

In our society, our work often defines us. When you meet someone one of the earliest questions is, "What do you do?"

We want to know. "What do you do? What's your occupation, your job?"

When you start out as a child, we ask, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

As you get older, we start to get more specific. "Are you a student? What year are you?" (In other words, 'How far away are you from entering the work-force?') "What's your major? What kind of work do you plan to be doing?"

If you're obviously older still, we might ask, "Are you still working? Are you retired? What did you retire from?"

We often derive much of our sense of identity from our work. We ask people what they "do." But then when we answer the question, we often use the term, "I am."

When people ask me what I do, I usually say, "I'm a priest," or "I'm a minister." I don't usually answer "I do priestly work," or "I do ministry."

Think about that. What you do is sort of "out there." But what you are is "in here"—it's your identity. What we do often reflects our sense of who we are. "I am a... (fill in the blank)."

And sometimes when folks retire in our culture, they can feel a bit lost. For many people it is their job that has defined them. Who are they apart from that job?

So our jobs often give us a sense of who we are. Our work also helps us fit into our world, our society. Our jobs connect us one to another. We live in a market economy. We exchange our time and labor for goods and services produced by others with their time and labor. We are connected in a vast web, a vast network, one to another. For most of us, this is probably a rather theoretical and invisible reality. We forget how deeply we are connected, how much we rely upon others.

Most of us no longer grow our own food, make our own clothing, or build our own houses. We have people that do those things, and we exchange our time and labor for theirs.

This was probably the clearest for me during the five years I taught high school science in the small cotton farming town of Lockney, about 60 miles that way (NNE).

Lockney at the time had a population of 2,200 people. Living and working there, I had a very real sense of my economic links with the other people in the community, almost as an economic 'food web.' I had a real sense that my salary, and in turn the goods and services that I purchased with it, came not from strangers but from members of my community. And the boundaries were often rather fuzzy. Our veterinarian took care of our animals, and we paid him for those services; but he was also on the school board; and he was a parent of two of my students; and he and I were members of the same Lion's club. Another member of the Lion's

Club ran the electrical utility—he was the one who ran the office, he was also the one who would climb the poles in case of an outage. His secretary was a parent of one of my students. The folks that owned the Mexican restaurant were also parents of one of my students. After a couple months of living there, they stopped giving us menus and just asked if we wanted "the usual." The folks at the post office knew me by name, which is why I was able one time to receive a letter addressed simply to, "Jim Haney, Lockney, Texas."

Of course, in larger towns those relationships are often less personal, and less obvious, but they are still there. It's easy to forget them, and we need to be reminded of that sometimes.

Perhaps that's why I love the prayer from our service of Compline:
*O God... Watch over those, both night and day,
 who work while others sleep, and grant that we may never
 forget that our common life depends upon each other's toil...¹*

Our work indeed connects us to the larger community around us. Which leads us to an important bit of trivia about a word. The word is economy. And economy stems from a sense of connectedness. Economy is a Greek word, it's a word that appears in the original language of the New Testament. In Greek, the *oikonomos* is the "house manager," or steward. The *oikonomos*, the steward is the one who makes sure the household is sufficiently connected to the community around it—buying some goods, selling others, hiring specialized workers to come and do specialized tasks. The root of economics is stewardship.

And that's a good reminder for us from a religious standpoint. Our work is part of our stewardship. When we work, we are using things that have been given to us: our time, our talents.

Scripture describes God as someone who works. Someone who labors. And God creates us and calls us to do the same kind of things. We are called to do what God does. God creates. We are called to create. God is actively working in the world. We are called to work in the world.

God could have created the world in such a way that we had nothing to do. But that's not the way the universe is set up. There is no free lunch. We have work to do. God works and creates. And God calls us to use our talents to work and create.

That means that your occupation, your work in the world is your primary ministry. We forget that. When we talk about a Christian minister, you probably think of someone with a job like mine. But God has called you to be engaged in his work, engaged in ministry, whether it's in the world of law, or finance, or medicine, or education, or business, or the church.

Which leads to another bit of interesting trivia about another word we use. This word is vocation. Vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare*, to call. Vocal, and voice are related words.

¹ BCP p. 134

Your vocation, your job, is your calling. And if you're listening to the right voice, hopefully God's voice, then hopefully you're in the right vocation, using the gifts God has given you to do your part in God's work in the world.

There's a wonderful joy that can come from exercising your vocation. I know personally that being a parish priest can be difficult at times. And yet there often times when I'm "in the zone" or "in the flow," when I really feel and know I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing, that I'm doing what I was created and called to do. That's a wonderful feeling.

But you might be thinking, "Well Jim, that's all well and good for you. But I don't really have a sense of vocation. I work because I have to, not because I love what I'm doing."

If you're thinking that, I would suggest a couple of things. First off, you might need to listen carefully for God's voice. If you're not happy in your job, perhaps that's because you're called to another job. That may take some discernment.

On the other hand, perhaps you need to step back and think about your job differently. Maybe you are doing exactly what God calls you to do.

We live in a rather specialized world. There are many different ways of serving the community, providing goods and services that improve the quality of people's lives. That is an admirable use of your God-given talents.

Plus, the money you earn using your God-given talents and abilities provides food, shelter, clothing for yourself, and for those who may depend upon you for care. That is also an admirable use of your labor in the world.

Part of it does come down to a matter of attitude. Am I working because I have to? Or am I working to serve God and to serve others?

This question was addressed by one of the greatest spiritual writers in history. He was largely unknown until after his death. His writings were published posthumously, and his legacy is profound.

His name was Brother Lawrence. He was a 17th century French monk. He spent most of his life working in the monastery kitchen, washing dishes and cooking for the rest of the community. Not only did Br. Lawrence have a sense that he was serving his community, his fellow monks by providing food. He also had a very keen sense that he was serving God by working in the kitchen. And his writings are now regarded as a spiritual classic.

Br. Lawrence writes,
"We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for the love of (God)... who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to simply pick up a piece of straw from the floor (if I'm doing it) for the love of God."²

² Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

Br. Lawrence is a good reminder. Almost any vocation can be holy, almost any job can serve God if we have the attitude that we are serving God.

And there's also the possibility of an avocation. Avocation is often thought of as a synonym for a hobby, something you enjoy doing outside of your paid job. But it can also be something done as an additional way of serving God through an additional calling. And if you're retired from your primary vocation in life, your avocations can be extremely productive ways of serving society and serving God. If you're not retired, volunteering outside of your normal work can provide spiritually rich opportunities to serve as well.

We often think of our work as separate from our spiritual lives. We go to church on Sunday. We work Monday through Friday. And we think of them as separate spheres.

But all of the world belongs to God. All of time belongs to God. There isn't a secular sphere and a spiritual sphere. Anything we're able to do is because God has given us the abilities and gifts to do them.

In a few moments, we're going to be praying for people in all sorts and kinds of occupations.

And afterwards, you'll be invited to come forward and symbolically dedicate your labor to God by placing your symbolic tokens of your work on or before the altar.

And if you didn't bring anything, you can grab a business card from your wallet, or you can write something down on a piece of paper and bring it up to offer to God.

As you're doing so, I hope you'll be spiritually offering your jobs and vocations and avocations up to God, for his glory, and for the good of his world and his people.

Let us with gladness offer up our lives and our labor to the Lord.