

When Spirituality is Just a Job

One Easter, just before dawn, I was wakened by the persistent rapping of a state police officer at my door. He apologized for the intrusion and then told his tragic news. Some time during the night, Fred, a member of the parish, had run his car off the road, struck a tree, and been killed.

"Apparently he fell asleep," the officer suggested. "He was alone." No liquor was involved. In fact, the car was full of Easter candy and toys.

It wasn't difficult to fill in the story. Unable to find work locally, Fred reluctantly had become a long-haul trucker. Though the pay was good, he hated the days away from home. He pushed to complete each run so he could spend as much time as possible with his wife and children.

Arriving at the truck terminal late that Saturday night, he had put presents for his children in his car and begun the fifty-mile drive home. On that night the fatigue had proved to great. Just ten miles short of his goal, he had fallen asleep. A few hundred feet later, his life ended when his car found an oak tree.

The police officer asked me to go with him to break the news to Fred's wife. "I just can't take that candy and those presents to her by myself," he said. So Easter began with a 4 A.M. ride to share a tragedy.

By grace I made my way through the worship services later that morning. Easter night I went with Fred's wife to choose a casket. I returned to stand with her at the calling hours Monday and to conduct the service on Tuesday. Knowing her friends and family would likely return to their own homes after a day or two, I visited her and the children Friday morning. Finally she had gotten angry. I sat with her while she railed at the "rotten God" who took away her husband – and as the same God began filling her with healing grace.

Back home, my weariness overtook me. I tried to work on the sermon for Sunday – to no avail. I simply didn't have the energy.

After lunch I decided to take a break and plant the seeds I'd originally planned to sow Easter Monday.

Worn out and preoccupied, I didn't notice John, a neighbor and

member of my church board, until he spoke.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Hi, John," I replied, surprised to see him standing over me. "As you know, Monday's my day off. I usually work on Friday. But this has been quite a week! On top of the usual visits, I've spent endless hours with Fred's family. I know I really ought to be working on my sermon, but I couldn't seem to get anywhere on it. So, I thought if I stole a few hours of time, I might be able to write later."

"Whoa!" he said, smiling. "I didn't expect an explanation. I already know how hard you've been working. I just wanted to know what you're planting. I've watched ministers garden this plot for thirty years, and I can tell you which vegetables usually do better on this end of it."

His remark stood me up straight. Why am I explaining? It took some months and other, similar experiences for me to discover the reason I felt I needed to explain why I wasn't working. I realized that down deep I felt I wasn't being fully spiritual unless I was on the job. I was a victim of work-related Christianity.

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Work-related piety

How easily we ministers fall into the habit of working to feel spiritual! The traps are set early for many of us. I remember well the praise my family and friends offered when I told them of my calling to ministry. Unwittingly, I assumed that doing the work of a minister would make me spiritual.

My years in seminary reinforced that notion. Nearly all my spiritual development related to my work. I learned theology to clarify faith to others. I explored counseling to help others through the crises of believing. I studied liturgy to be able to lead meaningful worship. I spent hours learning the Word of God to write sermons that would enable others to understand it and find faith. I probed ethics so I could challenge others to faithful living.

Everyone at home and seminary encouraged me to apply myself fully to develop as a Christian minister; hardly anyone encouraged me to give attention to my development as a Christian person.

Even the meager attention given to personal piety related it to the work of ministry. I learned that a devoted minister begins the workday with time set aside to study Scripture and pray. But as I read the Bible, I found myself mostly writing notes that would become sermons. In my praying I focused mostly on the concerns of the congregation. My Christian identity was becoming increasingly dependent on my work. In fact, since my personal piety was integrated into my work schedule, days off from work were days off from devotions.

Once the pattern was set, my only means of growing spiritually was simply to work harder. I had a clear sense of being Christian only as I did ministry. Even when exhaustion overcame me, as it did that Friday after Easter, I found it difficult to

“take time off.” So when church members like John found me not working, I felt impelled to explain, lest they see me as an unfaithful Christian.

Breaking free

It took me awhile to discover a sounder and more healthy approach to Christian living. Let me describe a change in perspective and some practices that help me maintain a healthier Christian stance.

First, the perspective: I now see my ministry as both a calling and a job. Ministry is more than my work, but it is my work.

Some Christians typically spend their work days laying bricks, some extracting appendixes, and others writing sermons. Laying bricks, doing surgery, and writing sermons are all work.

As ministers, we can never be off duty from our calling; but just like bricklayers and physicians, we can be off duty from our

work. I cannot say, “I’m not working today.”

Some years ago I participated in a joint meeting of physicians and clergy. The conversation turned to parishioners and patients who make demands on pastors and doctors when they’re not working. One pastor asked a doctor, “What do you do when someone comes up to you in a grocery store and begins to talk about an ailment?”

“I suggest he or she call my office the next morning and arrange for an appointment,” the doctor responded.

“Oh, we could never get away with that!” the clergy responded in chorus.

The physician’s reply had a sobering effect: “You mean you don’t think enough of what you do and take the problems people bring to you seriously enough to suggest they schedule sufficient

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time with you to deal with them?"

Taking the perspective of ministry as the work to which we're dedicated encourages us to find ways to do it well, but at the same time to take care of ourselves – including taking time for recreation – so that we might fulfill our calling to the best of our ability.

Second, *the practices*: I no longer schedule spiritual nurture during my work time. I use my own time to affirm that my relationship with God involves more than work; it takes all I am.

As a minister, I don't believe I have any more right to take "company time" to tend my personal piety than secretaries or physicians do. While most patients would like their doctor to be a person of faith, they would object if asked to pay for the time spent in personal devotions. I think it is equally out of line to believe parishioners should compensate a minister for time spent on personal spiritual nurture.

When I feel the need to pray as I work, I also feel the need to be free from work to give full attention to my conversation with God. My relationship with God isn't based in or confined to

my work any more than I would expect my doctors to be.

I have discovered that my faith is stimulated by certain aspects of my work. As I teach and preach, for example, the need for clear thinking has helped me clarify what I believe. In these spiritual serendipities of my chosen work I rejoice.

■ I don't expect my work to nurture my faith. I've discovered I need regular time away from work and people to maintain and grow in faith – in a place where I know no one will invade. God nurtures me in quiet as well as in service.

■ When I neglect such time apart, I lose my sense of direction. When I do take such time, the return to work and to all the relationships of life is done with renewed vision and vigor.

■ I find unique ways to nurture my faith. For me, that means planting a large garden each spring. Often I tend my garden early in the morning. The quiet of those hours moves me to prayer. And sometimes a puzzling question I'm trying to work through suddenly becomes clear.

We are just as Christian when alone in reflective prayer, tending a garden, or talking with our spouses as when we're teaching or preaching. We who are clergy are not fundamentally ministers; we're Christian persons who are called to be ministers. And this understanding only enhances our ministry.

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by Douglas Alan Walrath

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