

Out of Egypt: Faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [May 10, 2000](#) issue

I have been writing recently about the connection between our Christian faith and the workaday lives most of us lead, and I have sought to strengthen that connection. But now I want to weaken it some, because often in our zeal to make a point we wind up making an idol.

We need to recognize two things about “our jobs.” The first is that some jobs are by their very nature a violation of our baptismal vows. To put it more simply, some jobs are bad. Other religions seem to have a firmer grasp on this than we do.

Buddha, for example, made “right occupation” one-eighth of his “Noble Eightfold Path.” The occupations of brewer, butcher and slave trader, among others, are proscribed by traditional Buddhist teaching. Judaism has at least at certain times in its history held a similar view. “The sinners” we read about in the Gospels included persons who held an unkosher occupation. The woman who anoints Jesus’s feet in Luke, and whom the popular imagination loves to portray as a voluptuous prostitute, may in fact have been no more than the dowdy spouse of a donkey driver.

The early church seems to have entertained the question of “right occupation,” particularly in regard to soldiers, but eventually let its scruples go down the drain with the rest of the “ceremonial law” of Judaism. To the extent that this was a vindication for the wives of donkey drivers, I’m glad. Beyond that, I have my doubts.

The second point I wish to raise is not a matter of work that demeans the worker or defrauds the worker’s community but the matter of idolizing work itself. If I do something wrong and I tell you “I was just doing my job,” or if I fail to do something right and give as my excuse that “I have to get to work,” then in the view of many people I have acquitted myself. And should my sin of commission or omission create employment, I do not even need to be acquitted. No doubt if Hitler were alive today he would justify the construction of Auschwitz on the grounds that it had created jobs.

But if some of us are innocent of this “idolatry of jobs,” if we are able to see employment as a value relative to other values such as conservation, social justice

and all the rest, that may mean nothing more than that we ourselves have good jobs, marketable skills or sizable nest eggs. I grow annoyed with my neighbors who seem ready to sell their souls to the first scoundrel who promises to “bring jobs into town.” I grow even more annoyed with those well-placed folks who heap contempt on their neighbors’ yearning, who, to use the words of Amos, build houses of hewn stone but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

In summary, we must recognize that not every job is fit for a follower of Jesus. We must recognize that “job” is not another name for God. And finally, we must recognize that our ability to recognize those two truths may have no finer basis than our privileged position in the world. I offer all this by way of qualifying my theme—namely, that the work of “laypeople” is potentially a work of holiness, and that a religion that doesn’t help them see this is potentially a waste of time.

My sense of “holy work” grows out of my belief in the creation and the incarnation. The contrariness that I’m expressing grows out of my faith in the God of Exodus, the God who calls slaves out of bondage, the God whose first prophetic message—“Let my people go”—is dismissed by their bosses as an excuse for lying down on the job.

The faith of Exodus calls Christians to use their powers, as Moses used his, to break the hard heart of Pharaoh. Back at the turn of the century the Industrial Workers of the World talked of creating “one big union” for the advancement of all working people. Sometimes, I wonder with a chill if their dream isn’t within reach. But we’d squirm in our pews—even as those old “Wobblies” would roll in their graves—to hear its name: the church.

Perhaps that’s too grandiose. At the very least, the faith of Exodus calls individual Christians to “come out of Egypt” when the workplace becomes “the house of bondage.” Our secular religion, our version of Pharaoh, tells them in a thousand ways that any such move is an act of irresponsibility and betrayal. But what called us to a job can also call us away from it.

I taught school for a number of years until my heart and my wife both told me it was time to do something else. Every year I tried to leave but could never bring myself to do it. Only when I overheard my daughter tell her mother one day, “I’m not good at anything,” did I make the decision to request a year’s leave from my job in order to teach her at home. She is now happily enrolled in high school. I am here at this desk writing, and I write primarily to teach.

We work to support our families, to use our gifts, to be of use. We might believe that we must turn our back on those several callings in order to turn our back on the bondage of a particular job. I think otherwise. The God who called Abraham is the same God who called Moses. The God who led Joseph into Egypt is the same God who led his people out.