



Some people tell the same jokes over and over. As a minister, I hear one particular joke over and over. At some point, you've probably made this joke. I've heard it so many times I keep count, and have now heard it 17,684 times. If I begin the joke, you can probably finish it – *I sure wish I only worked...
...one day a week.*

People seem to enjoy joking that ministers only work one day a week (but if we work one minute overtime on that day we hear about it!). And though a few people might think there is only one day a week that ministers work, the majority of people understand that there is much more to vocational ministry than what happens on Sunday. That being said, there are still many misconceptions about what ministers do with their time. I once had a young man come into my office and ask, *I know what you do on Sunday, but what in the world do you do the rest of the week?*

It is also fair to say that many ministers fail to understand what life is like in the workplace, especially in our modern age, when so much change has taken place. I'm in my fourth decade of ministry, so I haven't worked a "real" job since I was in my 20s, with the exception of some experience gained as Tanya and I had a small business of our own for some years. I understand that I live in a bubble that is different from what many of you live in every day as you go to work and deal with all the various issues that arise from being a member of the marketplace of employment. I do know, however, that life in the workplace is neither simple nor easy. It is, among many things, competitive, demanding, stressful, and kind of crazy.

As we continue our series of messages about *Voices of Faith*, this week our topic is *Voices of Faith: In the Marketplace*. Our Scripture text is from the book of Acts and tells us of a time when Paul had traveled to the city of Athens. While in Athens, Paul went to the marketplace, where he began to debate theological matters with those who had gathered there. The ancient Greeks loved to debate ideas, and that debate often took place in the marketplace, where not only goods and services were exchanged, but also ideas. It is from this setting that we get our term *marketplace of ideas*.

Listen to this morning's Scripture text from Acts 17:16-23 –

16 *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.*

17 *So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*

18 *A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said*

this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?”

20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”

21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.

23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

1. Allow your work to be a calling.

It’s very much worth noting, I think, that the early church was led by people who were not at all like me, in that they were not vocational ministers. They did not “do” ministry for a living. They were not educated in colleges and seminaries, they did not have libraries of helpful resources, and they did not have conferences and workshops to attend that helped them to understand how to do their work.

Peter and some of the other disciples made their living as fishermen. Matthew was a tax collector. Does anyone know what Paul did for a living? He was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Paul took no financial support for himself as he conducted his ministry, While he wrote in I Corinthians 9:1-18 that it would be perfectly proper for him to earn a living from his ministry work, he chose not to do so, and in numerous passages he wrote of the fact that he supported not only himself, but others as well (Acts 20:34 that *these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions*. In I Corinthians 4:12 he again affirms that *we work hard with our own hands*. In I Thessalonians 2:9 he writes, *surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you*. And, in II Thessalonians 3:7-9 he writes, *for you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow*).

For Paul, his work was a calling, and nothing stood between him and that calling. Whether or not his words were received joyfully, or rejected with scorn, Paul continued his work and ministry without hesitation. For the early disciples, their work was a part of their calling. It was not only a means to support themselves and their families; it also provided opportunities to interact with people and to integrate the work of God’s kingdom with the work of their vocations.

I’m going to assume that not everyone sees their work as a part of God’s calling, but it is. It’s not just vocational ministers, such as myself, who are called by God; every person has the call of God upon their lives. We are part of a church that believes very strongly in the idea of the *priesthood of all believers*. Every believer is, in a very real way, a minister, not just those who are officially set aside for the work of ministry.

Trust me, the world does not need everyone to be a vocational minister. We need them, yes, but we need teachers, and doctors, and factory workers, and electricians, and plumbers, and bankers, and real estate agents, and farmers who see their work as a calling of God. When I interact with people, whatever I say, the reaction is often *well, he’s a minister, that’s what he’s supposed to say*, and it may or may not be heard. But when one person in the marketplace talks to another person in the marketplace, it is heard. If one teacher tells another teacher about the importance of their faith, that other teacher hears it in a way they simply don’t hear from someone like me. That’s why it’s so important to understand that if you want someone to talk to a friend, family member, or coworker about the importance of faith,

I'm probably not the best person to do that – you are. Your voice is important in the marketplace, and is, most likely, heard in a way that mine is not.

2. *The marketplace is not only in need of faith, it is often looking for faith.*

We live in a day and age when we are often presented with false equivalencies. A false equivalency presents something as a fact, when indeed it is not. An example would be the idea that faith and science is incompatible. Often presented as a fundamental truth by skeptics, it is simply not true. Also not true is the oft-presented idea that faith and the marketplace are incompatible, when, in fact, the marketplace is not only receptive to faith, it is often *looking* for faith.

In March, Harvard University hosted a group of scholars who participated in a meeting with the title of *From Wall Street to Main Street: The Search for a New Moral Compass for the New Economy*. The panelists involved in the meeting came to the agreement that religious communities need to be actively engaged in shaping both the nation's economic reform policies as well as its moral direction.

(<http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/03/faith-and-the-marketplace/>)

The World Bank has joined with a number of religious leaders to bring their expertise on market and faith values to an effort to eradicate extreme poverty by the year 2030.

(<http://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/faith-world-bank-group-and-ending-poverty>)

These are but two examples of the ways in which the marketplace is reaching out to faith to help find solutions to some of the most pressing problems of our day. In spite of the division that some people want to believe exists between faith and the marketplace, the two can work together very effectively together, and often do. Because we live in an era where there seem to be so many lines of division drawn between different groups, it's easy to fall for the misnomer that there is, and ought to be, a division between the marketplace and faith.

Having said that, we must also note that,

3. *The marketplace is a great collective of ideas that sometimes clash with one another.*

Paul certainly had mixed reactions when he spoke about God in the marketplace. Sometimes, he was very well received, while at other times, he was jeered, run out of town, and even beaten and arrested. Still, Paul persevered. One certainly has to give Paul an A+ for perseverance and diligence!

I think, in our present political and social context, it is impossible to talk about the marketplace without speaking to one of the most contentious debates in a long time, and that is the debate over religious freedom and the marketplace, specifically the debate over whether or not businesses ought to have legal protection if they choose to reject business from individuals with whom they disagree. We could spend a lot of time on this topic, and we don't all have the same point of view – and I respect your right to your view whether or not it is the same as mine.

But before I tell you what I think, let me say this: I think there is more grey than there is black and white in most issues. I wish I could see more issues in terms of black and white, but I mostly see grey, and it's because I think most issues are more complicated than we make them out to be.

I have, for instance, a cell phone in my pocket. Like most of my electronics, it was manufactured largely in China. Last week, in my message about persecution, I talked about what believers in China face, in terms of harassment and persecution. Recently, the president of China gave a major speech in which he reaffirmed the Chinese Communist Party's commitment to atheism and signaled that there are increasingly difficult times ahead for Chinese believers (<http://time.com/4306179/china-religion-freedom-xi-jinping-muslim-christian-xinjiang-buddhist-tibet/>). There was also a tragic example recently of the manner in which the Chinese government continues to destroy churches. A government-backed firm bulldozed a church, and when the pastor and his wife attempted to stop that action, the bulldozer operator ran over them, burying them under dirt. The pastor was able to dig himself out of the dirt but could not save his wife, who suffocated to death (<http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2016/04/19/wife-of->

[chinese-church-leader-reportedly-buried-alive-and-killed-after-protesting-churchs-demolition/](#)). The question then becomes, should I use a product, sold by an American company, but manufactured in China? I am spending money on a product that helps to support a government that practices religious persecution and has a terrible record on human rights. I am, as a friend reminds me of us all, complicit in things that I neither want to be, or should be, complicit in.

Having said that, we live in a nation very different from China, thankfully, when it comes to human rights and the freedom of religion (but I still must consider how I spend my money, certainly when that money supports things with which I do not agree, such as the persecution of believers in other parts of the world). So allow me to offer a basic summation of what I believe, and it is this question: why would we want to do anything in the marketplace other than treat people with kindness and love, whether or not we agree with them about who they are, how they live, and what they believe? To be kind and loving to another human being does not mean you have to violate *your* conscience and beliefs, even if a political or religious leader is trying to convince you that you are, in fact, violating your conscience and beliefs.

To read the gospels is to find Jesus in conflict with religious leaders because of his associations with people; he associated with people that the religious leaders and the pious of the day believed he should shun. I take one simple lesson from that and it is this – if we do not offend someone by our willingness to associate with others and to treat them with love and kindness we are missing an opportunity to associate ourselves with Jesus in one of the most fundamental ways in which he lived. As people of faith, if we are going to have a voice in the marketplace, that is certainly what we ought to be speaking.