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Rethinking Work

Romans 13:8-14

John 6:25-34

On this Labor Day weekend as people enjoy the unofficial end of summer, a black cloud of economic uncertainty lingers over the nation. Economists claim that the great recession that began in December 2007 officially came to an end in June 2009. Nevertheless, too many Americans find themselves stuck in neutral gaining no traction in finding work. Economists admit that we are in a jobless recovery. Well, that's a big help.

As of August, the unemployment rate stands at 9.1%. This represents almost 14 million people. It includes over 6 million who have been out of work for 27 or more weeks, not counting the 8 million who are working only part-time, or the 1 million who have become so discouraged that they stopped looking for work.

The American people feel left behind as they have only one thing on their minds: Jobs! Jobs! Jobs! As President Obama prepares to address Congress on Thursday, and Republican presidential candidates jockey to be heard, the only mantra all politicians may hear over the next 15 months is: *"Step up or step down!"*

In a July 20th article in an online edition of *Forbes* magazine, I was intrigued by the comment that few people who *"simply wait for things to pick up are going to be satisfied."* The writer believes looking for work *"requires a different mindset."* In the Bible, Jesus said something similar in inviting us to rethink our views of work.

In John 6:27, Jesus says to the crowd: *"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life. . . ."* The crowd that sought Jesus were among the 5,000 who ate bread and fish blessed by Jesus which the disciples distributed to the people on the mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

The people were clamoring for more bread to eat. Jesus told them they should work to do more than put food on their table.

Jesus viewed work as a calling in doing God's will as food for the soul. In John 4:24, Jesus said: *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."* I believe this is what Jesus meant in working *"for the food that endures for eternal life."* It is to view one's work in this life as having greater significance beyond providing for one's family or gaining social status. Do we not want to experience work to be as satisfying as eating delicious bread. The crowd said to Jesus: *"Sir, give us this bread always."* (John 6:34)

If someone asks, *"Do you have any bread?"*, in our culture it can mean either a request for food or money. Jesus' teaching invites rethinking work to view our labor and earnings as an opportunity for contributing to God's kingdom, i.e., *"the food that endures for eternal life."* Following Jesus, it is this bread that *"gives life to the world."* (John 6:33)

You may be asking yourself, “How can my work give life to the world?” In response to Jesus’ teaching the crowd raised a similar question: “*What must we do to perform the works of God?*” (John 6:28) In other words, what is the job description? Jesus says the work has two priorities. The primary work is to believe in Jesus as the one sent by God to speak God’s word of life to humankind. Believing in Jesus is faith that seeks understanding in connecting faith to life. The corresponding work is to feed on Jesus as the “*bread of God*” to nourish one’s faith regularly. It is to discern how the labor of our lives including volunteer work can become the works of God which “*gives life to the world.*” Feeding on Jesus is rethinking work as it relates to faith.

In *Everything Must Change*, Brian McLaren invites Christians to rethink what it means to be the church in today’s world around two key questions: 1) What are the biggest problems in the world? 2) What does Jesus have to say about these global problems? If we consider stagnant unemployment to be the biggest problem in the U.S. which increases suffering and threatens our future, then what does the Bible have to say about the work of ministry the church is called to do?

The apostle Paul draws on Jesus’ teaching about loving one’s neighbor to offer moral guidance to the church. He says Christians need only to follow one rule: “*Owe no one anything, except to love one another.*” (Romans 13:8).

However, many would rightly ask: “How does one show love for people who have found the job search difficult and discouraging?” Paul proscribes the Christian rule of love with an ethical principle in verse 10: “*Love does no wrong to a neighbor.*” In other words, Paul is instructing us to love our unemployed neighbor in ways to lift them up instead of putting them down. Many unemployed people feel they are put down by people who consider them lazy.

In verse 11, Paul goes on to say in verse 11 that “*it is now the moment for you to wake up from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.*” As Christians, we need to wake up and see what is happening to people who have been laid off and who continue to struggle to find work. The work of ministry for the church is to love neighbor by understanding the plight of the unemployed. If we have learned anything from the Great Recession is that nothing in life can be taken for granted so long as people have no job security.

Thus, Paul summons the church to ethical action in showing Jesus’ love for neighbor in precarious times. The unemployed need to be assured that God still loves them. This becomes real as Christians reach out with loving concern.

For this reason, Paul speaks of salvation drawing nearer when Christians love for neighbor increases understanding of another person’s life situation. Thus, love for neighbor creates a neighbor to neighbor relationship. For Christians, it is to affirm the promise of salvation in solidarity with all who struggle to find work.

Therefore, in appealing to the church to rethink its work of ministry, Paul says in verse 12: “*Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*” As Christians, we are called to be a light to the world by exposing the the works of darkness in our economy that create hardship for unemployed people. In telling the truth, you will need armor to withstand the arrows of criticism.

If jobs are the number one priority in our nation for Americans left behind in the Great Recession, then the solution will require politicians, small business owners, corporate executives, labor

leaders, and individuals to abandon self-interest and share responsibility to work sacrificially for the common good of everyone.

In a critical time of massive and long-term unemployment, I think Christian witness in this precarious moment in history calls for the church to be a catalyst to encourage creative ideas and bold action from every segment of our society that will create “life-giving” work for unemployed people.

Loving neighbor is easy to say, but difficult to do. Love is always love in action in the New Testament. It encompasses both acts of charity and actions of justice through public policy witness. To break the back of unemployment, citizens need to demand that Congress act with bold leadership to put people back to work.

In his commentary on Romans, (Interpretation Commentary, p. 209), Professor Paul Achtemier sums up what love in action means in this passage from Romans: “*To love someone is actively to promote that person’s good.*” Although this may be a Christian principle, I think it also is sound ethical advice that everyone in our nation would do well to heed.

To God be the Glory! Amen.