

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Whatever You Do . . .”**

Rev. David K. Groth

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*“Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though working for the Lord, not for men” (Col. 3:22ff).*

One of the things I love doing is watching other people work. For example, Norm Abram, (the woodworker on the New Yankee Workshop), I love watching him make furniture. He has a set of skills nearly alien to me. His dove tail joints are a thing of beauty. So snug and tight, he hardly needs glue or nails. When he does use glue it seeps out just a bit. If I were to try that it would be like frosting drizzling over the side of a pound cake.

I love watching professional chefs on T.V., with efficiency of movement and little regard for exact measurements, they compose a beautiful meal. Or professional musicians . . . who make it look so easy, so effortless. Or masons building a wall straight and true. Again, efficiency of motion, very little waste, precise and clean . . . even the sounds of their tools tapping bricks into place, scraping away the excess . . . when they get humming along it’s almost rhythmic, musical.

It’s a beautiful thing to watch people work, people who know their work and do it well. If we have eyes to see, we can see how God serves us through these people. When God blesses us, he almost always does it through others. Luther calls them masks of God. God protects us, for example, through the cop on the beat. Because of them, thieves and criminals cannot run around with impunity. God gives us beauty and meaning through artists. He lets us travel through the ministry of auto workers, mechanics, road crews and car dealers. He keeps us clean through the work of trash collectors, plumbers, sanitation workers and even the illegal aliens who sometimes clean our hotel rooms. The fast food-food worker, the inventor, the clerical assistant, the scientist, the accountant, the musician – they are *all* high callings, used by God to bless and serve his people and his creation. In fact, I don’t think it’s even helpful to use the language of “high calling” because I’m not convinced there’s such a thing as a low calling. So long as it doesn’t conflict with God’s commands, all work is important work. Whatever your calling, you can serve others in that vocation. Whatever your calling, God can use you as one of his masks behind which he serves others.

Unfortunately, that’s not the way we always think about all work. We tend to think of white collar workers having more important work, which requires greater wisdom, than blue collar workers. The one who works in suit and tie is nearly always held in higher esteem than the one who can wear jeans and a t-shirt to work. But let’s think about that for a moment. We hardly pay the twelve year old baby sitter yet we entrust to them that which is most precious to us. Most farmers don’t wear a suit and tie in the barn or tractor, yet without them, we don’t eat.

Without them, we become hunters and gatherers again, nearly always hungry. And the skill set required of farmers is among the most comprehensive.

I'm reading a beautiful book entitled "The Dirty Life" by Kristin Kimball. It's the true story of Kimball who graduated from Harvard with a degree in English Lit and ends up falling in love with and marrying a farmer. She gives up her life in New York City and adopts his. She knows next to nothing about farming, but she figures she's bright enough to quickly learn. It's one of those little farms that sells memberships to local people with the goal of making the grocery store obsolete for themselves and their members, providing a full and interesting diet year round including meats and dairy and grains and vegetables. What she had to learn and how difficult it was to learn it hit her like a brick. She writes, "I had come to the farm with the unarticulated belief that concrete things were for dumb people and abstract things were for smart people. I thought the physical world – the trades – was the place you ended up if you weren't bright or ambitious enough to handle a white-collar job. Did I really think that a person with a genius for fixing engines, or for building, or for husbanding cows, was less brilliant than a person who writes ad copy or interprets the law? Apparently I did, though it amazes me now. I ordered books from the library about construction, plumbing, and electricity, [all skills that I needed to learn for farming] and discovered that reading them was like trying to learn a foreign language. There's no better cure for snobbery than a good . . ." kick in the kiester (p. 111).

It's all important work and the Lord uses it all. There's dignity in all work because all of it is ultimately for the neighbor: for the boss, the co-worker, the customer. When we forget that, when we forget that God calls us to serve others and glorify him through our work, then work turns into a curse rather than a blessing, something to avoid rather than embrace. The result: the "work-is-evil" culture. You've seen it. It's in the one whose goal is to do as little work as possible while appearing busy. If only they put as much effort into their work as they do pulling the wool over everyone's eyes!

That's the extreme, but all of us, to one extent or another, buys into the "work-is-evil" culture. For example we can come to think of our vocations, our callings, as just a *job* that we have to endure for the pay check. We can think of our work as consuming our time, our emotions, our after-hours preoccupations, and to an extent it does. Is that necessarily all bad? We believe work gets in the way of freedom and happiness, and robs us of time with family. And so we do the math and try to figure out the earliest possible date we can retire. Work for thirty years, and then retire another forty. I'm not sure how one's family or one's country or even one's psyche can afford that.

There is an element of toil, for sure, to every vocation. Ever since the fall of man, it's never just pure pleasure. The one who at his retirement party says he enjoyed every minute of it is lying through his teeth. And who of us goes to work in the spirit of the seven dwarves to the coal mine, singing "Hi ho, hi ho . . ." Sometimes work is just toilsome, but that doesn't make it evil. That doesn't make work a curse.

And, of course, we also sin in our vocations. Instead of loving our neighbors in and through our vocations, we come to despise our neighbors, the one who's always sniffing and sneezing in the cubicle next door or chews crunchy things with his mouth open. Instead of serving our neighbors through our vocations, we constantly pull rank and insist they serve us.

We make it an unspoken goal of one day having enough money that we never have to serve anyone. That was not the way of Jesus nor does he want it to be ours.

Work is a blessing, not a curse . . . a gift from God. It gives you something to talk about with your spouse over the dinner table or on the car ride. Even in retirement volunteer work gives purpose and meaning and direction and energy and interest to your life. Don't let the "work-is-evil" culture sweep that away.

Tony Woodlief wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal about teaching his kids to enjoy work. He and his wife moved into the country, not out of some deep love for nature, which he says is where God keeps the snakes and the poison ivy. Rather, "we moved because of an old-fashioned sense that our four boys will benefit from hard work" and because he didn't want his kids to become "overweight, mouth breathing video game players." He writes, "One summer I installed stairs and flooring in our stifling-hot attic. My oldest son, 4 at the time, insisted on donning his little work belt to help. I situated him in a corner with his tiny hammer and water-color paint, where he spent hours hammering and painting while I nailed floorboards. Months later, out of the blue, he took my hand and asked when we could do that again. I'd found the work miserable. But to my son it was blissful. We now had a 'secret room.' And he had worked with his daddy" (WSJ Aug. 22, 2008). His point? Humans need work. It's not evil. It is participating in God's work of serving others. It is participating in God's work of sustaining his creation.

Does your work matter? You may not think it does, but it does, all of it. No job is too small, too lowly, too mundane. If you know it serves your neighbor somewhere, and if you know you're doing it also for the Lord, who is there beside you, behind you . . . it matters.

A sports analogy may help. An NFL running back isn't happy sitting on the bench, nor is he happy on defense. He's most happy when he's in the sweet spot of his vocation: running with the ball. Often, however, he's required to stay back and block. Dirty work for the running back! Most of them don't enjoy it. But it's in service of the quarterback and the team, the coach and the fans. When he does it right, the quarterback will get accolades for another completion. If he refuses to block, or if he whiffs, he won't be a running back in the NFL.

John Adams, when sailing to England, refused to take his turn at the pump because he thought the work beneath him. We also sniff at the dirty work in our lives. We should remember the cross. Is there any work dirtier, more repulsive? Yet, to serve and save us Jesus did not shrink from that dirty work. He embraced it and did it well, without complaint, thoroughly, until it was finished. In his dirty work lies our salvation.

There is work for all to do, and often it's when work is most toilsome that we get to serve our neighbors the most. If we do it right, if we embrace it, without complaint, thoroughly, until it's finished, we may just give others a glimpse of the mercy and grace and goodness of Jesus Christ.

Six months before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a group of junior high students in Philadelphia. He said, "when you discover what you will be in your life, set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it . . . If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the

Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well . . .” (*What Is Your Life’s Blueprint?* Oct. 26, 1967).

All work, however lowly in the eyes of the world, is good and important and dignified if done for the glory of God and in service of our neighbors. Therefore Paul wrote the following to slaves. It’s not what we would have written, but it does tell us how to work. He writes, “Obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service [that is, merely for those who are looking], or as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though working for the Lord, not for men . . . You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23). Amen.