

The Work of Love and Wisdom
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Micah 6:6-8; Luke 11:33-36
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It is a sign of the times that one of the most popular syndicated comic strips today is one in which the everyday life of corporate America is ridiculed to the point of hilarity. Dilbert, the brainchild of Scott Adams, a Bay Area local, is a scathing critique of inept managers, faulty products, Machiavellian business schemes and the endless permutations of the bizarre personality traits of co-workers. Adams' point of view has struck a chord with millions of people who can identify with the bittersweet struggle to earn a living in a system that does not inherently uphold their own ultimate well being as its end. And yet, it is in this capitalist system that we Americans carve out our destinies; form life-long relationships; and usher our souls along on the never-ending process of regeneration. Although Dilbert might never admit it, work is clearly a spiritual undertaking.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a holiday intended as a time to recognize and celebrate the contributions of the American worker. The workers of this country, from the railroad builders to the garment workers, from the teachers to the architects of the telecommunications infrastructure, from the farm workers to the retail salespeople—the labor of these workers has formed this country into the most powerful nation on earth. It is right indeed to give thanks to the generations of hard workers who have made it possible for us to live the way we do today.

A few decades ago, it was believed that advances in technology would lead us to work less—that the array of new machines handling menial tasks for us would result in an ever-increasing amount of leisure time for everyday people. Far from that vision, today's workers are working longer hours than ever before, and for many people, work has become a primary arena in which to look for meaning in one's life.

One of the things I love the most about the theology of our church is that it is supremely practical—its sublime spiritual truths are applicable to everyday life. Emanuel Swedenborg himself exemplified a practical, spiritually grounded life in his own work. He had a career as a brilliant scientist and distinguished statesman before turning his primary occupation to his spiritual and theological undertakings after a life-changing visionary experience at the age of 54. Even after his change of vocation, he continued to make contributions to government affairs, which many people understand to be a testament to his conviction to be of service in the real world.

One of the most central concepts of Swedenborg's theology is the notion of use. Use—or usefulness, as we might say in contemporary parlance—is joined with love and wisdom as the essential tri-partite formulation of existence. Swedenborg believed that the divine itself consists of love and wisdom. Divine love and divine wisdom are in constant, co-creative interplay with each other, but the way in which they come into being in the world is through uses. Uses are essentially actions that are good, and Swedenborg believed that the entire created universe is made of and for uses. In other words, love and wisdom are actualized in this world through the actions of human beings. The way we bring God into existence is through our words, our speech, our actions—and indeed, through our occupations.

There are two main points that I would like to convey about usefulness. Usefulness, first of all, means that we are meant to live out our spiritual values in the real world. It means that true piety and devotion are not to be undertaken only in church, but all over the place right in the middle of our ordinary lives. Secondly, usefulness also means that part of the essential responsibility we inherit as God's creatures is that we offer ourselves in service to creation. We use our lives to give back a little bit of the awesome beauty and wonder that we have each been given ourselves.

It might seem natural that as people of faith we would live out our spiritual values in the real world. Why does it get so complicated, then, in the daily living of our lives? One reason is that the spiritual pitfalls of work can be tricky. For many, work has taken over the majority of our lives, and yet its goals can be incongruous with our own. Work can also be deceptive. It can drive us to attach to wealth, success, authority, or even our own identity. If we work in business, work can seduce us into believing that the laws of supply and demand are in fact eternal spiritual truths, and that the activity of *buying things* is the ultimate reason for being. In addition, work can make us perpetually future-oriented—focused on projects that need to be completed and goals that need to be reached-- and by doing so it can diminish our ability to live in the present. It can fool us into believing that an organization's goals are actually more important than the humanity of one's colleagues. Any of these distortions taken to heart can be destructive to the soul.

To avoid these pitfalls, we must be guided by a spiritual roadmap. Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures reflects this guidance. In the passage from Micah, the questioner wonders what kinds of elaborate sacrifices he should bring to express his devotion to God. In ancient near eastern religions, it was a common practice to sacrifice valuable goods to show the extent of one's faith. Alas, the answer in this case is that none of them are needed. All that the Lord requires is to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

To embrace the concept of uses means that we do not let the negative potentials of work overtake us. It means that we bring our spiritual values right into the conference calls, the classrooms, the email messages, and the budget decisions. We practice an awareness and conscientiousness of how our speech and actions affect those around us. We can strive toward being present to the gifts of the moment, and we can embrace our whole, complicated, expansive selves that spill over the distinct categories of our daily occupations. We can help make decisions that will steer our organization's efforts to benefit humankind. Perhaps most importantly, we can honor the people with whom we share our lives, understanding them as both flawed and gifted, wounded and productive. In all of these "good actions" we practice, we are bringing divine love and divine wisdom into reality in our world.

The second aspect of uses that I noted can be more elusive, and more challenging. It is the idea that with our very lives, we can be useful to God's creation. For some, this can translate into finding one's mission in life, and for others, it can speak to the need to live in harmony with one's passions and values. One of the most helpful expressions of how to go about being useful in this way comes from Frederick Buechner. "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's great hunger meet." This is a succinct expression of usefulness; we become useful when we use our gifts and abilities in a way that is both needed by the world and expresses God's eternal love.

The passage we heard from the Gospel of Luke reflects this notion as well. It speaks of the eyes being the lamp of the body, and for them to be clear enough to expel darkness and to fill

one's entire body with light. While the light in this passage has frequently been understood to symbolize faith in Jesus that is not to be hidden, I read it in another way as well. To me, the image of a person illuminated from the inside out is a representation of that place Buechner describes where one's inner being has found perfect harmony with God and the needs of the world. It is a radiant, life-giving and inspiring image.

Millard Fuller is a man who has made usefulness the foundation of his life. In fact, he has poured lots of foundations in the 27 years since he founded Habitat for Humanity. He did not set out with a mission in life to help others. In fact, his goal from the time he was a young child was quite simply to make a lot of money. He proved quite good at it, running a successful law practice in Alabama as well as several profitable side businesses at the same time. He bought a big house, a fancy car, vacation homes, boats and household help for his wife and children. When his company treasurer walked into his office one day in 1964 and announced that he was a millionaire, Fuller wasn't even surprised. He immediately set his next goal at ten million.

However, things were not all rosy for Fuller and his wife. He had become addicted to his work, and had let all other aspects of his life fall away in importance. His wife, who he had cherished so dearly when they were married, had in effect lost her spouse for years on end while Fuller had become more devoted to his work than to anything else. One day she announced to him that she didn't love him anymore and that she couldn't stay in their loveless marriage. It was the lightning bolt that changed his life. Up to that point, success was all he knew. It had never occurred to him that his marriage wouldn't be a success too. He desperately wanted to continue his marriage, and he resolved to do whatever it would take to keep their family together. A few weeks later, Fuller and his wife found themselves in a New York taxicab. And it was there that he was hit with a flash of inspiration. "Linda," he said, "I know what we should do. I think we need to give away all our money. We need to give it away and make ourselves available for whatever God wants us to do."

Linda whole-heartedly agreed, and they proceeded to give their money to those in need, and to explore new ways of acting in the world that would benefit others. They became involved in an intentional Christian community, and through that organization became aware of the desolate conditions in which some of the local poor families were living near Americus, Georgia. They started a program to build solid houses for people, guided by the principle that all people deserve a decent place to live. Today, Habitat for Humanity has built more than 150,000 houses in more than 89 countries. Their work has changed the lives of thousands of people who now have the confidence, pride and security of living in their own home. It has also changed Millard Fuller. "I doubt anyone has felt Habitat's power to transform lives more than I have," he says. "I was on the verge of losing everything that truly meant anything to me. I had gone so far down the wrong track that I hadn't even noticed how empty my life had become. But when I turned my attention to helping other people, I healed myself and I healed my relationships with the people I loved."

Millard Fuller found a way for his abilities and skills to be used in the service of humanity, and in a way that is deeply harmonious with his values. Swedenborg wrote, "the universe has been created by God in order that uses might come into existence; and therefore the universe may be called a theatre of uses." (TCR 67) My hope is that we might all consider how we can do our part toward embodying love and wisdom through our usefulness. In bringing our spirituality into everyday practice and in thinking of our very lives as an offering to creation, we

respond in our relationship with God. The poet Mary Oliver, in her poem “The Summer Day” poses this question:

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Amen.