"Called For This Business"

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Matt. 9:9 & 28:19-20

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Acts 18:1-4

Seventy-five years ago a young grocery clerk had $372 and an idea. He founded a little store on the Cincinnati river front. Today that one store has gown into a system operating some 2,000 stores. This grocery clerk helped foster a merchandising revolution based on the premise that if a large enough volume of goods could be sold at a small unit profit, a satisfactory total profit would be earned. Today this is a major accepted business philosophy. This businessman's name was Bernard H. Kroger.

In the passages of scripture which were just read, they tell of two other businessmen. Granted, they were not responsible for creating a chain of grocery stores. Matthew was a tax collector and so he really wasn't a producer of goods and services. However, having signed a contract with the Roman government meant there were ecconomic risks. Tradition says as it is verified in the passage from Acts that St. Paul was a tentmaker. This was the way he supported himself as he went about preaching the gospel. In fact, tradition says, he never accepted an offering for his personal support. Two Bible characters and businessmen trying to make a profit.

A few Sundays ago I preached a sermon dedicated to the youth of our church. As we approach Labor Day, I thought that it would be appropriate to honor the business person.

I. IN HONOR OF THE BUSINESS PERSON

I have not only chosen to honor you because I needed a theme for a Labor Day sermon, but because you have received so much bad press in the past. Even the clergy jumped on the band wagon of criticism during the sixties and seventies. We pointed our fingers at the people who violated the ethics of God's love in the market place and concluded that all business persons were bad. Like the movie, "Wall Street," we stereotyped the business person as one suffering from the disease of greed. We blamed him for the poverty in society without pointing to the degree of poverty being eradicated by the adventurous entrepreneur.

The truth of the matter is that there are unscrupulous characters in every producer, even among the clergy. Of course, an example is the trial of Jim Bakker in North Carolina. In the most beautiful forest there are beautiful wild flowers and lovely trees, but there are also snakes. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden affirm that.

A. The fact is that all of us are business persons. We may not be a stockbroker, or a manufacturer of hoola hoops, or manage a restaurant or own a grocery store, but we engage in the commerical enterprise. Sometime in our lives, we try to market or sell something. It may be that old second-hand car or the extra couch which we don't need. You place an ad in the classified and wait for a customer to call. I read where one very frustrated wife of a deer hunter advertised that her husband was for sale. Included in the deal were a rifle, hunting clothes, a Labrador Retriever and fifty pounds of venison. She received an offer for the dog.

How many of us have had a "rummage sale ?" While driving to a wedding reception yesterday, I couldn't help but notice all the rummage sales. Some time ago, I read an article about a minister who put on a rummage sale. His attitude toward the commerical enterprise wasn't favorable. During the sale, he found himself selling items which had memories attached to them. He shared those memories with the buyer. The

children's high-chair still had the scars from two children. The memories were sold but also kept and every buyer seemed to appreciate that. This experience changed his attitude. Whether we give a rummage sale or sell cars, we are all business persons.

B. On this Labor Day, we want to honor you because of the risks you take in the market place. Granted, the person who markets her homemade quilts at the craft show doesn't take the same risks as the computer manufacturer. There are definite risks.

I was about 14 years of age when I began to learn about risks in the market place. My father made a business deal with my brother and me. He said that he would give us a percentage of the profits from the several acres of watermelons, if we would harvest and market them. We agreed. For four weeks, every morning, we went to the watermelon patch. The dew was still on the melons so that we got wet and dirty from carrying these 30-50 lb. melons to the truck. By 11:00 A.M., we had hauled those melons from the patch to the fruit stand we had on the main highway. Rain or shine, we manned that roadside market until sundown. Upon marketing most all the watermelons, my brother and I could hardly wait to split up the profits. After working four weeks, seven days a week, my cut came to a total of $4.80. There are risks in the market place.

In this country, shortages of goods and services almost never happen because of the free market economy and people who are willing to risk. There is a theological dimension to this risking. God risked His Son that we might experience abundant life now. God himself suffered in his effort to reflect his love. So does the business person risk in the market place. In that risk, sometimes there is pain, but good comes from that.

C. Of course part of that good comes in the jobs and salaries which enable us to purchase what we need and want. David Berstein in the publication, "The Freeman," suggested that racial tensions could be reduced through the market system. He sights an example of a huge flea market which is hosted at the Aquaduct Race Track near Queens, New York. This racially troubled area has people of all races coming every Sunday and Tuesday to buy and sell a wide variety of merchandise. He says security is minimal and the only time he has seen harsh words exchanged, was due to haggling over a price. He concludes that when people of different races are active in the market place, they are able to see each other up close. Then they realize how foolish stereotyping really is.

So, I want to affirm the good you are doing in this world. The business person deserves a few strokes for risking and producing.

II. CALLED TO DISCIPLESHIP

In as much as we honor the business person this day, there is also a challenge I want to propose to you. Now I know what you are thinking. This is one of those preacher-tricks. He soften us up with a few pats on the back while all the time he had a knife in the other hand. With the defenses down, he's going to stick that knife right in our hearts. All I can say to that is, "trust me"; the challenge will hurt no more than a vaccination and it might help you, too.

I began this sermon callng attention to the fact that Matthew and Paul were businessmen. They participated in the economy of that day. But that's not the reason the Bible includes them in the Biblical record. For that they would have been written up in the Jerusalem "Wall Street Journal." Their stories are recorded because they answered a call to discipleship. They became engaged in the business of Christian discipleship. Notice some factors about God's call of these men.

God's call to be a disciple is not limited to the "good guys" or to church folks. In the first part of this sermon I referred to the unscrupulous business person in the market place. Matthew, if he followed the usual road of the Roman tax collectors was only interested in lining his own pockets. It didn't matter much to him how he did it. In short, Matthew was probably a crook. But the Symbol of God's love called him to follow Him.

Most of us remember the Watergate Scandal and one man who was convicted and sent to prison because of his involvment. That man was Chuck Colsen. At the time of his imprisonment, he couldn't have secured a job as a chicken plucker or a watermelon salesman. However, in that prison experience, he heard a call from the Master to "follow me." Today, Chuck Colsen has established the "Prison Fellowship;" an organization that seeks to minister to those in prison. "I was in prison and you visited me." God's call to discipleship is not limited to the good guys. In fact, you might note that Jesus didn't ask a priest or clergy person to follow him. He called those who were fishermen and persons engaged in the market place of life. As a clergy person that kind of irritates me.

Secondly, notice that the Apostle Paul was a businessman engaged in two businesses. He was both a tentmaker and a disciple of Christ. Your field of work may lie in a store, in a factory or in an office. During each work day, you may be surrounded by ledgers and files, wage scales and price lists. You may produce what feeds and clothes the human race. However, as a Christian you wear two hats, that of a disciple and a business person. But neither are separate from each other.

Just as in business we are to produce, so are we to produce as a disciple of Christ. Jesus' proclamation to us is to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations.....teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you....."(Matt. 28:19-20). We have no problem producing wheat to make bread or marketing some new appliance for the home, but sharing our faith is scary.

Most of us function as God's secret agent. Some even try to hide that they have any spiritual values at all. What if we had to draw a graph of our discipleship production for the last 12 months? What would it look like? Would the president of the company keep us as an employee if our sales for the year were the same as the number of times we invited someone to church?

About now you are thinking that Mark is showing his roots in the revivalistic Bible Belt. He is about to inform us that this Tuesday, during lunch hour, we have to man a street corner in downtown Milwaukee and preach the "good news." We are not all called to be another St. Paul who argued and persuaded people in the synagogue. No, that's not what I am saying, although the imagery of each of us preaching on the streets does have a certain flair to it. No, I am simply saying that the call to follow our Lord is to be God's love in the market place.

CONCLUSION

As a Christian engaged in the business of Christian discipleship, you don't need an advertising gimmic. There is a little simple poem that goes like this:

I am my neighbor's Bible,
He reads me when we meet;
Today he reads me in my home,
Tommorrow in the street.

He may be relative or friend,
He may a stranger be,

He may not even know my name,
Yet, he is reading me!
We are called to be in the business of being God's love. Amen.

PRAYER:

Let us meet the spirit of God in our being as we go to God in silent prayer.

O God, on this Labor Day, we remember Your blessed Son was once a carpenter at Nazareth, so we pray for the workers and business people of the world. Cheer with Thy presence those whose labor is wearisome and joyless, and receive into Thy protection those who work in dangerous trades, particularly those who risk their lives that others might live. We are reminded to make intercession for all of those who throughout the year labor in our behalf, that we may have good clothes, food, water and shelter.

We pray, too, for those who, even when given a special holiday for rest, have to continue to be at their places of responsibility.

And, as another school year has begun, we pray in behalf of those teachers in our schools and in colleges and universities who share in the preparation of our sons and daughters and grandchildren for responsible places in society. May they have such a sense of vocation that they will give the best of their talent, energies, and expertise to this high calling.

We pray, too, for our sons and daughters, as we send an enthusiastic commitment to the opportunity of education, that their potential, which You have placed within them, may be realized.

For the ill and infirmed, we pray for the healing that ministers wholeness even where physical brokenness persists; for us and for all of those who are bereaved, we pray the gift of Thy peace--the peace that the world cannot give and that the world cannot take away. Amen.