

WHAT MAKES WORK GOOD?

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Luke 14:1, 7-11

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To begin, I'm curious: raise your hand if you are a first child. I am also, and we're everywhere! I am going to be talking for a few moments about what first children tend to be like, according to some behavioral psychologists (and my experience). Those of you who raised your hands just now can ponder whether what I say applies to you, and the rest of you can perhaps breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Thank heaven that wasn't my fate, or in terms of today's Scripture, "perhaps those of us who aren't first children will have an easier time getting into the kingdom of God".

I resonate with the following quote from a family therapist, "if you can only know one piece of information about a person, if you know his or her sibling placement, you can predict more about the behavior than any other **ONE** piece of information." This may be especially true of first children. First children tend to be achievers and leaders. For example*, a majority of U.S. presidents have been first children (25 of 45) and 21 of the first 23 U.S. astronauts (and by the way, that same therapist told me that 90% of therapists are first children). We love to lead – we are responsible and usually more than willing to take charge. We are efficient, we plan ahead, we work hard and we follow through. We **like rules and we like order**. Hand raisers – any self-recognition?

There is, of course, a downside to all those leadership qualities. It has been said that first born are not so much rule followers as that we like to make the rules! And because we are so willing to take charge, we tend to think we know what is

best for others and might believe we are harder to replace than others – that we are even indispensable! Pride can be our undoing. In addition to being a first child, I am also in the group “oldest sister of sisters”. In a book called *Family Constellation** we are described in the following charming way “The oldest sister of sisters likes to take care of things and give orders. She wants to know what is going on around her*. She wants people to report to her, to be up to date and in control”. I’m not going to embarrass any of you out there by asking who might share this identity with me, but I might like those of you who are the oldest brother of brothers to ‘fess up, because you all are the only ones who are described as bossier than oldest sisters of sisters and are the ones this same author says can act more popish than the Pope! We have 3 sons*– anyone guess which son I locked horns with as they were growing up?

But rather than dividing you into groups to take potshots at, I’m going to attempt to describe what I think all of this has to do with today’s Gospel lesson and Labor Day. What is Jesus attempting to illustrate in his parable about the wedding banquet? Some background may be helpful. In Jesus’ time, guests would be arranged on couches on the floor in groups of three. The center would be the place of honor. It might even be physically elevated*. It was “awarded” if you will, on the basis of power or position. Jesus is again aiming at the Pharisees, who as he says earlier in this text, like to have the best seat – and truly believe they deserve the best seats. Jesus wants them to know it is not so in God’s kingdom. One commentator says that Jesus is saying to these Pharisees, “Self-assertion will not cut it before God”. So, the parable tells us that those who seek the place of honor or believe that they are more deserving of honor than others will most likely be moved out of those places. Throughout his ministry, Jesus reminds us

that the kingdom reverses the usual human concept of status and reward. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled* and those humbled will be exalted.

I think this parable speaks to the holiday we mark this weekend – LABOR DAY. Tomorrow we celebrate the value of work – the meaning of honest labor for society and for each of us as individuals. Certainly, society cannot survive without its citizens being engaged in sustained work and production. And generally, individuals tend to lead happier, more fulfilled lives if those lives include meaningful and useful work, whether that work be compensated financially or not.

But as Christians, we have a unique take on what makes work meaningful. That uniqueness can be described in the distinction between what theologians call WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS and FAITH FOLLOWED BY GOOD WORKS* and that difference is at the heart of Christianity. For review, works righteousness is the idea that we can earn our own salvation: that as the number of our good works increases, so do our chances of getting to heaven. The problem with this system, of course, is that we can never do enough or be good enough to be worthy of God. We necessarily fall short because perfection is needed to measure up to God and we are not capable of perfection. Returning for a moment to first children, we may be as a group, more susceptible to works righteousness because we tend to earn approval by achieving or producing more. I am a consummate list-maker – a frequent compulsion of the first born – and my list is never finished. A friend once gave me an electric memo pad – when turned on, it kept rotating, so there was always space to add something else, and the things that didn't get

accomplished, disappeared! (apparently there wasn't a big market for it – the screen shows you the closest I could find to it now!*)

The Christian view is that salvation is a gift, we don't earn it*. So, our work is not what assures us of a place of honor with God. So, the question for this morning is, what then makes work meaningful for a Christian? The answer has to do with faith and good works. John Wesley very much preached about the importance of good works for Christians. But for him, good works always followed faith. Faith must come first. Work whose aim is loving God and others is good work. It is not done for reward **from** God, but rather **in response** to God. God gives to us because he loves us and we give back in response to that love. St. Augustine famously said, "Love God and do as you please*". If loving God is our aim, the work that pleases us will be what is pleasing to God. The talents we have come from God, so whatever work comes from those talents can be called good when it is offered back in response to the Giver of gifts and brings that Giver glory.

In confirmation, I was taught from the Dutch Catechism that the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever*. What follows is this: as we celebrate Labor Day, we can affirm the goodness of whatever work we do, paid or volunteer, if it is honest work which is offered in love to God, not for credit, but for God's use and God's glory. Not long ago, I read an article about Generation X's view of work. Generation X are those born between 1961 and 1981*. The X, I'm told, because there is not a shared set of beliefs or values. We could debate that contention, but for the sake of this discussion, it corresponds to how the author says they see work, i.e., as "a means to an end rather than a way of life". On the one hand, this is good in that they have lives beyond their work, they don't

depend on work for their identity and are not consumed by it. But for me, it may miss a sense of work as ministry – but that is perhaps a discussion for another time.

But for today – we Christians are to come to the wedding banquet and choose the lowest place because whatever our work, it is not motivated by the expectation of reward or honor or status, but a desire to serve our God, who loves us so greatly.

Our pride needs to come not from what we have achieved, but from being called the sons and daughters of God. We are to offer who we are and what we do daily to God because Jesus first offered himself for us and thereby laid claim to the place of honor for all time. From that perspective, we “so called” first born might do well to remember that we were not first, we are not to lead – we follow Jesus, the firstborn son of God*. Whatever our work, whatever our status or achievements might be, they fall short of the work done by our brother Jesus the first born of all creation. AMEN.