

Practical matters: Faith at work

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [March 15, 2000](#) issue

Back when I made my living as a high school English teacher, I used to tell my ninth graders that the class unit with the most practical application to their lives was Greek tragedy. “Grammar’s important, too,” I would hasten to add. “Don’t get me wrong. But not all of you will require a working knowledge of English grammar to get by in life. In fact, there have been any number of persons, including one or two recent presidents of the United States, who seemed to do quite well without it.

“As far as reading goes, I’d be the first person to extol the practical value of literacy, not to mention the many pleasures that come of the same, but there again, I’ve met more than one successful man or woman who seems not to have read much besides a menu in years. Writing, for sure, is also an important skill, but I’ve been writing and teaching writing for a decade, and look at the car I drive.

“No, there are some of you who may get through life without having to read or write, or make a subject agree with a verb. But all of you will suffer, and all of you will die. And that is why Greek tragedy, of all the things we’ll study this year, has the greatest practical application.”

Do I need to add that the effectiveness of my little speech rested in large part on its irony? What teenager, if asked to name the “most practical” subject of a freshman English curriculum, would name Greek tragedy? And what Christian, if asked to name a “practical” aspect of his or her religious heritage, would choose the doctrine of the Holy Trinity?

I would. “Belief” is not the moot abstraction many of us take it for. What I *believe* to be the thickness of the ice on a frozen lake will determine how I walk on it, or if I walk on it at all. And what I believe about the nature of God has enormous influence on how I walk through my life.

Christians could find worse ways of thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity than as the revelation of *God working*. To turn that around, we can use the ways we work as practices by which we understand the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier of

this world.

It isn't difficult, of course, to relate the creation of the world to the "creative" aspects of our work. But what of the methods of that creation as we see it dreamed in Genesis? God creates by organizing and dividing—night and day, sea and dry land—and I don't need Blake or Michelangelo to show me the image. All I need is my daughter sorting her books and pencils into the various compartments of her backpack. Or a secretary setting up for business at his new desk. The God of Genesis also creates by delegating and enabling: the earth brings forth vegetation, and the human one names the animals. Whoever enables his or her subordinates to participate fully in a work, to enjoy its fruits and to partake of its glory is performing a "godly" office.

Members of several occupations have drawn parallels between their work and the earthly work of the Redeemer: carpenters, fishers, teachers, healers, poets, magicians and clergy—though in the last instance the identification is sometimes accompanied by an unfortunate psychological complex. Other kinds of work are equally Christlike, though perhaps not so easily recognized. "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a service sector worker," girding himself with a towel, and all the rest. Who knows but at a Last Supper held today, he would come into the Upper Room as a pizza deliverer?

Also, in St. John's vision of "the Word made flesh" we can identify the incarnational nature of any kind of work that calls for a bodying forth, a coming down to some level more easily grasped, or the raising up to a level more happily dignified. Athanasius: "God became human that humanity might become divine." In the sight of my wife seated in a tiny wooden chair among her preschool students, I have thought of angels and mangers. And in every prosthesis, ramp or piece of software that gives more abundant life to the disabled, I might see the ascension of my Lord.

If at first we have some difficulty speaking of the work of the Sanctifier, that may be because she has so little to say of herself. The Holy Spirit is the supremely invisible operative, the wonderfully self-effacing archetype of those whose best work is primarily manifested in the achievements of someone else: the work of coaches, therapists, designers, maintenance workers, mothers and fathers. To work "like the Holy Spirit" is, above all, to bring out the best in others, to knit others together in

love, to know that the divine intention within every job is never found in the shop manual or the mission statement.

There are days, though, in which nothing I have written above would make much sense. Even when I had the privilege of teaching my ever practical Sophocles to my ever astonishing freshmen, what would I have made then of some joker drawing glib connections between the Persons of the Trinity and the source of my third knockdown headache in as many days?

Still, I recall those afternoons when I looked at the clock in my study hall and remembered that the hours of a typical school day were roughly the same as the hours that Jesus hung upon the cross. Who was he, after all, in the most basic sense that the church receives him, but a faithful provider who suffered terribly just to put bread on the table?