

The Pearl of Our Work

Jeff Haanen

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When I was in elementary school, my mother took my older sister and I to Lake Itasca State Park for summer vacation, located in the cool northern woods of Minnesota. A life-long teacher, she would glory in making the outdoor visit into a lesson: spotting the diving loons in search of breakfast, explaining the history of old-growth red pines towering over the landscape, and proudly declaring that we were looking at the headwaters of the mighty Mississippi River.

My sister and I, however, were more concerned with the number of times we could skip a rock across the glassy surface and the tiny creatures we discovered on the lakeshore. Barefoot, cool breeze in my curly blond hair, I would spend afternoons hunting for tadpoles or grabbing tiny oysters to crack them open, in search of treasure. Though I never did find a pearl in those oysters, the shell's rainbow iridescence, shimmering in the sunlight, hinted at a joy embedded deeply within creation.

Three decades later, with a wife and four daughters of my own – and nearing forty years of age – I now spend more time landscaping behind my [mortgaged house](#), cleaning dishes, and checking email than I do whimsically searching for marine treasures. Yet amidst the ever-present responsibility of directing a [nonprofit](#), paying bills, and supporting family, and I've found that my daily work has become the central arena in which I sense the magic of the Creator's handiwork in my own life.

Like the refracted light of a rainbow, faith shapes the breadth of my human experience, including the one-third of my life I spend working. When I feel the neck-tingling stress of hitting financial goals or the sadness of a co-worker who's lamenting singleness in her forties, I pause to pray. When I discuss future office space needs with my COO and the wild uncertainty of our current cultural moment, I draw on the Christian doctrines Trinity and the incarnation to think through the problem. When I lose motivation to knock out my task list on a long, hot afternoon, I draw fresh inspiration from Christian authors like Dorothy Sayers, who remind me, "We are made in the image of a Maker," and my work is a part of my humanity. When I read a news story that [says](#) "1 in 4 American workers have filed for unemployment benefits during the pandemic," I rework plans for our largest annual event, [Business for the Common Good](#), to reflect God's own concern for the vulnerable (Exodus 3:17). There is simply no extracting faith from my daily work. My working life is spent at the intersection of my human experience. If I was to remove faith from my working life, it would make me not just less Christian, but less human.

Why should we bring our whole self to work – including our faith? Well, for the Christian, there is no other option. The very oldest Christian confession is, "Jesus is Lord," (1 Corinthians 12:3). For the early church, calling Jesus *kurios* ("lord") was a challenge to Caesar's claim to that same title. Both Jesus and Caesar claimed ultimate allegiance, forcing early Christians to make a choice. The early church chose the name *ekklesia tou Theou* ("church of God"), refusing the official protection of "private cults" by the Roman empire, precisely because an *ekklesia* was a *public* assembly to which all people in the empire were summoned to discuss the *public* affairs of the city. The followers of Jesus were making its own self-understanding clear: the church would not be merely a "private religion" but would instead be public assembly by which all humanity is summoned, called by God himself.

Today, our modern notions of a strict divide between public and private, sacred and secular, faith and work trace their ancestry originally to Greek dualism, and more recently to Enlightenment thinking that

places the individual human at the center of the universe. Indeed, the idea that people could be “religious” at some times and “secular” at others is a relatively new notion. (Peter Berger’s [The Sacred Canopy](#) and Charles Taylor’s [A Secular Age](#) are helpful here.) Yet it is that awkward but unspoken expectation of fencing off our deepest convictions that still dominates most government, corporate, and nonprofit entities today. And so, millions of men and women across faith traditions are forced to ask, how am I supposed to be fully human at work, but ignore the very source of my humanity for the majority of my waking hours?

In my own tradition – I am a Presbyterian, drawing from the rich well of historic American Protestantism – there has been much handwringing about this question, especially in the context of a changing culture. Pew [reports](#) that in just the last 30 years, the percentage of U.S. adults who identify as Christians has declined from 87% to 65%, whereas the number of adults who claim to be “religiously unaffiliated” has swelled from 8% to 26%. That’s 30 million more “nones” than just 10 years ago.

As culture has [shifted](#) from a Judeo-Christian social consensus to a secular one in the last 60 years, I lament that the Christian response has largely been around the politicization of faith, the privatization of belief, or the accommodation to culture. In one camp, the culture wars rage on and faith is politicized in a battle for control over the future of America. Others largely retreat from culture, content to either restrict faith to “just my private belief” or live in evangelical subcultures neatly removed from mainstream culture. Yet by far the most common response is Christians accommodating to popular culture, adopting whatever social, cultural, or economic practices are popular in the moment. Each of these play out as Christians try an answer the question: what does faith mean for my work and the world I live in?

At [Denver Institute for Faith & Work](#), the nonprofit I lead, we believe that work is a way to love God, serve our neighbors, and demonstrate the gospel. We believe vocation is first a call to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself,” (Luke 10:27; Matthew 22:37-40). Vocation is our response to God’s voice in all areas of life, including our work.

I think many people, including much of corporate America, see this view and feel concerned that bringing your faith to work will cause conflict between people of divergent beliefs. But in my experience, the opposite has been the case. [Pete Ochs](#) creates Seat King, a company that manufactures car seats inside a medium-security prison and gives prisoners a fair wage, “life lessons,” and a newfound sense of dignity. Young professionals [tackle the challenges of social media](#), innovate new HR [benefits for refugees](#) working in pallet company, and highlight the plight of [undocumented immigrants](#) in local newspaper – all as an expression of their faith. From tech workers advocating for better [family leave policies](#) to investors humbling admitting they have an anger problem and recommitting to [emotional healing](#), faith in the workplace can be a powerful force for good.

Of course, Christians also sin, and as such, “bringing your whole self to work” can also mean bringing greed, lust, pride, envy, prejudice, and laziness to the workplace as well. I myself have been a fine example of each of these vices to my co-workers and family. Yet it’s in moments of being drawn to addiction, self-aggrandizement or brute selfishness that I need God in my own work all the more. Russian novelist and Alexander Solzhenitsyn once wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*, “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart...” I think many of us are tempted to believe that the problem with our world today is “them.” But daily I’m reminded that the greatest problem our world faces beats within my own breast.

Faith@Work Matters (DRAFT | not for circulation)

Two millennia ago, when Jesus was being crowded by throngs of admirers, he hopped in a boat, pushed off from shore, and began to teach. Voice echoing off the water's surface, he told the story of a farmer who found a treasure buried in a field. Wild with excitement, he sold all he had to buy the field, knowing that in the end he was getting an incredible deal. Similarly, he told the story of a merchant in search of pearls. When he found one, overcome with joy he too sold everything he had just to possess that single treasure (Matthew 13:44-45).

When I was a boy, strolling along the shores of Lake Itasca and hunting for oysters, my work was simply to delight in the world around me. Now as an adult, nonprofit leader, husband and father, my work now is to allow that same pearl of God's grace to permeate my daily life. For me, like the headwaters of the Mississippi river, God is the Living Water who has given me new life (John 4:14-16). If everybody worships, as the late David Foster Wallace [claims](#), is it such a strange thing to acknowledge that source of life in our working life?

Why faith at work? Like a merchant finding a pearl, or a child finding a shell, the answer for the Christian is simple: joy.

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