

# “Good Job!”

4 September 2005

( *Labor Day* )

Bible passages:

**Proverbs 12:14** (*The Message*)

“Well-done work has its own reward.”

**Colossians 3:22** (*The Message*)

“Don’t just do the minimum to get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for God.”

Here we are at Labor Day, 2005, stepping full speed ahead into the fall. It’s the last big weekend of the summer, and I’m sure that many of us have the day off, and plan on cookouts with friends and family to celebrate. However, I wonder if we’ve ever really stopped to wonder about this holiday, and why it was established. In doing a little bit of research, I learned that this day was designated as a holiday back in 1894, and it was created to honor working men and women.

We often hear the words, “good job” connected with the work that’s done. One of the ways it’s often used is in the context of “He has a really good job.” Typically, that means that, in the speaker’s estimate, the job has certain attributes connected with it that are considered to be important and positive.

I’d like to suggest to you that every job, regardless of what comes with it, is a good job. What I mean by that is that every job fulfills a place in the whole scheme of things. Take, for instance, Melvin Reich, Manhattan’s buttonhole-maker. Reich told the *New York Times*, “Buttonholes are what we do...You think it’s nothing. Just a buttonhole. But it’s something. It’s not nothing.” Melvin Reich has a good job because he believes in what he is doing, he believes it’s worthwhile, and that it serves a purpose.

Or what about a TV interview that was conducted with a food server at an inner-city high school cafeteria? I suspect this was someone who doesn’t always get a lot of respect from students or employers. Yet this woman looked the interviewer squarely in the eye and said, “My job is important. Sometimes this is the only hot meal these kids get all day. What I do is important.”

You see, a good job isn’t just about the position that gets the biggest salary, or the most fringe benefits. It’s not about having the ideal working conditions or the perfect hours. It’s very clear to me that a big part of having a good job is having a sense that what we’re doing is worthwhile and important, regardless of what that job is. Everybody has a job to do, and everyone has a contribution to make to the world. It does not matter how large or small that job seems in the bigger scheme of things. Every job is a good job.

A lot has been written and filmed about the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle. I’d love to go there to experience it for myself what it’s like. It sounds like an absolutely energy-filled fun place to be! The fishmongers there make it their job to have fun with the way they conduct the

business of selling fish. They do their work in a playful way, and work to make sure their customers have a positive experience.

Being a fishmonger may not seem like the most glorious job in the world, but the workers at Pike Place have an edge over the other fish shops in the market. They have spirit; they demonstrate the role that bringing a positive attitude plays in a good job. Pike Place Fish Market has discovered one of the key ingredients to making any job a good job. It's this: "There is always a choice about the way you do your work, even if there is not a choice about the work itself."

What that says to me is that it's really all about the attitude we bring to the work, and not the task itself, that makes our work good and worthwhile. Every one of us can choose the attitude that we bring to our work; we can decide whether or not ours is a "good job" by what we bring to it. So, a question for each of us to ask ourselves is "What attitude am I bringing to the work I do?" If we aren't happy with our answer, then it's up to us to change our attitude, knowing full well that we're the only ones who can make that change happen.

There's another piece to this concept of a good job. For example, we may hear someone say, "She did a good job," and we know that comment is referring to the quality of the work that the other person did.

That's really what our Bible passages are talking about this morning. The first one is a proverb and it says, "Well-done work is its own reward." Poet Madeline Bridges put it like this: "Give to the world the best you have. And the best will come back to you." There's something intrinsically good about giving our best. John Ruskin said, "The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it." How true that is—we become a better person, a person of better character—if our work is well done.

Most of us also know the sense of accomplishment and gratification we get when we give something our all, our best effort. While it can be exhausting, there's also a sense of exhilaration that goes along with it. That's the thing we sensed with the astronauts in the Discovery mission that concluded a couple of weeks ago. There was the feeling of satisfaction at a job well done.

The other Bible passage is a bit more directive about doing the best we can at our work. It says, "Don't just do the minimum to get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for God." I see this as very much a faith issue. I believe that God has created us, and has given each of us our own unique set of gifts and abilities. I really don't believe that it's God's intention that we slouch our way through life just barely getting by, but we're to sink our teeth deep into all that life has to offer and to give it our very best shot. Helen Keller once said, "When we do the best that we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another." I'm convinced that we can do that, we can give our best toward whatever work we are doing.

I've mentioned before Tim Russert's book, *Big Russ and Me*. The book is about Russert's memories of his Dad, who, it turns out, was a garbage collector in Buffalo, New York. One summer, his dad got him a job doing the same thing, and Big Russ said to Tim, "Now I got you this job, so don't embarrass me, okay?" Big Russ was proud of his work, and he took pride in a job well done. It was hard work, and not work that was highly revered by the general public, but his dad knew it was important work that needed to be done well. His dad said something that I heard

many times from my own Dad, “A job worth doing is worth doing well.” In other words, give whatever job you’re doing your best; do it the best you possibly can.

There was an article in our daughter’s company newsletter that points out exactly what I mean. You may have heard it. It’s about a young boy who went into a drug store to use the phone. (hard to find those these days!) He was calling to check on a job mowing lawns, and the exchange went something like this:

“Miss....., I’d like to mow your lawn.” The woman replied, “Thank you, but I already have someone to cut the lawn.” “Ma’am, I’ll cut your lawn for half the price of the person who cuts it now.” The woman responded that she was very satisfied with the person who was doing her lawn currently. Finally, the boy tried one more ploy: “Ma’am, I’ll even sweep your sidewalk and trim everything so you’ll have the prettiest lawn in the whole city.” Again, the woman told him no, that she was very happy with things as they were.

The pharmacist had been overhearing this conversation, and said to the young man, “Son, I like your attitude. I like that positive spirit. I’d like to offer you a job.” The boy replied, “No thanks. I was just checking on the job I already have.” That young man had the right spirit and attitude, and it was clear he wanted to make sure that he was doing a good job.

That’s something for each of us to think about. Are we giving our best? The best person for us to ask is probably ourselves, because I believe that each one of us knows at the core of our being when we’re doing the best we can, and when we’re not. I’m not talking about being perfect in everything we do, but I am talking about working toward constant improvement, and striving toward excellence.

There’s yet another thing about doing a good job. It inspires others to do the same. In the “old” clergy team at St. Luke’s, we used to talk about “not dropping the ball.” Whenever one of my colleagues preached, he or she always did such a good job that I knew that I didn’t want to let anyone down. I tried to give it my best, because all of my colleagues did that. They inspired me to stretch and reach, and they inspired me to keep working and trying, and growing. We weren’t competing with one another; instead they were truly sharing who they were, and they were folks who were committed to giving their best every time at bat. I will always be grateful to them for the example and inspiration they were to me. And that brings me to one last thing....I want to be sure I tell them that, and thank them, and I’m going to do that.

You know, there are many around The Garden who give it their best day in and day out. Many of them are behind the scenes and those of you here on Sundays never see them, or you see just some of them. But allow me to take this opportunity, on the behalf of all Gardeners, to say “thank you” and “good job” to our paid and unpaid staff—those loyal Gardeners who give of themselves every day. You know who you are, and you know the reward of doing a good job and making a difference in our lives. Thank you.

Closing:

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written, “When work is done in the right frame of mind, work

can be holy.” Maybe we need to ask ourselves, “Is my work being done in the right frame of mind? Is it holy work?” I hope and pray that it is.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.