



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Hands to Work, Hearts to God,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 14, 2010

When you hear the word “work,” what’s your response? Does the thought of work fill you with dread, or satisfaction? With guilt, or pleasure? Do you work to live, or live to work? I don’t mean to suggest that these are either/or answers--most of us probably fall somewhere in between. You may say, “It depends on what you mean by work: are you talking about my job, or all the other work I do?”

The sermon title comes from the Shakers, the religious sect that got its name from the ecstatic nature of their worship, but which is remembered for the lovely communities they built and the simple, beautiful furniture they created. I love working with my hands, and so the Shaker idea of finding the presence of God in physical work really appeals to me. Often when I come home from church on Sunday I want to get outside and dig in the dirt, or rake leaves, or work on some kind of project. It’s an antidote to the work of ministry, which at times seems wordy and intangible.

Over the past two summers, my son and I built a wooden sailboat. It was his idea, which made it even better. I loved this project, and even more, working with him on it. There were times I would look up from our work and think to myself, “I am so happy.” Not all the time, of course--there were plenty of frustrations too. But to work with wood and with hand tools, to see the boat come into shape, to plane and sand, and finish it with paint and varnish--words fail to describe how satisfying that was.

Though I’ve worked a number of jobs that required some physical labor--landscaper, mate on a charter fishing boat, scallop opener, photographer’s assistant--I never worked construction, or on an assembly line, or a public works crew. From the bits of physical work I have done, I have nothing but respect for people who do hard work day in and day out, often outdoors in the heat and cold. I don’t want to romanticize this work, which can be backbreaking and grueling. But there is something satisfying about physical work that connects you with the land and the seasons, that puts blisters on your hands and, when you’re done, lets you see the fruits of your labor.

Unemployment continues to be a big problem in our country. There are so many people who are out of work. And this is not just a financial issue for them; it’s a spiritual and emotional issue too. Because work is good for us. It helps give our lives purpose and meaning. Work, in the broadest sense, is part of what we’re meant to do.

But some of us have too much work--too much stress, too many responsibilities, too many hours at work plus more spent commuting. Some of us have jobs that pay the bills but that are deadening to our souls. So what can we do, if we have too much work, or not enough work? What do you do when your soul is longing for something more?

First you listen to that longing, and try and follow where it leads. You listen to Howard Thurman, who said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

It's good advice. But I worry that you could hear it as a solely individual pursuit. I'm sure that's not what Thurman meant. But we need to be wary of the tendency toward individualism and narcissism that's so common in our time. We can learn from the work ethic of the Shakers and others like them, who understand work not as a solitary pursuit, but part of the fabric of community. In a poem, Wendell Berry quotes an Amish man who says,

"It falls strangely on Amish ears,
This talk of how you find yourself.
We Amish, after all, don't try
To find ourselves. We try to lose
Ourselves"--and thus are lost within
The found world of sunlight and rain
Where fields are green and then are ripe,
And the people eat together...¹

A couple of years ago I told you a story about three common laborers. When the first one is asked about his work, he responds, "What does it look like? I'm a stonecutter. My job is cutting stones into blocks, a foot by a foot by three quarters of a foot. And I'll be doing the same backbreaking work till the day I die."

A second stonecutter nearby is also cutting stones into blocks, a foot by a foot by three quarters of a foot. But when asked about his work, he smiles and says, "It's hard work, but it allows me to earn a living for my family. We have a home, filled with love, and our children have clothes and food and what they need to grow up strong and healthy."

Not too far away there is a third stonecutter, doing the same thing. When asked about his work, he lays down his hammer and chisel and looks up, and a smile comes over his face. He exclaims, "See for yourself! Look around you! I am helping to build a great cathedral, a beacon of faith and hope and love, that will last for a thousand years!"²

How do you approach your work? As drudgery? As a way to make a living? As a chance to build something that will last a thousand years? The choice is up to you.

¹ Wendell Berry, "Amish Economy," in *A Timbered Choir* (New York: Counterpoint, 1998), p. 190.

² This parable is told by the Italian psychiatrist, Roberto Assagioli.

If you are unemployed right now, or underemployed, or if you are less than satisfied by your day job, then I may be able to help you. I know of a place that could use some good workers. The pay's not so good, but the benefits are awesome!

In my first year here, it didn't take long to see that this church has a real potential to grow. If we do what we are supposed to be doing--welcoming diversity, helping people to go deeper, and doing works of charity and justice--then we can't help but grow. And that's what's happening. We aren't that easy to find, and we haven't worked too hard--not yet--at spreading our message out in the wider community. But still, new folks are coming.

But I have to tell you, in my first year here, this started to freak me out a bit. I was already plenty busy. Where would I find the time and energy to minister to more and more people? I worried about this. But last year I realized that my perspective was all wrong. I can't be at the center of everything here, and I don't want to be. I have my work to do, and you have yours. If I'm involved in too many things, that will constrain our ability to grow. And you say you want to grow--that was clear at our Appreciative Inquiry workshop a few weeks ago.

So I ask you, how are you going to be part of the work of this church? There are all kinds of ways to get involved, to put your talents to use. And we need your help. Last Saturday, a week ago, we had our fall outdoor clean up. It was a small but hardy group. One of them joked that the reason I showed up was because it was the only place where I, a 50 year-old, would get called "young fellah." Everyone else there had ten or fifteen years on me, or more. Doing the physical work of the church. What's wrong with this picture?

This past Monday I was in Winchester at the memorial service for the Rev. Mary Harrington. I worked with several of my colleagues to plan the service, and it was a big deal. Nine of us had parts in the service, over 70 ministers were there, there were between 350 and 400 people in the church. They had to rent chairs to accommodate everyone, and 42 members of the Winchester church volunteered that day to help out. 42! Some of them shuttled family members from the airport, others served as ushers, others organized and served the food at the reception, or were part of the clean up crew. When I was finally leaving the church, I stuck my head in the kitchen, where about a dozen folks were still working, to say "Thank you, good people, for all you did to make this a lovely day."

Now I know that Winchester is a bigger congregation than we are. But I wonder, are we ready, and organized enough, to pull off what I saw there on Monday? Some of you are very committed workers here. You know who you are. Sometimes I worry about you--I worry that you feel alone in your work, or that you are going to get burned out. But I'm not too worried. More and more of you are helping with the work of the church. I see it every week, and I'm grateful. But we still have a ways to go. So I ask you. Are you ready to make a commitment to doing something to help out around here?

Maybe you'll be part of our wider network of care that we're in the process of developing--part of our expanded pastoral care program that will provide help to those in need. I'm talking about making a meal for someone who's grieving, providing a ride to the doctor, or childcare, or visiting someone who's homebound. Maybe you'll take a leadership role on a committee you're

passionate about, or spend some time working on a project around here. Talk to me, or anyone on the staff, or on the Board, or the appropriate committee.

If right now you're thinking, "I'm way too busy already to take anything else on," then to you I say, "Please don't." If you're someone who's already too busy, stop saying yes to so many things! Make some time for yourself; some time to tend your own soul. Make time to turn your heart toward silence, or love, or God--which are pretty much all words for the same thing.

But remember, Albert Schweitzer said, "The only really happy people are those who have learned how to serve." Think of the Amish, who don't work to find themselves or to seek happiness. They work because it's what they do as people in community--each with a part to play. They know about balance, about working at a reasonable pace, with time for rest and play. They see themselves as part of a larger story. As the Shakers say, "Hands to work and hearts to God."

It's a blessing to have work to do, and people to work with. My hope and prayer is that we are becoming like those people the poet Marge Piercy loves best:

"who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again."

Like the poet,

"I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out."

Because you know that

"The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real." ³

That's why we're here, to turn our hearts toward the holy and put our hands to work, building the world we dream of.

Amen.

³ Marge Piercy, "To Be of Use," in *Circles on the Water* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).