

Love made visible

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It's

very difficult to plan a career in the midst of economic turmoil, when you're calculating starting pay against your debts, and you don't even know if the job you're preparing for is going to be there when you graduate. In the beginning of our careers, it becomes particularly important to ask, what did God have in mind when God was knitting us together? What is our vocation?

Once you finally get

a job, then you need to get a "real" job. Then you can expect laid-off at least once in your career. Then you have to re-tool and enter the workforce again. Then even if you get your "dream" job, you might come to the realization that you're destroying your family and your personal life, and the dream becomes a bit of a nightmare. Then you begin to realign all your goals. Then you begin to look toward retirement, and you begin to imagine what your vocation is going to be when you retire.

In other words, the question of

vocation is something that most of us struggle with all of our lives. And at each point, we hear voices calling us.

There is the voice of the brazen

careerist. The person who is calculated about each and every social event she attends, each position she takes, and every lunch she schedules. She has one thing in mind—her personal success.

You will be her friend as long as

she can use you for something. For the brazen careerist, money may not be as important as prestige and power, although they often go hand-in-hand. Even if she is not making money, she looks like she is. Everything becomes a steppingstone for her success. In fact, she will even give up her own integrity

to ensure her opportunities.

Then there is the voice of greed. This is the person who whispers to us that “bigger is *a/ways* better.” That is the voice of unfettered capitalism that tells us that the bottom line is the only thing that matters. It is a call to consumption that drives us not only to consume the material things around us, but eventually, it will call us to consume the people around us.

It is the voice that tells us to lay off employees, because the fear of the remaining employees will fuel them to work harder. So we can get more productivity with less workers. It is the lie that says that laying off employees is the same thing as creating jobs. It is the drive that can look at sweatshops and say, “It’s not so bad. Actually, we’re making people’s lives better.”

I often work with people at the other end of the spectrum: **those who listen to the voice of the idealists.** They are people who are so committed to working for the good that they never count the costs.

I’ve often seen idealist women who work their fingers to the nubs, fighting for the injustice of women around the world. And they will do it at an organization where they are getting paid one quarter of the man sitting next to them. They are so committed to their ideals that they do not think about the practical reality of their situation.

I’ve seen idealists who will let themselves and their families go into extremely difficult situations for “the cause.” Or they go into financial distress because they want just the “right job.” Working in retail, construction, or the service industry isn’t good enough. So they wait until the ideal job comes along.

In all of this, it’s important to listen to the best of our Christian tradition. We need to think about what God has called us to in our work. This cannot solely be the job of a high school guidance counselor any more. This is no longer a discussion for one individual to have with another individual. It needs to be a conversation and an undertaking in which we all take part--as a society and

especially as the church. We need to be speaking loudly, calling out a vocation of wholeness, and drowning out the toxic voices that surround us.

We need to be speaking to the brazen careerist, and telling her that having a drive to succeed is extremely important. We need to affirm that, especially in women. But we also need to remind her that she does not have to give up her integrity or her relationships in order to do it. Because at the end of the day, our integrity and our relationships--the fruits of our love of God and our love of neighbors--these are the things that matter the most. We can remind the careerist of the need for Sabbath. Of taking a day off. Just one day when we do not jump at every command of our email inbox.

We need to be speaking to the voice of greed. This voice is loud out there. It is the one that starts marketing to our children before they can talk. It is the one that creates longings in us that we never knew we had. It is the one that reminds us of how poor we are.

We can replace it with a voice of "enough." We can tell it that we are learning disciplines so that we might understand that Jesus came so that we might have abundant life—not a life of constant, perpetual, manufactured longing for stuff.

There is a point where we can make enough. We can have enough. My generation, and those who are younger than I am, we know that we will not be as well off as our parents. And it's not un-American to understand that reality, because when we can talk back to the voice of greed, we will know that we have enough. And when we have enough, then there will be enough for all of us.

We can talk back to the voice that says that working with our hands no longer has dignity or value—the lie that keeps sweatshops productive around the world and heightens the abuse of immigrants in our own country. Because our Scriptures tell us in Thessalonians, to "live a quiet life... and work with your hands."

We can talk

back to that voice that says the work of our hands has no dignity as we learn to rip up our yards and green spaces and plant gardens. We can talk back as we encourage our children to become plumbers, car mechanics, and carpenters. We can affirm our need to labor and sweat and know that, at the end of the day, we have produced something and we have done well.

We can talk back to the lie that

says that the global economy should open up new ways for us to exploit another, with the truth that the Samaritan is our neighbor, and we are called to love our neighbors.

We can talk back to the lie that

says if we are having difficulties, we should turn to our high-interest credit cards instead of our families. We can talk back to the lie that says if a parent allows their adult son or daughter to live in one of their three empty bedrooms as they work themselves out of debt then those parents must be overly-indulgent.

And we can talk back to the lie

that says that our only purpose in life is tied up with our nine to five job. That our value as humans are somehow only tied to our employment and careers. Our work is much, much more than that.

The most profound American

theologian on this issue is Martin Luther King, Jr. He said that “work is love made visible.”

Work is love made visible. As we celebrate the courage of King this weekend, may we speak that truth to all of our careerism and all of our greed. May it be the standard by which we measure all of our vocations.

Because that is why God knit us together—it is for love made visible.