

“Family Business”
John 6:27-35
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
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Just before the start of our reading, Jesus has just performed an incredible miracle, feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and a few fish. Try to imagine what a sensation a miracle like that would've caused. Most of the people coming to hear Jesus were poor – farmers, fishermen, peasant labourers, all people who had to work each and every day from dawn to dusk just to earn enough to provide food for their families. They didn't have savings accounts, there was no social safety net, no soup kitchens or welfare programs. If they couldn't work and earn a living, they would starve.

So when Jesus takes a young boy's lunch and multiplies it to feed an entire multitude, a never-ending all-you-can-eat buffet spun out of thin air, that's going to make you sit up and take notice. The people who witness this miracle, they start dreaming of all the possibilities, all the things they could accomplish with Jesus on their side: they could feed the entire nation – no one would need to farm or fish anymore, they could all quit their exhausting jobs in the vineyards and sheepfolds of their rich masters.

And with all that free time, they could build an army – an army of well-fed warriors who could drive the Romans out and establish a new kingdom, with Jesus on the throne. The possibilities are endless, and the people are already drawing up plans for this vast enterprise, a powerful kingdom with Jesus in charge and all his loyal servants hard at work, carrying out his orders and obeying his commands.

They're ready to go to work to do whatever Jesus wants them to do, so they chase Jesus down and demand that he put them to work, that he give them a part to play in the kingdom they've dreamed up for him. They ask him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

And that's a question we ask too. After all, we look around at a world that still seems so broken, so full of need and heartache and pain, and we know that God wants us to do something about all that trouble we see around us. We know that we've been blessed so abundantly here in this place, so we need to use those blessings to make things better: we need to get to work.

And when there's all this work to be done, just sitting around in church seems inadequate to meet the moment, it makes us think that we're so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good.

Surely Jesus doesn't want us to hang out singing hymns while the world is burning? As labourers in God's vineyard, workers in the kingdom, surely there's something we can actually do, here and now, today? Just like the people in that crowd, we've seen the power of God, we've experienced it, but now we want to put it to work, we want to be servants in the kingdom, we want to get things done. We want an answer to that same question, what must we do to perform the works of God?

But when the people come to Jesus to make him their king and make themselves his servants, Jesus isn't interested. He doesn't want to be the kind of King they have in mind, and he isn't interested in the kind of work they want to do for him. He tells the crowd "Don't work for the food that perishes, but for food that endures forever, which the Son of Man will give you."

They're looking for earthly power, for food to fuel a kingdom that will overthrow Roman rule, but Jesus tells them that his kingdom isn't like that, and it's not something you have to work for – it's something that's given, not earned. And when they still won't listen, and keep asking for Jesus to give them a job to do, a way they can earn a place in his employ, Jesus spells it out for them – "This is the work of God – believe in the one God sent."

In other words – Trust me. Stop making plans, stop scheming about what you'll do with my power and the miracles I perform, and just trust me, trust that I know what I'm doing, trust that the ways I use my power in the world will lead to better things than the plans you've made.

The people are so eager to get started using Jesus' power for their own ends that they don't really know who Jesus is – they don't understand his motivations, the things he actually wants to use his power to accomplish. They have no idea where Jesus is actually headed – towards Jerusalem, not as a conquering king, but as a suffering servant, a criminal condemned to die on a cross.

So Jesus tells them that before they can work for him, they have to know him and trust him – that's the work he wants his people to do before anything else. Following Jesus means putting your own plans, your own ambitions, your desire to be useful and to earn your way in the world, put all of that aside, and focus on Jesus first, trust in Jesus first, accept the gifts that Jesus gives and understand how good it is to belong to Jesus Christ.

Because the kind of kingdom Jesus wants to build is nothing like the kingdoms that the crowd had in mind, and sometimes in the church we forget

that. We have these ideas about what God's kingdom should look like, all these plans for how things should be, and we start to think that building that future is entirely up to us, that if we don't solve all the problems and fix everything that's broken, it will never get done, and that's not what Jesus wants for us. Jesus doesn't want his followers to work for him as subservient subjects slaving away beneath an all powerful king. We are not God's employees, punching our time cards, putting in a day's work in exchange for a reasonable hourly wage.

First and foremost, we are God's children – above all else, we are defined by our relationship with Jesus Christ, saved and set free by his sacrifice on the cross, adopted to share in the love of the Triune God for all eternity. And yes, we have work to do: God wants us to use what we've been given to bless the world around us, but before we can get started on that work, we have to discover our place in God's family, we have to see ourselves in right relationship with who Jesus truly is, trusting him as our savior and brother and King.

If we rush ahead to the work, if we throw ourselves into doing all the things we think God wants us to do before understanding just how much Jesus has already done for us, then the work we do for God stops being a joyful response to the free grace we've been given, and it becomes an obligation, a series of

escalating burdens and duties that weighs us down instead of setting us free. The work we do for God isn't an obligation, it's part of the gift, part of the grace that Jesus offers us as his beloved children. The work we do isn't an end in itself, it's a means to the end of deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ, trusting him more and more every day.

Think of it this way. Every summer, Johanna and I take our children blueberry picking. We each get a bucket, and we stay in the fields until all the buckets are full. The boys have a job to do, and we take it very seriously – we all love blueberries, we all want to eat blueberries, so we are all committed to the work of picking those blueberries.

But I also know that my children are not the best blueberry pickers in the world. They pick slowly, one berry at a time, and let's be honest, not all of those berries find their way into the bucket. Some of the berries they pick are squished, and some of them are green, and some of them are not berries at all, but small rocks and twigs and insects.

And every so often, one of them spills their bucket, or puts it down and runs off, or sulks about how they wanted to pick from a different bush, and the whole endeavour is temporarily derailed. But at the end of the day, they bring

me their buckets half-filled of squished berries and twigs, and I tell them “Good Job”, and then I fill up their buckets with all the berries I’ve been picking. Now, if I wanted to pick blueberries efficiently, I would not hire my children to do the picking.

But the point of picking blueberries with my children isn’t the blueberries. The work isn’t an end in itself, it’s a means to an end, deepening my relationship with my children, spending time together doing something good that will help us love each other more. And that’s how it works when we work for God.

All the work we do, all our service, all our worship, all our grand cathedrals and stained glass windows, our music and art, soup kitchens and hospitals, everything that human beings do for the church, for God’s kingdom, all of it, it’s all blueberries, picked by God’s children working in the fields alongside our heavenly Father. Every day, we try our best, and every day, we fail – we put down our buckets and sulk, we fight over who gets to pick from which bush, we waste time eating berries when we should be picking.

And then each and every day, we bring our buckets, half-filled with hopes and sorta-kept promises and best attempts gone wrong, and we give it all to Our Father, and God takes what we bring, and tells us, Good Job, blesses the work

we've done, and then fills up our buckets to overflowing with the unending, inexhaustible grace of Jesus Christ.

Because in the end, that's what happens when you trust Jesus, when you follow his love, when you work for his kingdom. In the end, you get the bread of life, the food that endures and gives life to the world. When you work for Jesus Christ, Jesus is your work and your reward. When you work for God's kingdom, you are working in the family business, not as employees, but as children, beloved children of God.

Today, in all the work you do, trust that Jesus Christ is working alongside you, trust that his plans for you are better than the plans you have for yourself, trust that his grace is more than enough, that today and forever, you belong to him. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!