

Lent 2021

Ministry in Daily Life

As a retiree, I had to think about how I would define my “life’s work” for purposes of this reflection. For over thirty years I worked as an attorney first with the Bureau of the Public Debt and then at the Main Treasury General Counsel’s Office. Yet both before that and after that, I was a student. And much of my work as a lawyer was like that of a student. Here is my attempt to describe how my faith has informed my work as a government lawyer and student.

Jesus demonstrated that he had studied the Hebrew Scriptures when he responded to a Pharisee/lawyer with the following familiar words:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Matt. 22:36-40.

This passage seems to encapsulate the essence of how we go about our various callings—loving and serving the neighbor--a command that is secondary only to loving God. A similar exchange appears in Mark and Luke, but I chose this passage in Matthew because of the last sentence, which is unique to Matthew: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” It appeals to my sense of organization and helps put the focus on the important things.

As mentioned above, a lot of my work as a government lawyer was like that of a student—researching, analyzing issues, writing memos. What I enjoyed most was searching for the overarching principles at work, weighing what was most critical, and trying to bring some order to the issue. In short: trying to determine on what everything “hangs.” A lot of my work as a student also had to do with trying to figure out on what things “hang.”

Looking back at my life’s work, I can see evidence of God’s hand. Growing up, I never considered becoming a lawyer. Just out of college, I took a job as an entry-level securities transactions analyst at the Bureau of the Public Debt. It was only after seeing the work the legal staff did at that agency that I considered that I might be able to do that work, too. Over the years I realized that I had stumbled into a job that was, surprisingly, remarkably well suited to my strengths and disposition. For that reason, I considered it my calling.

In similar fashion, after having been drawn to spend some of my vacations at (what was then called) the Lay School of Theology at Gettysburg Seminary, I knew that I wanted to pursue some further kind of theological education after retirement. I started out with courses in the Certificate of Theological Studies program at Gettysburg, and then that led to enrolling in the M.A. program at Virginia Theological Seminary. I did not have a specific vocational goal, which makes it difficult to explain why I spent all that time, effort and money getting another degree. Yet it was an extremely meaningful spiritual as well as academic experience, and I think more so because I undertook it at an advanced age. But I did not set out with a grand plan. None of this was

planned; I believe the Holy Spirit must have had a guiding hand. So, to anyone else reading this who does not have a grand plan, either: perhaps that is fine.

What did my work as a government lawyer have to do with loving the neighbor? “Love” here is extravagant, self-sacrificing, agape love (see the parable of the Good Samaritan!). What about those of us whose work is part of an organization? Lawyers in the government are basically just specialized civil servants. In short, I hope I was able to be of service. Some of my best associations and joys were working alongside clients to help them successfully complete their regulatory or other projects. Of course, the reality is that the lawyers are also charged with pointing out the limitations of legal authority, which is not a popular message, but in my career, I found that most clients understood that this was also a way the lawyers were being of service to the agency (and by extension, to the people of this country).

What about my work as a real student? Initially, I thought that the work of a student does not have much to do with loving the neighbor because so much of it is solitary and inner-focused. Yet there is a communal aspect to the life of a student. In my seminary courses, one of my most rewarding experiences was being in a study group one year with international students and other students outside the mainstream. Also, obviously, education may be preparation for work that may ultimately serve the neighbor in the future. Although I did not plan to use my seminary education to secure paid employment, that education did turn out to be helpful preparation for leading some Bible studies at RELC, and I hope that that education has in some intangible ways informed how I undertake my various volunteer jobs in our congregation.

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