

Sermon Text for November 3, 2019

Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Amos 1:1, Acts 18:1-4

“Working for the Lord”

We had a visitor this past week, who really isn't a visitor but actually a member of this church and had never seen this church before, or been to church here before. Norma Paz is the pastor of the church called La Renacer which means renewal and it is a Presbyterian Church that meets in West Grove. It is a strictly Spanish speaking church and I have been moderating the session probably close to 3 years now. Norma is their pastor but isn't ordained.

She became a member of First Presbyterian a few session meetings before so that according to our church government she can now be given the ability to lead their session, baptize, serve communion, marry, all of which I do no Sundays at 5, when they meet, because up to now she is not able. As a member of our church she can be commissioned by the Presbytery to do all of these things. I am so proud of where this church is right now, Brett, Karen, Holly, and now Norma. When Norma began we had about 15 people in worship on Sundays, now they have 60 or 70. Tess went with me the seek for worship. They have a very unique praise band. Every Sunday we pray for members of the church who are in York in prison rounded up by immigration officials.

It is pretty powerful. Norma and her husband own a driving school out of Trenton where they live, so they are able to make ends meet. Without a shadow of a doubt she is called to be a pastor, you can see how God is using her, but she and her husband have a handful of jobs that they do to make it work.

One of the most identifying statements we make is a response to the questions: So, what do you do? So much of our identity is wrapped up in our occupation, in how we make our money, or how we spend most of our time throughout the day. Our work, for many of us, tends to be a pretty decisive factor in our identity. John Calvin refused to use the term occupation for our work, but rather insisted on using the term calling.

So, I wonder today, do you see your occupation as your calling, your vocation, or is it, as I might suspect for many of you, just a means to an end, a way to put food on the table, or a roof over your head, or clothes on your back. Is it in any way a spiritual act for us to go to work. Do we work the jobs that we have because we have to. Or, if we are retired do we see this phase in our life as a calling, as God tapping us and saying what you do now you are doing for me. Our

work must be for the Lord. Our time must be for the Lord. We have to live for something far bigger than ourselves if we are going to find any purpose in our lives.

Amos and Paul both are known primarily for the work that they did as prophet and evangelist and yet today we see that their calling, their occupation, was very different from what we would expect. One is a shepherd and one worked for REI building tents. Paul But we don't really know them by their callings as a shepherd or a tentmaker, we know them as a prophet and an evangelist. Today we will see what our true calling is even in the midst of our culturally defining role in our occupation. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURE

We begin the prophecy of Amos by reading that he was a shepherd of tekoa. So to the question he would receive, so what do you do? The answer would come: I'm a shepherd. He joins a long list of people in the bible whose occupation was that of shepherd but we know them as something else related to their faith. Moses was a shepherd, and was out with his sheep when he ran into the burning bush. David was a shepherd even while he slayed Goliath. Joseph and his brothers were shepherds which is what gave them the ability to sell him into slavery because they were far from their home watching their father's sheep.

But these people we know not because they did shepherding really well, but because they loved the Lord God and God used them to bring about his kingdom through their actions even while they were still employed as shepherds. Amos isn't introduced as the prophet who used to be a shepherd. No, he was a shepherd even while he worked for the Lord. Their calling was to be a shepherd and as a result God used them in a way that was transformative. They didn't have to change what they were doing for a living in order to do God's will and to be used by God powerfully.

One of the more fascinating field trips that I took on my own initiative was to go to the farm of John Meck. John is the pastor at Strasburg Mennonite. Over the years he has transitioned in my life from being a colleague in ministry to a close friend. We went to Israel this past year together and reciprocally dunked each other in the Jordan River.

John is a pig farmer, a few years ago he showed me around his farm and it was impressive. The amount of work that goes into raising pigs is stunning and I had no idea what was involved in doing that. I just eat bacon. John grew up on a farm and it is what he knows how to do. My family, well, my dad was a pastor, my grandfathers on both sides were pastors and missionaries, so it is what I know to do. But God has been able to use John powerfully to pastor a growing and vibrant church in town. The two things don't conflict, they are not

exclusive of each other either, but his work as a pig farmer has a powerful spiritual component to it that he understands and that God uses.

In all that he does he works for the Lord. Like Amos, and the shepherds in the Bible, his responsibilities on earth are important not as means to an end, but in and of themselves. What he does is work for the Lord in all that he does.

When we look at our Acts Scripture and we turn the page into chapter 18 we find Paul's occupation defined as a tentmaker. Let's get ourselves to where Paul is today. Remember he was in Athens and then he leaves this old famous city to go to a brand new city, less than 100 years old, called Corinth which was quickly becoming the center of commerce in the area. It was a busy place and if you had a trade or a gift there were people coming through who could use what you made.

Paul ends up writing a couple of letters to the church that he starts in this city, we call them I and II Corinthians. Paul, Scripture tells us, seeks out a fellow tentmaker, a refugee family who had fled Rome, crossed the border and settled in Greece. Because Paul and Aquila each had a skill they teamed up and made tents together. They worked by using what they knew.

The first person that we resettled in the United States when we were working with the US Embassy in Russia was a young woman from Ethiopia who had been arrested as a student protesting against the government. She was thrown in jail, beaten by the guards, raped and let out and told never to do that again. She protested again and heard that she was being pursued and made her way to Moscow. We recommended her to the US Embassy to be resettled and she and her daughter and her husband were resettled in Virginia. He was an engineer by trade but because of his refugee status could not find a job building roads and bridges as an engineer, but rather began by working at Wal-Mart. When I spoke to him he told me God is calling me there for a reason in this season. I work for the Lord.

Paul is described as a tentmaker who worked for the Lord. In I Thessalonians 2:9 and II Thessalonians 3:7-8 he speaks about working night and day as a tentmaker so he would not be a burden to anyone. He goes on and says we were not idle when we were with you. In vs.10 he goes on to say: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

Our background as Protestants saw this played out as this emphasis on work was instilled by those on the Mayflower where they were reminded of this verse, that those who do not work do not eat. As Protestants we have we have the work ethic which was coined by Adam Smith as our calling card. We work hard not because we want to make more money but because it is part

and parcel of our calling. In all that we do we are called to do it well and excellently because God has called us to this work, whatever it may be.

Does that sound like the job in which you find yourself? I know for many of you, that is not the case. Your job is your job and there is nothing vaguely spiritual about it. If I could find something better I would be gone tomorrow. In fact, my job is a big source of my discontent. So not, there is nothing spiritual in my job, in fact quite the opposite. Church is where I find my spiritual food. My work is toxic, so very far removed from whatever it is that you are talking about.

I need to say as an aside I have been extraordinarily proud of you this year. I gave you homework over the year in a variety of areas: praying, reading Scripture, tithing. In all of these things you have responded. You took a chance with me and this year we have seen a difference in all these areas. I'm going to give you another challenge, some more homework and I want you to see God work in your life as a result.

Pray and ask God, every single day, if God could reveal to you how your current job is a calling from God. Ask God to reveal to you how what you do day in and day out can be a calling from God. That doesn't mean that if you want to leave you stay, you still leave if you feel called to leave, but in your daily work look for signs that God is using this season in your life even this work, as an opportunity to experience God more fully. I promise if you pray this God will reveal himself to you more fully.

Paul and Amos did not shy away from their day job, because that did not define who they were. They saw themselves as children of God and so what they did they did as unto the Lord. That is our calling as well, in all that we do that we would work for the Lord. Amen.