraged his disciples to follow the teachings of their faith, pursuing good even as they likely experienced discouragement and overwhelm. Paul encouraged his original audience to swim against the tide.

The Apostle encourages us to move in the same countercultural way in our setting today. Tomorrow in this nation, we collectively honor those who have worked in the labor movement – advocating for safety, fairness, and dignity within workplaces.

Let's hear again his punchline delivered early: "[P]resent your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship.

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2)

In reading various biblical scholars’ reflections on today’s text, I was reminded of how seductive our society’s dominance mentality can be for us as individual and as a congregation.

Professor Eleazar Fernandez, whom I have had the fortune to experience as a teacher, shares this interpretation of Paul’s opening words in today’s reading. From Eleazar Fernandez: *“In the face of idols that demand devotion and sacrifice, worship of the true God can be no other than the **giving of one’s total self as a “living sacrifice”**... True/spiritual worship is a ‘living sacrifice’ because it demands that believers not be ‘conformed to this world.’... Against the culture of conformity and acquiescence, those who live in the power of the crucified Christ embody virtues and practices that **promote life-giving relations.**” (Feasting on the Word)* From Eleazar Fernandez.

Wall Street would urge us to strive for **success** as stepping on others to arrive to the top of a pyramid and **growth** in the form of accumulation and consumption. Articulating those ‘eat or be eaten’ capitalistic values feels to me like having walked into a spider web and then trying to peel the sticky layer off of me. But when I look around at this community we are co-creating, I feel encouraged and the death-dealing capitalistic ways don’t loom with as much seduction and stickiness.

To be sure, our faith does not grant us immunity from the practice of attempting to dominate others. Who among us has not occasionally pushed for ‘my way or the highway’ - be it in a private household decision or a congregational process?

And who among us has not slipped into a scarcity mindset of craving more to consume – be it more economic status among family and friends or a false assumption that church growth looks like achieving a large number of people existing in this space or a large number of zeros in reserve in our bank accounts.

No congregation is perfect, but I experienced many moments of gladness across this past summer of sabbatical time when I would talk with others (not every day, not all day, but sometimes) about the countercultural ways this community strives to practice not “eat or be eaten” but the giving of ourselves as “living sacrifices” to do as Fernandez encourages – that is, “promot[ing] life-giving relations.”

I see us practicing Apostle Paul’s encouragement to *“be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

I would tell people about the many ways you bring your hands and voices together each week to create this sacred pause away from the rhythms of our daily lives.

I would tell people about the creative thought and elbow grease that you pour into our Wednesday Community Suppers, allowing it to grow organically and keeping the doors open as we seek new partners to help us fund toward growth.

I would tell people about the first Stillwater Pride Alliance ice cream social – and how the glow of goodness overflowed as people of our church engaged with likeminded neighbors in a spirit of solidarity with LGBTQ+ and ally neighbors.

I would tell people about our monthly Conversations From The Heart in which we dare to be real with one another, sharing our tender and true experiences of life.

I would tell people about the sacred process of discerning the optimal uses of our church buildings as part of embodying our congregation's vision, which is: *an ever-expanding safe harbor where we thrive together and work with God toward love and justice.*

If you can't already tell, part of the joy of returning from sabbatical is that I no longer need to be away from these countercultural ways of daring hospitality, openhearted community partnerships, deepening relationships, and rigorous discernment of – what, Apostle Paul? – of what God's will is for our community's path forward.

I heard from two other voices this week. Hear these words from Rochelle A. Stackhouse about the power of love and hospitality. She writes: *"Growing churches often report that those who joined after a time of visiting did so because they found in the community a spirit that attracted them by its **power of love and hospitality**, not just in the way the members treated visitors, but also **in the way they treated each other.**" (Feasting on the Word).* That felt strongly resonant to me with the ways I experience this community.

I thank God to be part of this church, which is clearly more focused on a countercultural deepening form of growth rather than a standard growth by numbers.

And, finally, to return to Apostle Paul's desire that we be transformed, I want to share what another scholar pointed out from Rev. Dr. King's words when we consider the possibilities for transformation. Kirk Byron Jones writes:

*“Maintaining a **balance between God’s grace and human initiative in understanding the spiritual transformation of persons and communities** is vital.” (Feasting On The Word) And, in regard to that balance, he quotes Rev. Dr. King: “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”*

Thank God for the life and witness of the Rev. Dr. King. I’m also grateful that he chooses to use the words “use time” instead of “spend time.”

So how will we live our time – individually and together?

May we find what is good and do that. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
September 6, 2026 | Labor Day Weekend
Romans 12:1-18, “Holy As a Day is Spent”