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Three Sermons on
Work and Faith

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

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*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.

Sermon 2: Belong! Connect to the Branches of the 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.
- 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 second sermon, *connection to Jesus and one another*. 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. We are also friends of the Master (v. 14) which makes us friends also of one another. There is also an interesting Trinitarian feel to this text: Jesus the True Vine, the Father as the Vinedresser and the Spirit who is a Counselor and gives witness to the Son (15:26). Though the Spirit is not directly a part of the vine analogy, it is of interest that the Spirit is mentioned in close connection to this passage—as part of the whole narrative—and gives the impression of the social community of the Trinity. The fellowship of the Trinity (*perichoresis*) invites the disciples into divine community who are called to love one another.

Hermeneutical Connection: Faith cannot be exported to the work place unless it is first *believed* by the Believer (sermon one) and sustained in community (sermon two). We become fruit producing when first we are connected to the True Vine and draw sustenance from Him. Our fruit production is supported by the branches around us. Furthermore, the Community of Believers becomes a place where we can bring those in search of the Lord since to find God is also to find the people of God.

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: In this day and age it seems inconceivable that a store would not be open seven days a week to garner more business. Chik-fil-A, a fast food chain specializing in chicken meals, with over 1,300 stores in 37 states, is not open on Sunday. Its founder, Truett Cathy, a devout Southern Baptist, commented, *our decision to close on Sunday was our way of honoring God and directing our attention to things more important than our business. If it took seven days to make a living with a restaurant, then we needed to be in some other line of work. Through the years, I have never wavered from that position.* While others claim that a restaurant doesn't need a Sabbath, its employees do—meaning “day off”—one cannot but respect Mr. Cathy's commitment to living out his faith in the workplace. For him, they are not separate.

But for many and perhaps even most, faith is relegated to the confines of private life. The “messiness” of business is thought of as removed from the stained glass purity of church. Tertullian remarked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” meaning, how is reason and faith related? We might ask, “What has Wall Street to do with Jerusalem?” How are work and faith related? Do they really mix? [Here the preacher can wax on addressing this very real tension between what goes on in worship and the realities of the work place].

A. The Creation of the Jesus Fellowship

To sum our first sermon: our Scripture reading exhibits the intimacy of Jesus with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. Faith is not simply a philosophical system, a rational dogma or the result of childhood instruction; rather, faith here is described as a *connection* to the True Vine—it is an *abiding in* and *remaining in* Jesus, the Lord. Faith is about a continuous intimate connection to the Lord.

But faith is also about a connection to one another. Jesus appears to be radically re-interpreting Old Testament imagery of vineyard as a symbol of God's covenant community of Israel. Occasionally the symbol is one of fruitfulness (Isa. 27:2-6); more often the vineyard is unproductive or desolate and disappointing to Yahweh (Jer. 12:10-11). See also the “Song of the Vineyard” (Isa 5:1f). One could also mention the giant golden vines and grapes representing Israel that adorned the Jerusalem Temple at the time of Jesus.

Jesus is doing and saying something new with the vine imagery. The vine is not Israel, it is Jesus himself (similar to Body of Christ); however, the branches of this vine are also the community of Jesus followers who are intimately connected to Jesus and are commanded to love one another. Jesus appears to be creating a New Israel—a new vine(yard) of the Lord—as those who believe in Him and abide in Him. We need not interpret this as over and against Judaism, since they were all Jews, but rather as a fulfillment of the earlier promises of God.

So, we are called to *abide in Jesus* but also to live out the connection we have *with each other* in the Community of Jesus under the command to love one another.

Illustration.

I was involved in a Christian fellowship called Body Life when I was in high school. Body Life was held at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, CA and led by Ray Stedman who ended up writing a book by the same title. As a kid, I was intrigued by the fact there were people worshipping at Body Life that were bikers and also people in suits and ties; people like me who were teenagers and some in the twilight of their years; people who looked like they stepped out of a *Mayberry RFD* episode and those that looked like they slept on the street curb that night. What brought us all there together? Our desire to know more about Jesus of

Nazareth and to worship the living Lord! It was a church that seemed to be a lot like Toby Keith's song *I Love that Bar and Grill*:

*We got cowboys, we got truckers
Broken-hearted fools and suckers
And we got hustlers, we got fighters
Early birds and all-nighters
And the veterans talk about their battle scars*

Only what brought us together wasn't a bar and grill—it was the question of who is Jesus Christ and is he relevant for today?

B. The Importance of the Jesus Fellowship

Jesus calls us beyond simply a personal relationship to the Almighty to now a relationship with fellow disciples. His command is for us to love one another. This is a difficult thing!

[Here, the preacher can provide some humor about how church folk get in conflict and break up to form other churches. For example, the joke about a plane crash on a deserted island: the Presbyterians (substitute the denomination names as you desire) formed a church on the island, then the Methodist formed theirs. The Baptists started out with a First Baptist Church but it didn't last two weeks before it split and formed another church: Second Baptist Church.] Church folks have historically had a difficult time getting along! And yet, our Master calls us to regard one another as fellow offshoots of the same True Vine who is what holds us together. He calls us to love one another.

Illustration: I heard a story about a church in California during the long-haired hippie days. A young fellow walked into a tidy suburban church looking pretty ragged! He wore torn blue jeans, an old shirt, sandals, beads and his hair was well beyond his shoulders. The young man walked down the center aisle to the front and sat down on the floor. The congregation seemed to let out a quiet gasp as they noticed the head usher—a retired military colonel known for his dislike of hippies—following him down the aisle. The congregation seemed to brace itself for a confrontation when, to their surprise, the usher sat down next to the hippie and worshipped there with him.

Church can be a place of petty conflict—or of radical grace and acceptance! We must learn to practice here, in this place, that same love and grace we are called to live *out there* in the marketplace! [The preacher will want to challenge the congregation well on this point—how can we love outside the church if we cannot love within it?].

C. How the Jesus Fellowship Relates to the Workplace

Now, how does all this relate to the workplace?

In my first sermon of this series, I told a story about a small group Bible study where a man was asking for guidance from Scripture and his fellow Believers regarding an employee he was about to fire. One of his fellow group members exclaimed that he could not bring Christianity and business together! But it seems to me that this is precisely where our faith must make sense: outside the stained glass sanctuaries and in those places where we agonize over relationships! But we need each other to support our efforts to reach out with the Gospel. The support and encouragement of the Family of God provides the foundation for taking the Word into the world!

We agonize over relationships at home and at the workplace. Alone, we do not have the spiritual resources to know what to do. The Lord gives us each other, not only as an arena for love but as a support to venture out with the love of Jesus. We invite others to a relationship with the Lord and also into a relationship with the Lord's people. It is in this divine community formed by the Father, Son and Spirit and those the Lord

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**

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