



A sermon by The Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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HOLY LABOURS

If you haven't already started watching the television series, *Mad Men*, I highly recommend it. It's one of those stellar shows that prompt me to talk about "quality television" even though almost every time I use that term someone will wonder if there is such a thing. There is.

One of the intriguing aspects of this drama series is that it's set largely in the workplace, in particular a Madison Avenue advertising firm at the dawn of the 1960s. The production values of this show are incredible. The sets, costumes and even the graphics being created for the ads are amazingly detailed re-creations of that era; you see a square yellow plastic telephone on an extension cord and remember that's how phones used to be. Even the acting – and I thank one of our members Joyce Thierry for pointing this out to me – is performed in a style that's slightly wooden, as you might remember from TV shows of that time. But don't let that throw you off because what the characters are *saying* is nothing like old style television.

This series offers complex characters – none of them in any way heroic or stereotypical; relationships between men and women, both at home and, as I said, in the workplace, are major themes of the stories. The men are casually sexist and openly disrespectful of the women, who, at least in the first season, barely notice; the consciousness of these women is not yet awakened, so the overt sexual overtones between bosses and some of the secretaries take us by surprise. The firm's first attempt to woo an airline contract is to figure out what traveling businessmen fantasize about the 'stewardess,' but then they remember that these men have families. The creative department decides the best thing about flying is coming home safely to be met lovingly by your wife and children right on the *tarmac*.

That's one of the deeply engaging aspects of this show; it harkens back to, what I'll call for now, a more innocent time. In one sequence, the characters are shown in various places, but they're all watching Jacquelyn Kennedy lead a televised tour of the newly decorated White House. Everyone smokes without conflict or consequence. But that's just it: we watch it *knowing* the consequences. The end of that illusion of innocence is right around the corner.

The flipside of this 'innocence' is the systemic brutality. The male characters obviously misuse their power; we realize what is being done to the female characters even though they don't. By the end of the first season, one of the apparently most delicate and constrained secretaries becomes the firm's first female copywriter. To do that, she first has to endure some humiliation with bravery and aplomb; this allows the men to remain unaware or uncaring about their effect on women. Her reward is a resentful respect that, this season, continues gradually to build. She's a proto-feminist in transformation who is now going on to flout a number of social norms, but doing so in her oh-so-feminine and proper early 60s manner.

The male characters in the show are not *just* overlords, however. Several are damaged veterans of the Korean or Second World Wars. They too are stuck in the power system that traps them in a different way. The firm is clearly hierarchical; the ad men's drive for success seems also to be for survival, if in different cases for survival from the past, from family expectations or from the constant battle for status in the eyes of other men. The focal character of the story, the firm's creative director, fights emotional demons; it makes him deceptive and spills over into sexual compulsiveness. He performs a surprisingly compassionate act for the new female copywriter by giving her some soul-saving advice, but he has to do it in secret, and she has to keep it so. It's not that they're becoming allies, as that's not yet thinkable; rather, he crossed a usually impassable bridge to do it and they would both lose status if they let others know about it. There's no doubt the power is in male hands here, but there's also no doubt that power alone doesn't save them.

I can think of no other TV dramas in which the workplace is one of the major themes of the story. There are lots of comedies that happen at work; and detective, legal and medical shows take place at work, but the stories aren't centrally about workplace dynamics. They tend to be about the criminal case, the trial, the operation and the characters' relationships apart from or complicating their work. They might sometimes revolve for awhile around a promotion or a new boss, but the actual *work* aspect of these shows is peripheral or even turned into a fantasyland in which, say, doctors can have multiple relationships with nurses, interns or even patients and nothing is done about it. In *Mad Men*, the dramatic tension is significantly about the characters' working relations with each other. That's why it comes to mind on Labour Day weekend.

But another reason I begin today by telling you about a TV show is that I was thinking about how deeply complicated the topic of work or labour truly is. I hope that was reflected by the readings this morning. I found a Mark Twain quotation that Charlotte Perkins Gilman in a way responds to not just from the perspective of a woman, but from

that of anyone who has less choice to turn their play into their work. I might have chosen a class-based response, perhaps from Lane Kirkland, the late president of the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organizations, the AFL-CIO, who said that if hard work were so wonderful, surely the rich would keep it all for themselves. Or a more specifically feminist response from Unitarian minister and social reformer, Anna Garlin Spencer, who observed in 1912 that no book has yet been written that praises a woman who lets her husband and children starve or suffer while she invents marvellous things, or creates great literature or art, or works out new philosophies. I still have heard of no such book.

The topic of work is complicated because our tradition leads us Unitarian Universalists to competing points of view about it. On the one side is the Mark Twain idea that, surely, each of us is meant to find our most basic pleasure in our work precisely because it should issue from our most flowing energy and core nature. Joseph Campbell calls that following one's bliss. We embrace the power of positive thinking and imagine how much of our own destiny lies in the hands, feet and brain that we've each been blessed with. We think of this idea as progressive and spiritual; this room no doubt holds some people who've done just that and very well by it too; I'm certainly on that list. We celebrate such people who follow their hearts in this way. We value, and are largely made up of those who have been called "cultural creatives," the people in our society who step outside of traditional norms, see life differently and *make* it different for ourselves. We read, for example, *Eat, Pray, Love*, about a woman who responds to a life crisis by going away for a year to Italy, India and Indonesia; we see it as inspiring for us – for anyone.

On the other side of our competing views is our long religious history of labelling and engaging with social injustice. We recognize that situations that affect the lives of a large swath of the population make individual responsibility and choice much, much harder. Now I know that some of you here have loved the book I just mentioned, *Eat, Pray, Love*, and that means it must have some meaningful material in it; but I can't help but see it as written for the upper middle class. The rich can take a year off anytime they like; it's no big deal, but the version for the reduced-expectations middle class would have to be called *Nibble, Hope, Fantasize*. A movie like *The Pursuit of Happyness* is capitalist propaganda reinforcing the dream that *anyone* can be homeless and penniless at some point and still end up a billionaire. The movie purports to show that it is hard work that leads to luck and opportunity; does the person who is edged out of getting the one position available that might lead to wealth work any less than the one who gets it? And that's not even considering that it is economically and environmentally unviable for everyone to be rich. We Unitarian Universalists are those who see that

every human being has inherent worth and dignity *and* that every society makes the full expression of that dignity and worth virtually impossible for many.

This is what Charlotte Perkins Gilman is saying. She was a Unitarian writer and lecturer, an expert on the domestic lives of women in the late 19th and first third of the 20th century. What's particularly interesting about her is that the quotations you heard reflect her documented personal experience. To be brief, she suffered severe post-partum depression and wrote about it in the famous short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" which I also highly recommend as a strange and chilling read with a very modern feel to it. She received the latest treatment, a "rest cure"; first she was sent to a facility in which she wasn't allowed to get out of bed or even feed herself. After gradually taking on more activity, she was released home but was ordered "to live a domestic life; to have her child with her at all times; to have no more than 2 hours of intellectual stimulation a day; and to never touch pen, brush or pencil for the rest of her life." Her real cure came when she left her husband and began to write.

Doing that, Perkins Gilman found her "real job" and did it; she advocated for the freedom of women to work outside the home and the responsibility of men to work *inside* it. But we heard today that she did not think only about women, as she wrote that directed, restrained and guarded circumstances create narrow and weakened lives, whether it be for women, the poor, racial minorities or others lacking privilege. No doubt these circumstances become accepted as inevitable reality, and many who live under them stop thinking about alternatives. The circle becomes vicious and those outside observing it become vicious in their condemnation. This is the story of classism, racism and all the ism's.

So what can I say about this complicated and contradictory issue of work? I can say that Mark Twain and Joseph Campbell are right, and so are Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Lane Kirkland and Anna Garlin Spencer. *Eat, Pray, Love* and *The Pursuit of Happiness*, being true stories, are also right. What is not right is that any of them are right on their own. What is wrong is that we attempt to prescribe these single right ideas as the answer for anyone else.

It is wonderful that some people can follow their bliss and make what is play to them into their life's work; it is hurtful to propose that this can be so for anybody and everybody. Life is not a reality show that follows the winner on the path to success; it *is* the reality that all the apparent 'losers' also have paths worth paying attention to and lives worth leading because winning and losing, success and failure is the stuff of life.

Life is not a melodrama either as a simple class-based analysis would make it. Broad generalizations about social groups are useful to a point, but melodrama never allows character development or individual choice; bad characters are always and remain ever bad, as do the good. Those who are rich sometimes act against their self-interest and feel compassion for all of humankind; those who are poor can sometimes navigate a way through the barriers of class, but then become judgmental and dominating in their own success.

Rather life is a drama in which character develops and destiny is influenced by choice, either of which can lead to better or worse. Hard work might lead to success or it might fail utterly. Sometimes we do almost nothing and fortune pours upon us its bounty; sometimes we do all that we can and still the rug is pulled from under us.

What is holy about our labour is the spirit in which we do it and the end that we aim for. We might believe our holy labour is an act of faith; that it is our highest responsibility in life to live each moment in trust that all will become right so that we can inspire similar faith in those we meet. We might call our holy labour service; that our duty as a living being is to make the paths of others simpler so that the prevailing existence of all is gradually improved. We might see the holiness of work as mindfulness; that the point is to bring our full liveliness into every moment of our awareness so that the purpose of this life is fulfilled, and we are connected with every part of the world. In these ways and perhaps in many others, we make work holy by not distinguishing it from all that we do. Rather it is as central a part of our existence as is love, or connection, or breath. In this way it is not that play becomes our work, but that work enters into the play of all of life.

May it be so.