

Scripture Reference: Exodus 3:1-6; Matthew 7:7-8, 24-27

The times being what they are, a minister today often finds himself in the role of trying to be a mediator between the generations. Such a ministry may not have been called for in simpler days when the traditions of the fathers were handed down and accepted without question by the sons; but quite obviously, that is not the character of this transitional moment in which we are called to live. Almost every subject I can think of is the occasion of strenuous debate between the old and the young, and again and again I find myself being called in to do what I can to referee and hopefully to reconcile.

One particular experience of this sort came to mind this week as I was thinking about this holiday, for the issue at stake between this father and son was the reality of work and how it ought to be regarded. I found myself wondering how they would relate to each other over this particular weekend called Labor Day. Had they gained anything from our long discussion together about the subject of work, I wondered, or would their conversation fall back into the old, embattled

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positions from which they attacked each other and never budged?

For you see, this was the shape of things when I first was introduced into the fray. It was the father who came to me, initially, agitated almost to the point of explosion by the attitude of his teenage son toward the whole business of working. This man related to me how he had grown up during the Depression and had worked since he was ten. spoke of the sacrifices he had made and the effort he had put forth to get where he was, and now here was this strapping son of his who did nothing but "lay around and read and 'experience things,' and talk contemptuously about 'the Puritan work ethic'." This man grew more and more angry as he said: "As I see it, work is all there is. To be sure, I do not enjoy slaving away all those hours, but enjoyment and happiness are the luxury of poets and the rich. Making a living, putting a roof over our heads, saving a little for a rainy day - that is what life in the real world is all about. I'm afraid this boy of mine with all his kookie notions is going to degenerate into a worthless hippie bum. Pastor, can't you please talk to him and try to get some sense in his head?"

With this sort of invitation into the conflict, I made my way across "the no-man's land" in between and had occasion to sit down with the priviledged, articulate son of this worried father. He was quick to locate their problem exactly where the father did - namely, on the question of work; only his interpretation was precisely the opposite. Whereas the father saw the son's contempt of work as the real difficulty, the son saw the father's obsession with work as the culprit. "That poor man is a workaholic," he said; "It is all he can think about or do. In the name of work he never spends any time with the family, never reads, never really gets around to doing anything else. It is dehumanizing him, turning him into an exhausted, hulled-out machine. He can't enjoy anything, even the fruits of his labors. Here he has gone and worked so he can build this fine house, and he's not in it ten hours a week while he's awake and has never yet been able to savour its beauty or take time to enjoy it." Then with a determined expression, the young man said: "I have no intention of throwing my life away like that. about to postpone all satisfaction for some far-off date in the future. For me, immediacy and experiencing are the thing. I want to feel things and encounter meanings. All this 'sweatof-the-brow' stuff is for the birds. I rap with what is now, with what is given, not for what you have to strain to get. I'm not going to live under a burden of constraint. I've seen enough of what an obsession with work can do to people. I want to be different. I want to feel life and not work myself to death."

At the end of this conversation, I remember having two distinct impressions about this situation. For one thing, I sensed how utterly apart these two really were on the subject of work; yet at the same time, how intensely they needed each other if either one was going to be genuinely fulfilled. I realized anew, there in the gap between the ages, how wise God really is to give us life in this generational form. Those who have lived a while on this earth have learned something and deepened in their realism and experience, and have much to say. But so do the young, who come up from the springs of the morning and see old things with those "virgin eyes" that can so often penetrate to the heart of the This was the stance of hopefulness I tried to take matter. in relation to both of these men; although admittedly, at first, such in-betweenness was not very popular. People in conflict want advocates and partisans, not mediators; yet this latter is precisely what I think I am called to as a Christian and as a minister. And so I set out to get both the father and son to give and receive in relation to the other, to isolate out what each one had to say that it would be well for the other to hear. And as I said earlier, I wonder now, on this particular weekend, how much good was really done and how significantly either one was enlarged by the other. Knowing them as I do, I am sure the arrival of Labor Day will trigger some sort of discussion on this embattled topic. I only hope that they are continuing what we began to learn together; namely, both to speak and to listen to the other, and to take the stance of both learner and teacher.

However, I have not related all this simply to reminisce about an experience of pastoral care. As I thought of these two, I realized how representative they are and how timely their situation is to countless others of us today. These two are not the only family who probably will find the occasion this weekend to discuss this aspect of living. Therefore, I asked the permission of these two and got it to share with you more fully how we approached this problem and something of what we began to conclude. In short, I want to do with all of us what I did with them. I can only hope that it will help to sharpen your own insight into the subject of labor and maybe even begin some process of reconciliation that will lead to better understanding.

At the foundation of all of our discussions together was a conviction about the nature of work that I think is basic: for it to be an authentic human experience, two ingredients, and not just one, are involved. You can label these two in several different ways; for example, ecstasy and effort, or interest and action, or spontaneity and discipline. But the point is: both have to be present if the experience of labor comes to fulfillment. Let me try to illustrate what I mean by a familiar event in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:1-6).

The central figure in this account is one of the most remarkable men history has ever produced, the man Moses. He was born to Hebrew parents at a time when that race was enslaved down in Egypt. In fact, in order to curb their growth, a law was in effect then to kill all Hebrew male infants at the moment of birth. Moses' family somehow got him born unnoticed and attempted to hide him among the bullrushes along the Nile River; but he was discovered by, of all people, the Pharaoh's daughter, and she became attached to the infant and adopted him as her own son. As a result, the slave child grew up in the palace and received a royal education, and entered manhood with great promise. However, he could not shake off his origins or the condition of his people, so like many idealists in every age, he proceeded to attack injustice head-on and cut the Gordian knot of Egyptian-Israelite relation in one act of violence. However, his radicality proved unacceptable to both sides — to the Establishment and the down-trodden. They both rejected him, and he had no choice but swiftly to depart across the border into the desert of Midian. And there the would-be revolutionary settled into an unlikely life-style - he married and had a family and went to work for his father-in-law, and what had looked like so promising a career leveled off into the uneventful life of a nomadic shepherd.

However, the remarkable thing is that all this trauma did not crush Moses' essential humanity. For example, throughout all his disappointments he kept alive that uniquely human capacity - the capacity for wonder. He could still experience mystery and curiosity, which is exactly what happened one day when his eye caught sight of a burning bush. How easy it would have been for Moses, who was now a relatively old man, to dismiss it as a common brush fire or to have sighed: "What difference does it make? My great hour has already past. In vain, in vain, all now is in vain." Yet Moses did not respond in that way. There was still room in his being for private enthusiasm, so he perked up at the sight of this mysterious happening and proceeded to put forth great effort to investigate it more closely. In the wordimages of Jesus, the advent of wonder caused him to start "asking and seeking and knocking." At considerable expense to his comfort, he turned aside from his flocks and made his way into the midst of that mystery, where of course he unexpectedly encountered Jehovah and received the call that not only fulfilled his ancient dream of liberating his people but also reshaped all of history.

I used this example with that father and son to show how both immediacy and industry are tied up in any act of fulfilling work. This involved the very delicate maneuver of getting each advocate not only to see his pet truth but also to hear the legitimate point the other was making. In specifics, this meant using Moses' experience to show the father how ecstasy and personal meaning do have a place in the realm of work. Here is Moses putting forth strenuous effort to accomplish something, but it was not a matter of blind compulsion. The task was something Moses wanted to do, not something he had to do. It was an endeavor born of his own enthusiasm, and this is what made it a genuinely human and fulfilling act. Here was a project which was alive with meaning and thus carried Moses rather than being a dead weight Moses was having to carry.

This is precisely the aspect about labor that had dropped out altogether for this father, and this, more than anything else, was what was propelling the son to the other extreme. The father had concluded that work and personal meaning were mutually exclusive and not even supposed to belong together, and so he had come to terms with drudgery and meaninglessness, and grimly concluded that this was all one can expect.

I personally do not think this is the truth of the matter, and tried to help this father see that his son was really the bearer of good news to him. Thanks be to God, there is more to life than grinding one's self away in mindless drudgery! There not only can be, but ought to be, meaning and satisfaction in what we do with the working hours of our lives, and in lifting this ideal before us and calling us back to it, the Now Generation is doing the whole human family a great service.

Dr. Rollo May, a most perceptive observer of the modern scene, feels that the loss of meaning which has occurred in so many people in relation to their work is a major cause of much of the mental illness, drug abuse, and even the violence of our times. Back in the early fifties, before many people had come to realize it, Dr. May sensed that boredom and apathy were growing in epidemic proportions in our country. Part of the reason for this, claims Dr. May, is the fact that we have discounted as unimportant purely personal enthusiasms, and have chosen rather to bury our lives under a flood of "oughts" and "shoulds" until the core of personality is crushed.

Dr. Samuel Keen echoes this same point in relation to our educational experiences of the last decades. He recalls quite painfully sitting in a first-grade classroom in Alabama, doing his writing exercises, when a bird suddenly lighted on a bough outside the window and began to sing. He was instantly filled with childlike wonder by the sight and sound of this creature, but the next thing he knew a ruler was crashing down on his hand and a grimacing figure demanded that he get back to rounding his "o's" and crossing his "t's" and dotting his "i's." It was a prophetic symbol, he said, to

all his subsequent experiences in schools. There was no place for private enthusiasm, for seeing one's own burning bush and turning aside to investigate it because you wanted to. Everything was other-directed — what someone else decided you should learn and think and do and become. It is little wonder, then, that never being encouraged to cultivate the uniqueness of our own experiences, we should become obsessed with duty and be obligation oriented. The only trouble is, this is not being genuinely human, for the experience of personal meaning and excitement, like Moses experienced when he saw the burning bush, is part of what makes us different from animals and machines.

We are faced with the gigantic task, then, of undoing much that modern culture has done to us, and getting back to personal enthusiasm as the beginning point of one's vocation. There is nothing wrong with the questions: "What do you want to do with your life? What do you like? What turns you on?" This is true particularly in relation to the general direction and goal of one's activity. If what you are doing as you work has no real meaning that excites you or gives you satisfaction, then no matter how many other people tell you that you ought to do it, it cannot be God's place for you or the human way to deal with work. Too few of us, I am afraid, have heeded Jesus' parable of warning about building one's life upon the solid rock of reality. Instead of asking and seeking and knocking among all the possibilities before us vocationally, we carelessly and hurriedly pick up the easiest stone, only to get to mid-career and find ourselves hopelessly bored and discontent. The flood of the years reveals we are not really doing what we like to do or find meaning in doing. This is the plight of far too many adults — we have built our vocational lives on sand - and today's youth have been quick to pick it up. I attempted first, then, to point this father to Moses' enthusiasm, to how his effort began in the ecstasy of personal meaning, and said: "This is a crucial ingredient of the work experience."

However, at the same time I tried to get the son to see another facet of the same process; namely, that what was born in immediacy was completed by effort. Moses did more than just experience excitement. He acted on what he had glimpsed and went to considerable trouble to move closer to it and appropriate more of it and make something out of it. And this part of the process is just as distinctly human as the ability to perceive meaning. I tried to say to the son that man's uniqueness lies both in his power to feel and to will. It is authentically human to be able to experience ecstasy and be turned on with excitement, and it is just as human to construct goals out of such ecstasy and then discipline one's self to move toward them. This is what elevates man above the existence of a gadfly or a leaf blown here and

there by the wind. This is what gives direction and purpose to man's energy. And this is an aspect of the matter that I am afraid the Now Generation is in danger of losing in its over-reaction against mindless exertion. To be sure, there must be vision where the setting of goals is concerned. endeavor should be "your thing," but for the vision to become actual and historical, there must also be labor and discipline and at times acting against one's immediate feelings. ecstasy and enthusiasm are the beginning and the end, but effort is the means and the road that lies between the two. One should never set out on a journey without some personal stake in its reason and purpose, but one will never arrive at any destination if every contrary feeling or obstacle persuades one to give up. When such difficulties do arise, this gives one the occasion to restate his goal and be energized again by the enthusiasm that birthed the endeavor. Then one can identify the obstacles for what they are and press on. This is exactly what Moses did, not only in moving to the burning bush, but in actualizing the call that crystalized out of that encounter. You will note that Moses did not rush into this second attempt at liberating the Hebrews from Egypt. He asked and sought and knocked quite thoroughly in relation to his capabilities. He carefully counted the cost. But finally he got down to the rock and decided this is what he wanted to do under God with his life. From then on he faced innumerable hardships and obstacles, but he never gave up. I imagine again and again he returned in his mind to that bush and to the enthusiasm that was born there, and having restated the objective, he named the obstacles for what they were and moved on.

It was this aspect of the process I tried most to get the son to see, for I gravely fear that the Now Generation, in its reaction to meaningless work, may get bogged down in a swamp land of immediacy. This would be to remain at a level of uniformness that would be tragic. Another way of describing the same danger would be to call it chronic immaturity; for feeling immediacy, as important as it is, remains the beginning point, not the end of human fulfillment.

This fact came home to me dramatically this summer as we traveled in Greece and delved somewhat into the history of that land. One of its finest hours of glory was the battle of Marathon, when a relatively small band of Athenians defeated the overwhelming hordes of the Persian army. In trying to determine how this could have happened, Edith Hamilton located the secret in the attitudes of the two armies. The Greeks were free men fighting for their homeland, while the Persians were an army of slaves fighting under external compulsion. What a difference it made when interest and action coincided and when the meaning born of ecstasy was carried forth by effort.

This has to be the real truth about this important human process we call labor. There are two ingredients in it, not just one — immediacy and industry. This is what I tried to help a father and son to see not long ago, and I have tried to do the same thing for all of us here today. But the question lingers — did they really understand?

And do you?