

SERMON TITLE- " . . . To Do His Work . . . "

TEXT- John 4:34-38

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

BY- James Toews

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Last week Ryan and I were at a Study Conference with the topic- "Confessing Christ In A Pluralistic Culture."

It had been 3 good days of sitting with brothers and sisters of our conference and wrestling with each other about the language of our common faith. How do we confess Christ in a pluralistic culture?

The push and pull of language, personalities, and regions was itself a study in pluralism. We are bound together by the chains of our community, we were told. This is hard work at times.

It isn't easy getting our words right. It isn't easy to really hear someone else's questions and answers.

And so as we checked into the airport, Ryan and I agree to get seats together. We were both tired and the comfort of a well-known fellow traveler made sense to both of us.

But something went wrong. I looked around and I was in row 15 and he was getting into a seat near the front of the plane. Even as I looked up the cabin my seatmate was pushing her way in beside me. I was trapped against the window.

"I haven't slept for 36 hours," was her greeting.

"Why?" I asked, regretting it even as the single word fell from my lips.

"Oh, it's a long story."

And it was and it wouldn't stop until we landed and she left for her next connection.

I tried to find safe ground. "What do you do?" Maybe she has come off a long work shift of some kind.

"As little as possible." No, that was not safe ground.

"So what do you do?" she asked.

"You're a pastor?! Oh my God!" and she stared at me with wide eyes as if I were a ghost. "I have to ask you something. What is my purpose?"

Just that simple. It was the perfect question after 3 days of theological gymnastics. We had trained for this.

Of course nothing is that simple and while she paused briefly for my response it was also clear that she had an assortment of possible but troubling answers to her own question. These and the various conversations that followed from them and then had played themselves out in her brain- interjected themselves into my attempts to respond.

It was not long before I discovered why she had not slept for 36 hours. She was running away from a man and when she ran away from things she did this with the help of crack cocaine. Her brain was crackling like an old radio, leaping from the past to the present, from reality to paranoia, from the bizarre to the mundane.

I heard about a father who left while she was still in the womb and how that traumatized her. How her stepfather abused her and made her mother jealous. How she left for the street at 15. How she protected her own daughter only to be rejected herself.

And the men . . . and her counselor and her psychiatrist and her recovery groups.

Her stories poured out with a dull consistency but her question, which was buried under a load of tragedy, was real and sincere. It wasn't always easy to dig out again and it wasn't easy to answer.

But it is the question that lies at the heart of Jesus' mission.

It was the question that this woman's counterpart, the woman at the well wondered about. It was the question that Nicodemus had asked Jesus. It was the question that Jesus answered for Peter, before he asked it when He said, "I will make you fishers of men."

So what is our purpose?

We are going through our church mission statement. It is-

The Neighbourhood Church Mission-

"To Build Committed Followers Of Jesus- To Do His Work In Our City, Country and World."

We are going through it virtually word by word and now we are half way. You may notice that it has 2 halves each beginning with "to". First, "to build" and then "to do".

Today we look at "to do."

The first part of our mission is building a people, a team, a family. This is not any family- it is the family of God, those who have responded to that call Jesus put out- "follow Me!"

This is an amazing team to be part of.

But this is also a team with a purpose and now we shift to its purpose.

Now it follows that if we are "followers of Jesus" our purpose should be pretty linked to what He was doing- so we had best begin by discovering what He was doing.

Jesus was clear in His description of His purpose. Interestingly, He describes His purpose just after He has talked to a woman very like the woman I sat beside on the plane- the Samaritan woman- the woman at the well.

He had just had a long conversation and His disciples came back with lunch.

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" . . . Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."

But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" John 4:27-33

And here Jesus gives His answer.

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. John 4:34-36

Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor." John 4:37-38

Again there is a great deal in this passage but for today I want to zoom in on one work- "work."

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." John 4:37

The theme of doing God's work was a huge part of the language of Jesus and surfaced in all kind of situations. Once when He had healed a man born blind Jesus added-

As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. John 9:4

A great summary verse is-

Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." John 5:17

#1. Jesus' Followers Are To Be Workers

This is a big bottom line of our identity. Our purpose is to work. The early Christians identified themselves as "workers in the Kingdom of God." The imagery of this work had many forms. It was farming, it was carpentry, it was teaching, it was raising families but in every case it was work.

This leads to a conclusion that we might find counterintuitive-

#2. Work Is An Assignment And A Gift From God

We live in a culture that doesn't naturally respond to this. We tend to think of work as a curse that we do so that we can get on with the rest of life. 9-5 is a symbol of a chunk of life that you try to get finished as soon as you can.

The standard line is- you work for the weekend and ultimately for an early retirement. The woman's answer to me- "I work as little as possible" pretty well captures the standard concept of work.

This is not Biblical but there is a reason for it that we can track back to the very beginning- to creation itself.

After creation this took place-

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Genesis 2:15

Notice that work was something that God gave to Adam while everything was good. Adam was a gardener.

But then things went wrong and that great work of gardening. Because Adam had disobeyed God,

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life . . . By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return. Genesis 3:17-19

If that is what work means to us it is no wonder that work is something we try confine to as small a corner of our lives as possible.

But for those who chose to become followers of Jesus, work is something that is God's blessings to humanity, something whose blessing we need to rediscover.

We are workers in the Kingdom of God.

This leads to a question that every worker needs to answer- "So what am I supposed to do?"

In many ways this question may well be one of the really troubling ones we face.

I know that when we call for work parties at the church, there is often a great response but the challenge for the person calling the work party is organizing the work so that people know their assignments and are able to do them.

It doesn't take long for frustration to set in when those things are not clear.

What Is Our "Work"?

Jesus used all kind of language to describe the work. To Peter he said, "I will make you fishers of men." In one of the passages we looked at Jesus talked about harvest workers.

But what all of the images of work point to the establishment and maintenance of a vast enterprise called the Kingdom of God. What is the job of running a kingdom? There are 1000s of jobs.

One of the things that we are involved in is building a physical church. Sometimes people think that building a building is done by carpenters. Carpenters are needed but that is only a small part of the whole assignment. There are electricians and plumbers and painters and clean up people and coordination jobs and the list goes on. Everyone one of these jobs is part of the work.

And in the Kingdom of God there are all kinds of jobs far more than we could begin to list.

So how do we know what our job is? In many ways the question- "What is my specific assignment?" often lies at the heart of many of our frustration. "If I only just knew what I was supposed to do I could get at it."

There are times when it does seem clear but more often it isn't.

Interestingly the disciples asked Jesus this question with exactly this in mind.

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." John 6:28-29

And there's the answer, sort of. Our job is to believe in the one God sent.

When the woman on the plane first asked me what her purpose was, I asked her, "Do you believe that there is a purpose? No everyone does."

Yes, she replied. I'm not so sure she did. She wanted to have a purpose but I don't think she really was sure that there is one.

Why? because for there to be a purpose someone has to be deciding what that is and that someone must be God.

And really believing that there is a God who has a purpose for us means that we will actually have to listen for His instructions.

Lots of people really like the idea that there is a purpose to life. They really like the idea that there is a God who loves us and wants the best for us. But when it comes to actually living as if that was the case, they effectively become atheists.

If we really think that God has a purpose for our lives does it make any sense that we would spend them, as this woman did destroying the body that God had given her?

She knew that she was not living with the conviction that her life has a purpose. Everything she was doing said the opposite- and she knew it.

But it is not only self destructive people who live life as if it had no purpose.

When Jesus told the parable of the Sower and the Seed, He gave a whole list of reasons.

Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.

Luke 8: 13-14

All these represent people who agree that life has a purpose- but that conviction is choked out by-

- testing
- worries
- riches
- pleasures

In reality that list covers a lot of the ground we live in, day to day.

So what is Jesus telling those who wonder what their assignment is- work at believing that Jesus really is who He says He is.

What will we be doing if we believe that? We will be looking around ourselves for work to do and we will be listening for directions from our Master.

One of the lessons I quickly learned when I first went to work was that if you want to be a valued employee, you will be looking for things to do- not simply waiting for orders.

When you are on the job- you don't just sit there when your specific assignment is done- you pick up a broom and clean up- you think about what kinds of things that need doing and you do them if you can.

But the other thing that needs to be understood about the work of the Kingdom of God is- it is often invisible. There is nothing as satisfying as doing a job and looking at what has been accomplished.

But in the Kingdom of God much if not most of the work is invisible. What for example is the work of prayer? Who sees anything when that is being done?

In the Kingdom of God every follower of Jesus is a worker. Some do very visible work but most of the work will never be seen by anyone.

In the case of the woman on the airplane- because she talked to me- and because I tell this story to you most people who agree that this conversation was a Kingdom work. But don't miss the obvious. I will never see her again and if anything good follows from that meeting we will never know.

And even more profound- the major part of the "work" I was doing on that plane- was listening. Oh, I tried to think of some insightful things to say but I was very aware of the fact that she was high on drugs and that the capacity of her mind to take in any very complicated was quite low. I had to remind myself that as a worker in the Kingdom of God, I needed to be aware of who my Master is and listen.

At the end of the day- the amount of wise things I said was quite low and there is a very good chance that she will remember none of them.

The best that I could do was commit myself to caring for a broken person. The best I could do was pray that when she thinks about that flight the person who claimed to be a follower of Jesus who sat beside her- did not turn away and pretend to go to sleep.

Why did I do this? Because I believe that Jesus is my Master and I was on task. I am not always so aware.

What is the bottom line for a worker in the Kingdom of God?

- #1. Know that you are a worker
- #2. Know that you are on assignment.