

“Labor Day for the Unemployed”
Beatitudes Society Blog Post
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As we approach Labor Day 2010, I, like 9.5% of Americans, am unemployed. All 2,9165,622 of us are actively looking for work, so that number does not include those who are underemployed or have stopped looking for work. I am not looking forward to going to church on Labor Day for fear that I will have to endure yet another sermon about how we shouldn't let our work take over our lives; how we all need Sabbath, yada yada yada. For the unemployed person, a rather unwelcome Sabbath awaits every day, and it's enormously stressful. Chosen Sabbath is lovely; situational Sabbath not-so-much.

So I thought for this blog that I'd lay out the concerns I'd like to hear addressed in a sermon and then see what Biblical stories and responses we can come up with that offer succor during this time. I hope that this can be a dialogue...

1. Living in the midst of not knowing is really hard. I feel like the poet in Psalm 74,
“There is no longer any prophet,
and there is no one among us who
knows how long.
How long, O God...
do you hold back your hand;
why do you keep your hand in your bosom?”

I could adjust to an outcome (i.e. You will have a job but not until November) if only I knew what that outcome was. But we don't and can't know that outcome. We can't know what our new normal will be; only what our current situation is.

Possible response A: The Christian tradition has something to say to living in the midst of insecurity. The Old Testament is filled with the stories of people who wandered or were exiled from their preferred lives and did not know how long their time of uncertainty would last. We are built on having to make Jerusalem in the heart because the physical community of Jerusalem was something intangibly far off.

Possible response B: In the New Testament we are introduced to the concept of living this life in between the already and the not yet, between when Jesus walked the earth and when Christ returns. And what we are taught is that a sense of stability is arrived not from knowing the exact nature of the outcome but that (1) Christ walks with us in the insecurity, (2) we find comfort with one another, and (3) in service to others.

What else????

2. Our jobs provide identity and community in a way that is not altogether bad. We have somewhere to go in the morning. Ideally we can feel good about what we do while we're there. We work with other people, and, over time, build relationships with our

colleagues. They are the people at hand, the people we've been given to love in our midst. I find that I miss the meaning offered by work and the community both.

It's not so much that I think of myself any less a worthy child-of-God being a no-income individual but rather that I miss having the tasks and the community of a job. It's nice to be reminded from the pulpit that all I'm called to do is to be myself, a child before God. But more than that, I want something tangible in Christianity that acknowledges the benefits of work.

Possible response A: There is nothing unfaithful or unbiblical about wanting to work. The vast majority of figures in the Bible worked. They worked in agriculture and trades and law and government and medicine. Paul worked as a tent maker throughout his ministry and evangelism. One does not become holier by not working. Sure, taken to an extreme where work/money/business become idols themselves is a problem. Working itself, though, is consistent with the ancestors of the faith.

Possible response B: It is harder to build structure and community where it doesn't automatically exist, but we worship a God who parted the red sea and turned water into wine and made a motley crew of outcasts into the forefathers of Christianity. We are created by a God who creates. Perhaps the prayer in the midst of unemployment is how to make structure and community in the wilderness, trusting that God can do just that.

What else, friends? What other stories and concepts are there? I know that there are many ways that Christianity offers succor to the job-seeker. What shall we offer?