

Many weekday mornings when I wake Maya up, she asks me do I have to go to school today? And I say yes today is a school day, and usually she throws her head back tenses up her body and says NOOOO I don't want to go to school today, I want to stay home with you. Why can't I stay home! And so then I go through the whole things about how Saige and her go to school to learn, and daddy and I go to work. Why do you have to work every day mommy? I also get this question from Saige when she gets home from school at 2:30, why do you still have to work and can't just play with me?

Sometimes I talk about how we work to make money, so that we can have money to pay for our house, and our car, and the food we eat. And sometimes we talk about how Daddy helps people get clean water in their house. As you all know, our house is often a revolving door of different kids, and one of Quandre's little siblings, said to me, I want to be a preacher when I grow up so I can have a nice house like this.

I can remember when Andrew and I were newly married and I was having lots of stress at work and would get super upset by things there. And I asked him, how do you seem to not let stuff at work bother you so much. And we realized in these conversations together that we approached work slightly differently. He was like well work for me is what I do to be able to live and play later. I don't think about work as fun or not. Where I was coming from the vantage point that I want work to be enjoyable and/or meaningful. And I also acknowledge there is some privilege underneath that viewpoint.

I've been a part time youth director, part time preschool teacher, I was the city pool manager for the summer, I've worked at an aerial park as a zipline guide, and at a summer camp. I've worked as a pastor, and on staff at a nonprofit. I've been a therapeutic foster parent, and a stay at home mom.

Do you approach work primarily as a way to make a living? Or as something you enjoy? Or perhaps

something that serves the great good of community? Or maybe if you are lucky several of these apply to the same job...

Sometimes job opportunities are passed down through the family, sometimes we sort of stumble into job opportunities, and sometimes we seek out and study for many years for a certain career.

Sometimes we see our particular job or career as a calling. Sometimes jobs are for a season, and sometimes they are the ones we have for our whole working years.

I also know that for some work is a source of significant stress currently, you've been laid off, or face the threat of layoff, and finding a job that supports you and your family isn't always easy.

So what is the point of work?

At one level, we work to make money—which is how we make a living. We need food, a place to live, and hopefully some traveling and fun thrown in there also.

But none of us makes a living alone.

The food we eat depends on someone growing it, someone harvesting it, someone transporting it, someone stocking the shelves. We depend on people building homes, teaching children, providing care, and making sure clean water comes out of the faucet. We need people to pick up the trash, and to take care of our roads. We need people to run hospitals, and police stations.

Our lives are held up by other people's work. And our work, paid or unpaid, becomes part of what holds up someone else's life. That whole web also depends on the earth—on water, soil, energy, and all the resources that make our lives possible.

Y'all get the picture....

Because another core purpose of “work” is that it is what sustains our communities/ our shared life together.

And some of the work that most sustains our lives doesn't come with a paycheck at all. Raising children. Caring for an aging parent. Making a meal for someone who is sick.

Now when we talk about the economy, we are talking about how we organize these relationships and resources.

Who does what work? Who receives its benefits? Who has what they need?

If we work to sustain our lives, then it makes sense to ask whether the way we organize that work is helping sustain life for everyone.

As we continue our Showing Up series, today we are looking at the sphere of business and the economy. What does our Christian faith have to say about how we show up as employees, employers, business owners, board members, and customers? And what does it have to say about the purpose of business itself?

At one point in my life, I thought the connection between faith and work was mostly about whether you worked for a church or a ministry. The other alternative was, if you worked somewhere else, faith meant being kind to your coworker and maybe telling someone about Jesus or inviting them to church.

Those can all be expressions of faith. But I've come to believe that our faith has something to say about the work itself. About what a business is for. About how people are treated and paid. About what we make, what we sell, and what our decisions ask of the earth.

Because scripture is deeply concerned with how we organize our life together. Who gets to rest? Who has enough to eat? Who benefits from someone else's labor? What happens to the land?

I think our faith gives us a purpose to keep front and center: sustaining people, communities, and the earth.

We can see the beginnings of that purpose in Genesis, the human is placed in a garden to cultivate it and care for it. There is work to do, and that work participates in sustaining life. And before human beings accomplish anything, they bear the image of God. Their dignity comes before their productivity.¹

Hold those two things together: our work can contribute to the life around us, and our worth does not depend on how much we produce.

But scripture also tells stories about what happens when people organize work in ways that disregard that dignity.

In Exodus, Pharaoh demands that the enslaved Israelites keep making the same number of bricks, while refusing to provide the straw they need. They must find that themselves. When they protest, he calls them lazy. The demand stays fixed, and the workers bear the cost.²

Pharaoh can count the bricks. But the suffering of the people making them does not change what he demands.

And that raises a question we can bring to our own economic life: when we measure success, are we accounting for what it costs people?

A business can meet its goals while the people doing the work become exhausted. A product can be profitable while its production pollutes the water a community depends on. We have to ask what our measures of success include—and what they leave out.

Now, keep Pharaoh's demands in mind as we turn to Sabbath.

¹ Genesis 1:26–27; 2:15. The connection between these passages and the purpose of work is the sermon's theological interpretation.

² Exodus 5:4–18. The comparison with contemporary workplaces is an application of the passage, not an equation of all employment with slavery.

The North Carolina Council of Churches' Faithful Voter Guide describes Sabbath as "an economic practice as much as a spiritual one." That connection is easy to miss if we think of Sabbath only as going to church or taking some personal downtime.

The Sabbath commands made room for workers and animals to rest. In Deuteronomy, the command specifically remembers Israel's experience of slavery in Egypt. The people who had lived under Pharaoh's demands were to organize their shared life so that others could rest, too.

Rest was something they had a responsibility to make possible for one another.

These are parts of the biblical vision we don't hear the biblical literalists, or others really, bring into conversations about work and business. But scripture does have something to say about the purpose of our economic life.

They place limits on work and accumulation. Weekly Sabbath provided rest for workers and animals. Other commands provided rest for the land and the remission of debts in the seventh year. Jubilee called for the return of ancestral land and the release of Israelites who had entered servitude because of poverty.

These practices point toward an economy in which people have opportunities to recover, return, and begin again. The need for rest and renewal reaches all the way from the worker to the soil.

So when we ask what our faith has to do with business, we have to include these questions: Does the way we organize our work allow people to live well? Does it make room for care and rest? Does it protect the earth's ability to sustain life?

Showing up in business means keeping that purpose in view.

And then we come to this widow in Mark's Gospel.

Many of us have heard her story as a lesson about generosity. Jesus notices that her small offering represents an enormous sacrifice. But immediately before this, he warns about scribes who “devour widows’ houses.” Then we meet a widow putting everything she has into the treasury.³

I don’t think we can leave that warning behind when we read her story.

Her trust may be real and admirable. And we can still ask hard questions about the institution receiving her last coins. Who is caring for her? What will she live on now?

Her generosity should not become an excuse for failing to care for her.

What happens when we read this story and ask only, “Am I giving as much as the widow?” What might we hear if we also ask, “What responsibility do we have toward her?”

That question belongs in the church. We have to ask it about our own budgets, expectations, and practices.

Whose sacrifices do we depend on? Are we attentive to what those sacrifices cost them?

And that question belongs in the sphere of business, too.

We can admire an employee’s dedication and still ask whether their workload is sustainable. We can appreciate someone taking an extra shift and still ask whether their wages are enough to live on. We can celebrate a business’s growth and still ask what that growth is costing the surrounding community.

Love asks whether our institutions help people flourish—or require vulnerable people to sacrifice so the institution can flourish.

So what might this mean in the places where we show up this week?

³ Mark 12:38–44, NRSVUE. The quoted phrase appears in verse 40. Reading the widow’s offering alongside the preceding condemnation supports the institutional critique developed here; this is an interpretive reading rather than an explicit statement of the widow’s motives.

We have different amounts of influence. Some of us decide what people get paid. Some approve budgets or set schedules. Some of us have very little say over any of those things, and speaking up can come at a real cost.

There are limits to what we can keep asking of bodies and soil. Our economic life has to make room for renewal. Businesses need income. People need paychecks. The question of purpose helps us decide what we do with the resources and responsibility we have.

So I invite us to think about this in 3 ways:

Notice, Ask and Act

Notice who sustains the work- and what it costs them.

Ask questions that bring the purpose back into view: How will this affect the people doing the work? What will it mean for our community? What does it ask of the earth?

Act where you have influence, and join with others where change requires more power.

I can't remember who shared this story with me. But it was about the one and only Sue Shoemaker. Who is such a remarkable human being. But she was in line at CVS I think it was, but maybe another business. And someone was complaining about the line and how slow it was moving and being critical of the person at the cash register moving so slow. So Sue pulls out her phone and pulls up how much the CEO of the company makes and then the average pay of the employees. And then gently says you know I'm curious what it'd be like to work in an organization like this where the gap in pay is this much and yet they don't staff it with more people.

"Our work is to help life flourish." To measure economic success not only by profit, but by the well-being of people, communities, and the earth itself.

Showing up in business means keeping the purpose in view: sustaining people, communities, and the earth.

And What happens when making a living comes at the expense of life?

_____Discussion

NC has been ranked the best state for businesses, and yet they were ranked dead last for workers. So what does it mean to us that the best state for business is the worst state for workers?⁴

North Carolina was the only state in 2023-2024 to experience a statistically significant increase in income inequality. The richest 5% earn 29 times the income of the poorest 20%. Where do you see this gap in your own community, and where does your congregation stand in relation to it?

⁴ <https://www.justeconomicswnc.org/north-carolina-top-state-for-business-worst-state-for-workers/>