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Three Sermons on
Work and Faith

**Believe, Belong, Become:
*Forming Vital Connections!***

Dr. George Cladis

*The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.
Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

Believe, Belong, Become: *Forming Vital Connections!*

Introduction to the Sermon Series: Across America, the nature and environment of work is radically changing. Gone are the days of a stable nine to five job at the local manufacturing plant or community bank where you stayed your entire career retiring with a company pension. The workplace today is competitive, vibrant, fast-paced, and ever morphing to meet the demands of a dynamic global economy. Stress and anxiety about work has risen precipitously creating a feeling amongst millions of being ungrounded and insecure. How can faith in Jesus as Lord contribute to creating a meaningful yet productive workplace?

This three part sermon series *Believe, Belong, Become: Forming Vital Connections!* is designed to help you, the preacher, create sermons that both encourage and challenge your parishioners to view faith in Jesus as not only essential for their own occupational survival but also critical to bringing the Lord into secular settings that can benefit greatly from the Gospel.

The series is based upon Jesus image of the True Vine in John 15.

Here is the course of our journey in the proclaimed Word:

Sermon 1—Believe! Connect to the Life Giving Vine

Sermon 2—Belong! Connect to the Branches of the Vine

Sermon 3—Become! Connect to the Workplace by Seeding Faith

Sermon 1: Believe! Connect to the Life Giving Vine

Text: John 15:1-17

- 1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.
- 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.
- 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.
- 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.
- 5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.
- 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.
- 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.
- 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.
- 9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
- 10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.
- 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
- 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.
- 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.
- 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.
- 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

brings together as “friends” that we find not only our own wholeness but also the call to reach out and draw others into this holy *circle dance of God* to find their own healing.

Illustration. The New England Dream Center is a faith-based social service agency located in heavily urban downtown Worcester, MA. On Sunday morning, Liberty Churches holds one of its worship services at the dream center. Only three years old, it is now the largest Protestant church in Worcester—and it is one of the most diverse fellowships of Believers on the planet! People of all walks of life gather to worship God. And the common theme: we have found healing and redemption in this place and you can too! It is the fellowship of Believers and their love for one another that forms a healing community. It is one thing to be a lone Christian living the Gospel in the world and another thing to be an ambassador of the Kingdom in the world supported by a fellowship that supports you and forms the healing community for those you draw near!

Conclusion. *Preacher: narrow in on your congregation. After a good pause....*

Are we that kind of healing community? Is this a place where someone you bring to church will feel safe and unjudged as he seeks out God for his life? Does our love and acceptance of one another here create the community necessary for outsiders to come in and feel welcomed and invited to know more about the living Lord?

Sermon 3: Become! **Connect to the Workplace by Seeding Faith**

Text: John 15:1-17

- 1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.
- 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.
- 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.
- 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.
- 5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.
- 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.
- 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.
- 8 This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.
- 9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
- 10 If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.
- 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
- 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.
- 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.
- 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

- 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.
- 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.
- 17 This is my command: Love each other.

Theological Point: One of the primary themes in our Scripture reading is *connection*—for the sake of our third sermon, *connection to Jesus, one another and the world around us (e.g. workplace)*. The Greek verb *meinein* is used throughout this pericope forming a theological category: *remaining* or *abiding* in the Lord and one another. Community is implied in this text both directly and indirectly. Jesus is quite clear in his command to *love one another* in association with the connection we share to the True Vine and one another as fellow branches. The fellowship of the Trinity (*perichoresis*) invites the disciples into divine community who are called to love one another. However, ours is not an insular faith. We are called to *bear fruit*; meaning, to seed the earth with the same sustenance that we draw upon as branches of the True Vine. The love of the divine community is to brim and spill out into all the earth—it cannot be contained in our fellowship alone. And what better place to *seed with faith* than the place where we spend so much of our time: the workplace. Relationships are the medium for faith to germinate, grow and spread and the workplace is where we build many relationships for a variety of reasons.

Believe, Belong, Become forms a journey of spiritual growth and development from young shoot off the vine to a fully mature, fruit bearing branch!

Hermeneutical Connection: Faith can be exported to the work place best when it is first *believed* by the Believer (sermon one) and *sustained in community* (sermon two). Relationships are the key to spreading faith in Jesus—giving witness to what Jesus can do to restore and rejuvenate a life! At work, we are able to *bear fruit*, exhibiting the love of Christ and being sensitive to opportunities to share the Word. Backed by a community of Believers, we are able to invite others to experience the Lord in worship and be drawn toward the throne of Life.

Introduction: The preacher may want to re-introduce the sermon series here or before the reading of Scripture. These three sermons on work and faith hinge on each other: first, the Believer's connection to Jesus, the True Vine; second, the Believer's connection to the church or other branches as a source of encouragement and support; third, the Believer's connection to work as a place for *seeding* or bearing fruit. All of the sermons include references to the workplace which forms a common hermeneutical theme.

Illustration: Noted author and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner is from the state of Vermont where rugged New Englanders tend to keep faith a very private matter. Buechner was invited to speak at Wheaton College in Illinois—a markedly evangelical college. He was amazed to observe two Wheaton students in the college cafeteria talking about God. One asked the other how he was doing with God. Telling this story to an interviewer, Buechner remarked, “If anybody raised that question in Vermont, the ceiling would fall. Such words could not be uttered there, so I found it wonderfully refreshing at Wheaton. I live in a world where even religious people don't talk to you that way” (*Christian Century* 9/11/02).

Buechner found it delightfully refreshing to be in an environment where one's relationship to God is relevant to every aspect of our lives—and can even be openly talked about! Jesus calls us to bear fruit in the world around us and what better place to do so than the workplace where we spend so much of our lives. Let's look at ways we do that!

A. We Bear Fruit When We Engage

Jesus calls us into fellowship with Him, the True Vine. He is the source of our sustenance and Life. He says we are to “abide in him”; meaning, make our house there or lodge within Him. We are invited into a sacred community.

Jesus then calls us to a special connection with those who are also branches on this True Vine. We are invited into a community with God and other Believers. We are connected by the Life Giver, made whole by His love and care, and commanded now to “Love One Another.”

One of the great purposes for these connections, the text tells us, is *to bear fruit*. We bear fruit when we engage with world around us with the Life of Jesus. What better place to do this than in our homes and workplaces?

At the work place, Jesus enables us to engage with others and build relationships. These relationships do not have to be explicitly religious. In fact, in the beginning especially, they will not be. Rather, Jesus equips us to engage with others and create relationships that can bear fruit over time.

Business manuals and contemporary leadership books stress more and more the necessity to build good relationships in business in order to develop trust: the collateral of good business. So, developing good relationships at work serves many purposes: both personal and professional. It just makes sense to get to know the people you depend on at work!

Illustration. Mike Adams is a good example of a business man who makes good relationships! An executive with Peppers Catering of Northborough, MA, Mike is one of those guys who sincerely wants to know the community. He seems at ease talking about sports or politics and then shifting to issues of faith and church. He is a network guy and a model to me of a person who is makes relationships normally and naturally that not only benefit his business but also extends his faith. There seems, for him, a seamless connection between them.

B. We Bear Fruit When We Love and Care

Another way we bear fruit in the workplace is by seeding the love and care of Jesus to those around us. As we build relationships, there will appear natural opportunities to exhibit the concern of Jesus in ways that go beyond what people normally do. Demonstrating such care builds the relationships to a deeper level that can invite conversations about the Lord and invitations to church or life groups (small group gatherings).

Illustration. I was visiting a member of my congregation as his pastor when another man bounded in the doorway. He was a co-worker from the patient’s company. They were on the same work team. I was impressed with the co-worker’s effort to come to the hospital to visit his friend. Not realizing who I was, the fellow employee offered to say a prayer and prayed a beautiful prayer asking God to be present to this man in his pain and healing. I marveled at the visitor’s natural courage to come to the hospital and pray for his co-worker. His visit was not preachy or staged—just a friend coming to express his concern and offer a brief prayer for healing.

Mike Waters wrote, “Our Lord and Savior set a superlative example of serving others during his brief three-year ministry... A study of the life of Christ will reveal a character unconcerned with the serving of self. Jesus took advantage of every opportunity to instill this same trait in his disciples Christ wanted his disciples to understand that they must learn to think little of serving self and much of serving others” (*Spreading the Word*, Vol. 3, No. 8, March/April 1991).

C. We Bear Fruit When We Show Hospitality

There is another way we open our lives up to others as a way of seeding faith and that is through *hospitality*.

We have noted throughout this sermon series the frequent use of the verb *to remain in* or *to abide in* throughout our biblical text. The Greek word used here has a sense of *lodging* with Christ and one another: making our home in the Lord and in the divine community of God and the Church.

Seeding the world with faith means then to be *hospitable* and *invitational*: inviting others into the place of lodging with Jesus—abiding with Him and with His people.

Brother Daniel Homan in his book, *Radical Hospitality* says: “Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it. It is not a mere social grace; it is a spiritual and ethical issue. It is an issue involving what it means to be human. All of our talk about hospitable openness doesn’t mean anything as long as some people continue to be tossed aside.”

Arthur Sutherland states, “Hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls.”

We practice the Word of God when we extend the hospitality of Jesus to our friends and others at work. This is a wonderful way bear fruit and seed the faith.

And hospitality is not just an invitation to a BBQ at your home, as important as that can be. It is a lifestyle!

Adam J. Copeland wrote, “True Christian hospitality doesn’t stop at our house or care home, nor does it extend only to our church building. Holy hospitality encompasses all one’s life: hospitable driving, hospitable office work, hospitality toward strangers, hospitality towards those silly neighbors you’ve known for years, hospitality towards creation in all its form, hospitality towards all those for whom Christ died—all the world.” (<http://adamjcopeland.com/2008/06/29/sermon-holy-hospitality-matt-10-deut-10/>).

We offer the hospitality of Jesus many ways: taking a meal to a home where you know there is difficulty, offering to take someone to the airport or helping someone move. In these ways, we go beyond normal expectations of work relationships to demonstrating the love of Jesus in real ways that earn us, over time, the right to venture into faith conversations and invitations to church.

Conclusion. *Preacher: narrow in on your congregation. After a good pause....*
First, I need your help.

Please join me in making this place a sanctuary of holy hospitality! A place where anyone can walk through these doors and be drawn into *lodging* with Christ. Will you do that with me?

And lastly, let us all examine our lives. At work, in our homes, when we drive—in all our spheres of life, do we extend this holy hospitality, this sacred Lodge, to those around us? Are we truly extending the Life of Christ, the True Vine, out there, in our broken world, and seeding it with the restorative, redeeming Presence of our Lord?

These sermons are by Dr. George Cladis. He is Executive Pastor of Liberty Churches in the western suburbs of Boston. He also serves as the Chief Operating Officer of the New England Dream Center, a faith-based social service agency created by Liberty Churches in Worcester, Massachusetts. Cladis authored *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), and he is adjunct Assistant Professor in the Fuller Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry program teaching church leadership and team-based management. George and his wife Martie live in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, with their rescue dog, Emily.

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