

## Finding Ourselves in Work

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” -- Genesis 2:15

PowerPoint presentation of Washington Courthouse riot of 1894.

I tell you this story – this sad piece of Ohio's history – because it makes an important point about work. Work isn't simply what we do to earn a living; work is, to a very great extent, who we are. Work defines us and gives us a large part of our identity. When we ask children, for example, what they want to be when they grow up, a few of the little girls will say they want to be a mommy, virtually none of the little boys will say they want to be a daddy, and the vast majority of them will say nurse or doctor or firefighter or teacher or police officer or hockey player. Not many say tax accountant or claims adjuster, but that's only because not many of those appear in our television dramas or sitcoms. The answer to the question of what we want to be when we grow up is deeply embedded in our jobs, and so the “what” we want to be turns out to be the “who” we want to be, even if we don't know that as children.

It's a cliché of the old TV westerns that when the grateful hotel keeper or farm wife out in the wild, wild west expresses her effusive thanks to the strong, silent lawman who's just rescued her and her family or her whole town from the depredations of the outlaws, the marshal or cowboy high up in the saddle just touches the brim of his Stetson and says with self-effacing modesty, “Just doin' my job, ma'am, just doin' my job.”

And I suspect that if we were able to ask Judge H. B. Maynard or Sheriff Cook of Lafayette County what they thought they were doing in protecting Jasper Dolby from a lynch mob, they'd probably reply with some version of “Just doin' my job, ma'am, just doin' my job.”

But as I listened to Evelyn Pentzer, the county clerk, tell me this story in her office a few weeks ago, I thought that the actions of Judge Maynard, Sheriff Cook, Governor McKinley, and Colonel Coit were rather more than those of elected officials simply doing their jobs. They were upholding civilization as we know it. They were keeping the fabric of our society – and every free society – together by upholding the rule of law. And they were doing so for the explicit purpose of protecting a vulnerable criminal from the ravages of the mob representatives of the outraged majority. That's one of the primary purposes of the rule of law – to protect the guilty from arbitrary violence – and those who swore an oath to uphold the law were determined to do so even if it meant shedding the blood of those intent on vengeance. Those men believed that the law of the land applies to everyone who lives on that land, all the time, no exceptions, however unpopular the consistent application of the law may sometimes be. In simply doing their jobs, those nineteenth-century officers of the county and the state put themselves on the right side of history, and spared the reputation of our state one more lynching.

In contrast to those county officials, who protected the rights and person of Jasper Dolby, consider the case of another county official of our day, who has positioned herself firmly on the wrong side of history ostensibly for reasons of conscience.

Kim Davis, clerk of Kentucky's Rowan County, vowed she would go to jail before she would issue, or allow to be issued by her deputies, a marriage license to a same-sex couple. And she did. The law of the land had changed, and Kim Davis, who had sworn to uphold the law under which she serves, refused to honor that change. The change created by the Supreme Court's decision of June 26, 2015, in *Obergefell v. Hodges* was for the same purpose as the change in the law ushered in by the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1868, namely, the extension of rights to the minority that were already enjoyed by the majority. The law of this land, in all those places where the straight majority had denied their right to civil marriage to the gay minority, was changed, largely because those laws had not kept up with history. Attitudes toward same-sex marriage had change dramatically in just a few years, and by 2015, the majority of Americans favored marriage for all consenting adults, and the laws prohibiting those marriages were out of step with history. The Supreme Court's decision was an attempt to bring the law and history into closer alignment, and Kim Davis, on the basis of her version of Christianity, disagreed with the Court's decision. She was, of course, disagreeing not just with the Supreme Court, but also with the arc of history and the long arc of the moral universe, which, as Martin Luther King said, bends toward justice.

In doing our jobs, we sometimes break through the crust of the day-to-day and that vast vista that we call history opens before us, where our actions remind all of us, for better and for worse, what matters most in human society and human history. By making herself the latest media starlet for conservative evangelical Christianity, Kim Davis is carrying on the culture wars that have alienated so many young people not just from her brand of Christianity but from Christianity itself – indeed, from religion in general.

You and I might think it impolite to drag a person's private life into a discussion of his or her public duties, but marriage isn't private, and there's no way to tell a person the age of, say, Emily Dugovics or Danielle Juarez or Michael March or Allyson Bacon or David Nedrow that a person on her fourth marriage has the right to defend the sanctity of heterosexual marriage without being charged with hypocrisy. And when that person makes a display of her Christian faith with the cameras rolling, that faith and hypocrisy become linked in the minds of the young people who tell it like they see it, and they say they want to have nothing to do with a religion that's so narrow-minded, bigoted, and hypocritical. Is it any wonder that the largest age group in the religious Nones that the Pew survey identified a few years ago is under 35?

The passage from Genesis we read earlier in the service says that we humans were put here for a reason. We were put here to work, to till and keep God's garden. Our English translations say "till," but the Hebrew actually says "serve" -- humans were created to serve and preserve God's garden. And when, as the story goes on to say after our reading, we were thrown out of that garden, our mandate didn't change: our purpose on earth is still to serve and preserve God's garden in all its manifestations, thistles and all. We weren't put here to love God, believe in Jesus, or memorize the Apostles' Creed. We were put here to serve and preserve God's garden, which is all of creation – it all belongs to God. That, for believers, is our line of work.

You don't have to be a farmer to serve the earth, because there's a lot of earth to serve, and it comes packaged in a myriad of ways. Jasper Dolby was part of God's creation, and the officials who saved him from a noose were serving God's earth no less than if they'd been planting peach trees. To protect the vulnerable from the powerful, the individual from the mob, the unpopular from the generally accepted – all of that is service to planet earth. We tend God's garden, as our sermon hymn puts it, with seeds of

hope, fields of justice, and by watching for mercy to grow.

We find ourselves where we make that our life's work. We Christians often reduce the work of tending God's garden to a narrow, parochial piety, but such reductionism does our faith no credit. There are many ways to do justice, many ways to love kindness, and many ways to walk humbly with our God, as the prophet Micah urged us to do so many centuries ago. The life of faith isn't one interminable prayer meeting or Bible study; it's throwing ourselves – with all our minds, souls, and strength – into the struggle for justice and peace. You may not find someone who'll pay you to do that, but you will never find work more valuable to do.

Let me close by returning to one of the courthouses I visited recently. I don't recall where I saw this quote by Winston Churchill, but I was struck that some public official cared enough about the public to put these words in a frame and put them on the wall where the public could see them.

“We make a living by what we get,” Churchill said, “but we make a life by what we give.” What a lesson in civics, and I wish I'd learned that in junior high civics class, but I didn't. I learned it as a middle-aged nerd crawling through Ohio's courthouses. But you know what they say: Better late than never.