

Down and Dirty September 2, 2007

About a month or so ago, my husband Mike and I rented a 20 cubic yard dumpster to be delivered to our driveway to haul away a bunch of junk that we had accumulated in the last 30 years. It was 22' long, and something like 8' wide and 5' tall. We spent most of a weekend cleaning out our garage and attic and basement, and we filled that thing to the top and overflowing! As we were pitching all kinds of things—nothing toxic, mind you, since that was going to another place—all I could think about was the poor guy who got stuck with the job of sorting through all our trash, along with everyone else's, and what a tough job that must be.

Then, shortly after that, I read an article about someone in the Chesapeake Bay area whose job it was to trudge through 25 miles of quicksand-like mud each week trying to catch what was called the "Eastern Shore's archenemy—the nutria. I had no idea what nutria were, so I consulted dictionary.com, and it told me that a nutria is an aquatic rodent with a rat-like tail which feeds on vegetation, especially in marshlands. Apparently, the nutria have already caused serious damage to the ecosystem in the Chesapeake Bay area. One of the nutria trappers who was interviewed said, "You sink almost up to your neck." I shuddered when I read that part, as well as the part that said it was sometimes necessary to wrap the bodies of the trappers in duck tape to keep the bugs at bay.

In thinking of Labor Day, and our title this morning, "Down and Dirty, how could we not think about the show on the Discovery Channel that focuses on some of what the host, Mike Rowe, categorizes as dirty jobs. On the show's website, he actually lists what he thinks are the 10 "smelliest" places he's been, and seems to equate those with the dirtiest jobs. Citing them Letterman-style, they are:

10. The back of an Ohio state Department of Transportation Toad Kill Recovery truck near Akron.
9. A liquid turkey compost pile at Coyote (Texas) Turkey farm.
8. A dairy farm near Erie, Pa.
7. The grease pit at Madison Elementary School.
6. Eric Polich's pig nursery in Iowa
5. The Trommel—a food separation device at a San Francisco dump.
4. A fish recycling plant near Warrenton, Oregon.
3. Bracken Cave near Austin, Texas, home to 40 million bats.

2. The lift pump chamber at a San Francisco Treatment Facility.

1. The bug room at "Skulls Unlimited International—which happened to be one I saw!

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Nonetheless, my guess is that some of us think of our jobs, whether they are paid or unpaid, as some of the "down and dirty" jobs, and ones we'd prefer not to do. (An idea????—have folks in the next 1-2 enews or on Sundays, or via video name the "down and dirty" jobs they do that they don't find appealing????) In fact, some of you have shared those with me—things like cleaning toilets or digging ditches. I think it would be hard to be a telemarketer, since most folks I know dislike being interrupted in the middle of an evening to be asked for one thing or another. In fact, I read somewhere that most folks actually hang up on telemarketers. I don't think I could deal with all that rejection!

Fortunately, I don't have that kind of thing very much in the work I do, and I happen to really enjoy my work. I found it interesting that our bishop, Mike Coyner, in one of his recent email messages he calls "e-pistles," talked about this very thing. One thing I found a bit surprising is that pastors have the highest job satisfaction among all the various possibilities. Some 87% of pastors reported that they enjoy their work, and that put them at the top of the list. Other occupations where people reported satisfaction were: firefighters, physical therapists, authors, special education teachers, education administrators, painters and sculptors, psychologists, finance service salespersons, operating engineers and office supervisors. Some of those surprised me, and may have you, too.

Bishop Mike said that people often ask him, "Do you enjoy being a bishop?" His typical answer is one that I suspect many of us could use. He replies, "Not every day, but yes, I enjoy it."

Well, me too...I could say that, too. I've always believed that if we are doing work we love and enjoy, it almost doesn't seem like work, and that's what I truly can say about what I do. Now, that's not to say that it's a perfect job, because there is no such thing. Like very other line of work, there are things about it that most of us enjoy a lot, and there are those things that we wish we didn't have to do. It seems to go with the territory.

Actually, every job has its unwanted aspects. An employer who was quoted in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* said, "If those duties are only 10%-15% of the job, I would consider that a good match in this day and age." I take that to mean that we all need to realize that every job has its "down and dirty" parts, and we probably need to just stop our complaining about those parts, and get them done so we can go on with the parts of the work that we really enjoy and that give us satisfaction.

When the bishop cited his reasons for his enjoyment of his work, he said that it had to do with what we in the ministry refer to as our “call.” That simply means that this is the work to which God has called us, but frankly, I do not believe that sense of call is unique only to pastors. I have long been convinced that God calls each of us to our life’s work—whatever that may be, and that the ideal realization of our call is when our skills and interests and abilities match the desires and needs of the world around us.

Theologian Frederick Buechner put it this way: **“The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”** In her book, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*, Elizabeth O’Connor said, **“Every single one of us has ‘good work’ to do in life. This good work not only accomplishes something needed in the world, but completes something in us.”** I would suggest that even those things we refer to as the dirty jobs are those that are necessary and those that accomplish something that’s needed in the world. Hopefully, in filling that much needed task, each of us also experiences a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction for a job well done.

Take, for instance, a cafeteria worker in an urban high school. Many of us have been in school cafeteria, and we know the kind of verbal abuse some of those workers take because kids aren’t often very fond of their food. Nonetheless, this particular worker had what I believe to be the right attitude about her work. She said, **“What I do is important. This might be the only hot meal these kids get in a day, so what I do matters.”** Of course, it matters, because she truly believes it does.

That’s the heart of what our Bible passage for today is trying to help us understand. It reads like this: **“Don’t hold back. Throw yourself into the work of God, confident that nothing you do for God is a waste of time or effort.”** While it refers to “God’s work,” I think I would say it more like this: “Every kind of work we do in the right spirit is valuable.” You see, I believe that any of the work we do with a sense of meaning and purpose with a positive and hope-filled attitude matters. That kind of work makes a huge difference in our world, and I think that’s what Paul, the writer, of our Bible passage is talking about.

So, my question for us all to reflect on today is about our work. Do we just consider it something we have to do to earn a living, or can we throw ourselves into it, confident that nothing we do for God is a waste of time. Let’s think about it. OK?

Elena Bonner once said, **“Just as there are no little people or unimportant lives, there is no insignificant work.”** All of our work is important, because it makes a difference for us and for others. What more could we ask?