

The Family Business

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: There's nothing like being your own boss – at least, that's what I'm told. Quite frankly, I wouldn't know: I've always had to work for someone else. When I was a kid, it was mostly farmers who raised hazelnuts out in Oregon where I grew up. I worked in the orchards pruning, fertilizing, and cutting off the suckers that grow around the base of the tree trunks. In high school it was driving a forklift in a pickle factory and later working for a guy who placed concrete: we did flatwork, foundation walls, sidewalks, driveways – that sort of thing. Then there was the Army. For ten years I had more bosses than you can shake a stick at: everyone who wore a higher rank on his collar than me. Now, though the IRS says I'm self-employed, my boss is God, and nobody outranks him; so there you go: I've always worked for somebody else. Many of you, on the other hand, own and operate farms or other businesses; or maybe you are partners in the same. And for those who are in such situations, you are your own bosses. And I'm willing to bet that many of you who aren't working for yourself at this point in time, look forward to the day that you will be. You're working toward that goal.

Why? Well, it's a lot more than not having to worry about somebody over you telling you what to do all the time, isn't it? No, it has to do with responsibility and the pride of ownership. It allows you to make a name for yourself and stand on your reputation for good, honest work—and I don't mean any of that in a sinful sense. As Christians we ought to be able to take pride in the work we do in our respective vocations without any thought that we are somehow contributing to our righteousness before God by doing so. It's okay to be aware that your work is good. But more than that, working for yourself satisfies the desire to create something of your own and to enjoy the fruit of your own labor – to build up an enterprise that lasts and that you can one day pass down to your children and maybe to their children after them. It's a heritage ... a legacy. It's not just a job.

And all of us recognize that there is a world of difference between being an owner or a member of the family who owns a farm or a business and being a mere employee of such an enterprise – somebody without any inherent interest in the long term success or failure of the operation. Most employees work for a paycheck. That's it. And human nature being what it is, most employees will do whatever the boss requires of them to the standard the boss sets, and nothing more; and even then, only if the boss is paying attention and making regular checks for quality control. The motivation to perform comes from the outside. You do your job or else – or else you get chewed out or a bad report or maybe fired. But if it's *your* business (either in whole or part), or if you're part of a family tied to the business, then you have a vested interest in always doing the best you're capable of. Your motivation comes from within. You want to do well. And you're planning ahead. You're thinking about the future. And you're continually looking for ways to make improvements – to increase productivity and quality and efficiency—because it's *yours*. It's *your* future. And it's got *your* name on it. The success and reputation of the business reflect back on you.

And for that reason, you'd be extremely careful about whom you might be willing to take on as a partner. You wouldn't want someone who was dishonest or lazy or untrustworthy – someone who might cheat you or ruin the business and its reputation. No, you'd want someone who was just as able and just as motivated as you to see the business succeed. And all of this together is what makes this morning's Gospel reading so utterly astonishing, because in it,

Jesus is telling his disciples that he is making them full partners in his own divine family's business. "You are my friends ... no longer do I call you servants." And while he's at it, he's letting them in on the secret to the success of the family business.

There's a reason for that: an old proverb says that the man who knows *how* will always have a job; but the man who knows *why* will be the boss. (And just as an aside, they say that if you neither know how nor why, the only thing left is to go to seminary and become a preacher. Maybe that's why I've always had to work for someone else. Anyway,) Jesus is telling his disciples – that is, his new business partners – the *why* so that they can be more than just servants. If they know why, they can be their own bosses too. And the why is simple: it's love.

Let me explain: we recognize that the Lord is in charge of all things. He's the ultimate boss. In a sense, every one of us works for him. And he has certain standards of performance for us. We call it the Law of God. The Law tells us what to do and what not to do. It tells us to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. It tells us not to use his name improperly; but rather to call upon it in trouble, and to use it in reverence for prayer and thanksgiving. The Law tells us to honor our parents and other authorities, not to kill, not to sin sexually, not to steal, not to covet, and not to hurt each other's reputations by spreading lies and gossip. These and other moral laws are the standards we are to live up to as servants of God.

Unfortunately for most people – and indeed for us most of the time – there is the tendency to think of these standards that the Lord has set pretty much like we are employees who are working only for a paycheck. We do only what's absolutely required to keep from getting fired, so to speak. We know when and where we have at least to look good. We know where we can take shortcuts, how to avoid getting caught sleeping on the job or goofing off, and where we can get by adhering only to the narrowly defined letter of the law. And we know ways to break the rules and not get caught. Or again, at least we think we do. The truth is we're only fooling ourselves. It's not as if the Lord doesn't know what's going on. It's only his longsuffering mercy that prevents him from firing us like we deserve. And when you get fired by the Lord it's an eternal thing. And the fire is literal.

But the problem is that the motivation for doing well (or rather for doing what is wrongly perceived to be the bare minimum required to get by) is all external. We really don't want to do it. It's like having a job that you hate but that you must do to survive. *Why* never comes into it. We just do what we're told. And we concentrate on the how, mechanically trying to follow the rules and paying scrupulous attention to their letter rather than to their spirit; but our hearts aren't in it. It's only a job. It's not *our* business.

This is what Jesus is changing: our essential relationship both to him and to the Law of God. By calling us friends rather than servants, he making us part owners in his family business. In fact, elsewhere he calls those who listen to his words and adhere to his teachings (that is, his disciples) the members of his own family. And by giving us the why, he's equipping us to be our own bosses. He's giving us the spirit behind the Law. More than that, he's giving us his Holy Spirit so that the spirit of the law, which is love, will come from within us. And those who have the spirit of the Law written on their hearts don't need the letter of the Law to tell them how. They already know. They want to do it. It's the way they are by nature – the new, second, redeemed nature, that is. They show love in all that they think, say, and do because that's what Christ's love and his friendship have equipped them to do. They love because they know it's good for the family and for the family business.

But we had better unpack that a bit more because in modern English we use the word love in a lot of ways, and very rarely do their meanings have anything to do with the kind of love Jesus is talking about in this passage. Usually when one of us says, “I love” this person or that thing, it means “it gratifies me, I enjoy it, I get something pleasurable out of it, it makes me feel good”; something along those lines. The focus is on me and the pleasure, joy, warm or happy feeling that whatever it is gives me. This is exactly opposite of what Jesus means when he uses the word love. He’s speaking of love in the biblical sense – the kind of love that God has for the world. This love is not a feeling or an emotion. It’s a voluntary commitment. It’s a love that focuses not on the self and what I get out of it; but rather on its object. It’s not about me, it’s about you. It’s a love that asks, “What do you need?” “What can I do to serve or to help you?” And it does whatever it is willingly and enthusiastically, and without thinking about the cost or obligation to the self. It’s completely self-sacrificing. This is why Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” If you can benefit in some way by my suffering and by my death, then okay. I give myself up for you.

This, of course, is the kind of love Jesus has for us. And not twelve hours after speaking these words, he was showing the greatest love of all by suffering on the cross for our sins. It was a burden he took on willingly, a commitment he determined to keep, not because it made him feel good (it didn’t – far from it), not because we deserved it somehow (we didn’t), and not because of some reward that lay ahead for him. No, he gave himself up in perfect love to torture, humiliation, and death, the just for the unjust, for the sake of the reward he could earn for us. That’s the love the Father has for the Son. It’s the love the Father and the Son together have for us. And it’s the love that the Holy Spirit is even now working to write on our hearts so that we will be motivated from within to express it for one another. That’s the family business.

And it happens that once in a while that we get what we might think is a spectacular glimpse of this sort of behavior, like when a soldier sacrifices himself for one of his comrades on the battlefield. But too often, we’re mistaken about it. Such episodes tend to be impulsive things, which are not planned or very deliberate. They happen in the heat and confusion of the moment, and often by people who aren’t even Christian. We can call such acts heroic, perhaps; but we can’t call them love – not love in the biblical sense.

No, Christian love is a long term commitment to serve and to sacrifice and to give without counting the cost or hoping for a return or a reward. And usually there’s nothing spectacular about it. Far from it, usually love in action is mundane drudgery, unpleasant tasks repeated over and over again in kindness, humility, and patience. We have a wonderful example of it today, since this is the day we honor our mothers. Think about it: a woman knows from the very start of her pregnancy that she’s in for a lot of discomfort. There’s nausea, morning sickness, back pain, and all the rest of it – and that’s long before the terrible ordeal of labor, which is its own potentially fatal nightmare; as the poet Kipling wrote, “She who faces death by torture for each life beneath her breast ...” And even then it’s far from over. In many ways, it’s just the beginning. There’re the seemingly endless sleepless nights; the countless feedings, diaper changes, and other worries and hassles; there are the cuts and bruises to treat, the coughs, sniffles, and nose that always needs to be wiped; the emergency trips to the doctor. There are temper tantrums to deal with, the relentless torture of the child’s favorite songs, nursery rhymes, and stories repeated over and over again until your brain is numb; and there is the need for constant supervision, because to leave the child unattended for even the briefest period could bring disaster. Of course, as the child gets older and more independent, mom goes from having to worry about keeping constant watch to having to worry about what mischief the child is doing outside of her watch. And do you know what the most amazing thing in all of this is? It’s that many women, who admittedly might not have known everything they were

getting into when they first discovered that they were expecting, they voluntarily do it again; sometimes more than once. Now, that's love.

And please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that any Christian mother's love is anywhere near as perfect or complete as the love Jesus has for us; rather I'm saying that in this fallen world, and humanly speaking, a mother's love gives us a good picture of the kind of love we should all be striving to have for one another: love that is longsuffering and forgiving, love that gives and serves every member of the family. It's what Christ himself has chosen us for. It's what he's called, appointed, and is even now equipping us to do. And to the extent that we are his partners, we want to do it. It's our family business.

And as members of the family, we have access to the family's vast resources. We needn't be paupers in this enterprise, pretending that we haven't been entrusted with the gifts or equipped with the abilities we need to contribute to the success of the business. No, we have Christ's Word. We have his love. We have the power of his Spirit. When we fail, we have his blood-bought forgiveness. And he has given us the credit card, so to speak. He's told us that we can ask the Father in his name for whatever we want that he might give it to us. So let's ask. Let's ask the Father in Jesus' name for the gift of love, that we may be about the family business. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!