**WORK HARD**

**LOVING GENEROUSLY SERIES**

**WORK HARD**

1ST Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

27th Sunday in Ordinary

World Communion Sunday

**Matthew 19:16-22**

**Proverbs 13:4**

**Colossians 3:17**

**Proverbs 6:6-8**

**Psalm 128:2**

**Exodus 18:18-23**

Lectionary Texts:

Lamentations 1:1-6

Psalm 137

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert cartoon strip, conducted a “Highly Unscientific Dilbert Survey,” asking this question:

“If you had a chance to hit your boss in the back of the head with one of the following objects, with no risk of getting caught, which would you use?” Here are the percentages for respondents’ answers:

 ◉A large bean burrito - 19%

 ◉ “Nerf” ball - 17%

 ◉Ripe melon 14%

 ◉Framed certificate of appreciation - 13%

 ◉Outdated computer you are forced to use - 13%

 ◉Your last performance review,

 including the 600-pound filing cabinet in which you keep it - 13%

 ◉All your co-workers, bound by duct tape and flung from a huge catapult - 8%

 ◉A Ford Focus with a full tank of gas - 7%

“I think the bean burrito won because it would make a really cool sound and it would be messy with or without guacamole,” said Adams. Over 64% of respondents selected a non-lethal response, knowing if their boss were injured, it would mean more work for them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

On this World Communion Sunday we come to the 2nd item on our plaque, **Work Hard**. Last week, you may recall we explored, “Be Grateful” and today it is “Work Hard.” It almost sounds like a theme for Labor Day, a weekend when our minds do tend to turn to “work.” That is also a weekend when most of us try to do little of it. For most there is a belief that the day of little work comes when one achieves retirement. However, permit me to share with you a definition of retirement that I heard nearly 40 years ago: “Twice the husband at half the salary.” Actually, the idea of retirement bringing little work is somewhat false. Most of the retired people I know work incredibly hard and they are among the largest group of volunteers we see be it Habitat for Humanity, the Penny Pincher Sale, or caring for the grounds around our church. Retirement is also a time when taking care of bodies becomes a slightly larger chore since they don’t respond as easily as they did long before the effects of aging change things.

Joseph Conrad, writing in his book, *The Heart of Darkness* says, “I don't like work – few people do - but I like what is in work - the chance to find yourself. Your own reality - for yourself, not for others - what no other person can ever know."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Another author, Matthew Fox says, "But work is also capable of creating the dark night - when, for example, our work contributes to the devastation of the planet, to the despair of the young, to hoarding when we ought to be sharing, to control and power games instead of celebrating, to putting people down instead of lifting them up, to injustice instead of justice."[[3]](#footnote-3)

"Good living and good working go together. Life and livelihood ought not to be separated but to flow from the same source, which is Spirit. Spirit means life, and both life and livelihood are about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contributing to the greater community. A spirituality of work is about bringing life and livelihood back together again."[[4]](#footnote-4)

If you go back and replay the words of Jimmy Carter, one of our best ever ex-presidents, you will find a televised speech from 1979 where he said, "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we have discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have little confidence or purpose."[[5]](#footnote-5)

On this World Communion Sunday when we will walk around our themes not only of a world-wide gathering of believers at the Lord’s Table, but peacemaking and our Fall self-imposed approach of “Loving Generously,” what texts shall we explore during this time in our worship?

Exegesis is a very reformed and Protestant thing to do. When we do that, we open up the Bible to most any text and ask the question, “What does this mean?” Then we ask, “What did it mean for the people who first heard these words and what do they mean for us in our period of history?” We somewhat force ourselves to do this with lectionary readings. At First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford we tend to follow the Reformed Common Lectionary (RCL). Most every Sunday there is a suggested Bible reading from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms, one from the Gospels, and one from another of the New Testament books.

This lectionary approach covers a cycle of three years in which one year we read from Matthew, another from Mark and a third from Luke. Every year there are readings from the gospel of John. After three years, the process repeats itself. Christians from all over the world follow this Bible reading plan and today they will be reading from Lamentations, Psalm 137, 2 Timothy and the 17th chapter of Luke.

But we have imposed our own lectionary of sorts with this plaque. We have said that we are looking at the theme “work hard.” We then do some *isegesis.* Rather than pulling out what the text means, we say we will examine where the Bible addresses the subject of work. So, we scour the pages of scripture and find a verse like this from Proverbs: 13:4 - *The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied.* Or Proverbs 6 - *Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest.*  Or, how about Psalm 128 - *You shall eat the fruit of the work of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.*

A wise Deacon once said to me, "I think that I would rather see a sermon than hear one." I agree with that sentiment. That might lead us to let our eyes settle on the Bible words, "*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves*" as it says in the New Testament letter of James (1:22). Now I confess that although I like much of what is in James because it is very practical. There is another aspect of James that makes me cringe. The book of James is full of these pithy little truisms which most everybody already knows. "*Every good gift is from heaven*" (v. 17), "*be swift to listen, slow to speak*" (great and applicable for any political candidate, don’t you think? (v. 19), "*lay aside filthiness and wickedness*" (v. 21), "*be doers of the word and not hearers only*" (v.22). They all rather sound like your mother, don’t they? - “Pick up your socks. Be considerate of your brother. Don't eat in the living room.”

This might be a good place to recognize that our worship service is filled with liturgy . . . prayers, readings, hymns and the like. The word “liturgy” actually comes from the Greek word *liturgia* which means “work.” Worship is the “work” of the people.

We have bypassed most of the lectionary for this series and have elected to read from Matthew 19 and Exodus 18 in the Old Testament this morning. We have selected to read from passages that are not a part of the three-year lectionary cycle. This is not a looming problem if you consider that the story from Matthew 19 is also told in Luke and in Mark. Therefore, the creators of the lectionary probably asked themselves, “Do we need to read this story a third time?”

But, in Matthew the writer tells us that Jesus’ conversation was with a young man. This is new information that Mark and Luke do not contain. Taken together, the three gospels give us a composite of this fellow. Matthew describes him as young. Luke doesn’t mention that he was young, but gives us the information that he was a ruler and Mark adds the information that Jesus loved him very much.

The young man came to Jesus with a heavy question: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" The Greek word for "eternal" is "*aionios*." It does not mean "lasting forever, " which is our usual definition of eternal. Rather this word references the concept of belonging or in this case, "belonging to God" or "characteristic of God, " or "Godly. " The young man's question was: "What work must I be doing to live a Godly or God-pleasing life?"

Sometimes we confuse being “godly” with being effective or efficient or prudent. One of my favorite stories concerns a young man who was working in a grocery store. A lady came in and asked for half a grapefruit. Thinking that request rather strange, the young man went to the back of the store and said to the manager, “There is some nut out front who wants to buy half a grapefruit.” Just then he glanced over his shoulder and noticed that the lady had followed him to the back of the store, so he added immediately, “And this gracious lady is willing to buy the other half. I hope that is okay.”

The manager was much impressed. Later he said to the young man, “You have a quick mind. You could have a great future in this business. By the way, from where are you? What do you consider ‘home?’” The young man answered, “I’m from Buffalo, New York, the home of ugly women and great hockey teams.” With a distinct coolness the manager said, “My wife comes from Buffalo, New York.” The young man rose to this occasion quickly and asked, “And on which hockey team did she play?” This makes him bright and quick, but not necessarily “godly.”

A bright, quick-witted young adult is always a delight. Most of us who are older would not want to be teenagers again, but we delight in the enthusiasm, vitality, and idealism of youth.

When I graduated from high school, seemingly centuries ago now, my situation was a little different from Pittsford. We lived in Grove City, Pennsylvania, a small town of approximately 7,000 Scotch-Irish about 50 miles north of Pittsburgh. You could get into trouble in Grove City, but you had to work at it a little. The devil was in Grove City, but he was not happy to be there and was probably bored beyond belief. No doubt he sought hardship pay for being assigned to work there. During those days we almost never heard of drugs. We really didn’t know much about sex, though we were every bit as interested in the subject as most anyone. We loved music just as much as today’s youth, though we had not learned to appreciate it as much as many today do.

We played together and really didn’t consider as much the challenges of living in a more integrated society. But, it seems that from generation to generation and place to place the scenes change; the issues and crises shift. But the central questions of life remain remarkably constant and despite the relative tranquility of Grove City we had hopes like this young man in Matthew who was smart enough to know that if his life pleased God, it would be fulfilling for him also.

Jesus gave him two answers. FIRST, HE SAID. KEEP THE COMMANDMENTS.

In verse 17 are Jesus' words: "If you would enter life, keep-the commandments." Our Lord was referring primarily to the Ten Commandments, and he went on to quote about half of them. Most of the rules of the Bible are general principles. Keeping them will not earn you a ticket to heaven, but breaking them will certainly separate you from a strong relationship with our righteous and holy God. The rules of God, interpreted though the love of Christ, are our guideposts for living.

There are some who say, "I don't believe in rules. I just make up my mind what is best in each situation." This is naïve. This approach over-estimates the powers and mistakes of detached decision-making, and under-estimates the salesmanship of evil. Rules serve at least two purposes. First, they protect us from our worst selves. As someone has said, "The decisions I make in my best moments bind me in my worst moments." The second purpose of rules is to give us some helpful guidelines to assist in decision- making which can be some of the hardest work we ever do.

Jesus' first guidance to the rich young ruler was to obey God's rules. Jesus gave a second answer that was even more important: He said (and I shall paraphrase here) IF YOU REALLY WANT THE GOOD LIFE, GET RID OF ANY THINGS THAT YOU LOVE AND WORSHIP MORE THAN GOD, AND THEN FOLLOW ME.

In the case of the rich young ruler, this was going to be a problem. He loved things a lot more than he loved God and so he went away sorrowful. Jesus was not commanding that all of us get rid of our possessions and embrace poverty. Nor did he mean to suggest that money in and of itself is bad. Jesus did indicate that we must subject every other value and loyalty to the high and holy privilege of being a disciple. According to Jesus, that is a key to the good life. The hard work of making good decisions might start in determining “Who is our God?”

If my life doesn't glorify Christ, then my work may not be as complete as God would hope it to be. If I work hard at healing the hurts of all God’s people and am contagious with God’s love, then I will find in my life greater satisfaction that I would without this purpose. If the collection of “things” is our life’s work, we may never be satisfied. Working hard to manage God’s creation, provide for our families and community is hard work. "It's true hard work never killed anybody, but I figure, why take the chance?" Ronald Reagan. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Most parents know what hard work means and eventually so do their children. Two college students were walking into Starbucks. "I'm really worried. Dad slaves away at his job so I will never want for anything, pays all of my bills and covers the tuition so that I can go to college. When I’m home Mom spends every day washing and ironing and cleaning up after me, and even takes care of me when I am sick."

"So, what are you worried about?"

He said, "I'm afraid they might try to escape!"

Most of us feel that in some way we are “entitled.” When we were younger we felt “entitled” to an allowance and saw our parents as human ATMs. But these feelings tend to follow us as we age and in so doing we learn that life lived well is hard work and full of dignity and that the hard work actually gives us a sense of satisfaction and pleasure.

It has been that way from the beginning, really. Right in the beginning of Genesis the Bible tells us, *The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to dress, till, till and keep the earth.* (Genesis 2:15). The NIV reads this way, “*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*” We can conclude that from the beginning there was work to do. We are to work hard, but we might also be wise to work smart and that seems to be an undergirding theme of our Old Testament reading today.

What an odd story for us to read in Exodus this morning! Let’s take a fresher look at what God might have for us in this historical account. It is the tale of a visit to Moses from his father-in-law, Jethro. At the time Moses was running everything. If we extrapolate the number of people involved in this migration of Israelites, they would have numbered anywhere from 200,000 to 400,000 people. Moses was in charge of housing, sanitation, employment, production, communications, the courts, the administration, food and distribution . . . just about everything. They had been wandering around in the wilderness for almost 40 years. Then Moses father-in-law, observing this gave Moses some advice. When I read this I heard Jethro speaking a little like Bernie Sanders as portrayed by Larry David.

*You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; 20teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. 21You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 22Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.’*

So what did Moses do? He followed his Father-in-Law Jethro’s suggestion and in a couple of months they were out of the wilderness. Moses was working hard, but not smart. Jethro suggested that the work, if shared, would not only be more efficient, but more could be accomplished and people would be less stressed, especially Moses. This is good advice for any pastor. Who does the ministry of the church? We all do!

What are the rewards of hard and faithful and smart work? That is usually our bottom-line question. Jesus said to the disciples

*Then Peter said, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?’ 28Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold,\* and will inherit eternal life. 30But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*

In this we might summarize to say that Jesus is telling his disciples that good faithful work has its rewards and some of them are simply “out of this world.” Jesus was using a metaphor about sitting on thrones and making judgments. It was his way of saying, ultimate value and honor come to those who sacrificially do the hard work of being my disciples and carrying on the ministry I have come to do. Yet, I must admit, that some of the greatest rewards I have ever seen carry no dollar signs nor are they limited to life eternal, be it in heaven or simply as God-breathed work now. Those rewards are priceless and often just as simple as a smile that communicates, “Thank You.”

♦*The dictionary is the only place that success comes before work. work is the key to success, and hard work can help you accomplish anything.*  - [Vince Lombardi Jr.](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/9771155.Vince_Lombardi_Jr_)

♦*There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure*. - Colin Powell

♦*Things may come to those who wait, and they will be the things left by those who have worked*. -Abraham Lincoln

♦*In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.* Proverbs 14:23

♦*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.* - Galatians 6:9

♦*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* - Matthew 5:16

1. Lynn Walford, writing for UPI and found in *Leadership Journal & Christian Reader*, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Konemann, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for Our Time*,

Harper San Francisco, 1995 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. President Jimmy Carter in a televised speech, July 15, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (Columbia, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)