

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from July 19, 2009

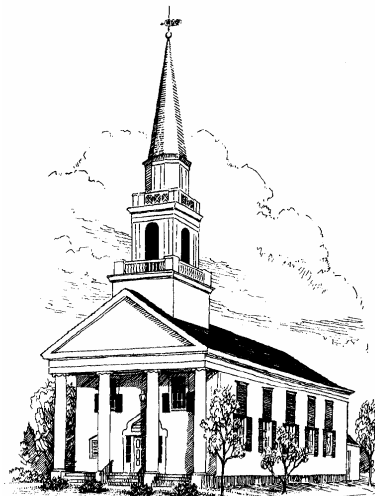
### **“Work as Worship”**

Jacquelyn Phillips

Scriptures:

Proverbs 22:16-29

Matthew 25:31-46



**W**hat is your definition of worship? How many times a day, or a week, do you worship? Can you worship while sitting at a desk or making phone calls? Well, today, I'd like to talk about a new way to worship. In reality this form of worship is not new; you've probably been doing it for years and just haven't realized it. It's called "work as worship."

Last summer I shared with you stories of my travels to India and Peru where I was able to experience God at work in a number of different settings. It was in those communities that I learned about work as worship. As you may recall, I spent a month in India with a Hindu monastery called the Ramakrishna Mission. More than a site for training monks, the Mission runs a hospital, mobile health clinic, and health education program. For the Ramakrishna monks, service to the community is a central tenet of faith.

In traditional Hinduism, extreme ascetic study and isolation were revered as highly spiritual. In his older years after his children were grown, a Hindu man was to leave all personal and material connections to become a wandering *sannyasin* or holy man. It was believed that a *sannyasin*'s separation from society would allow for a stronger focus on the spiritual.

Sri Ramakrishna, the man now respected as a saint by his followers and the inspiration for the Ramakrishna Mission, disagreed with this lifestyle. While traveling as a monk, he was troubled by the intolerable conditions of the villages and exasperated by the sharp contrast between rich and poor. He grew frustrated as he watched the wandering monks teaching religion but not noticing the struggle of the people they visited. He argued that "if religion cannot help man wherever he may be, wherever he stands, it is not of much use; it will remain only a theory for the chosen few."

Refusing to continue living as a monk with what he saw as little purpose, Sri Ramakrishna began to plan an educational campaign. He knew that villagers would resist traditional education as they needed to work and didn't have time to attend school. He advocated instead a door-to-door system in which the traveling *sannyasins* would instruct villagers, "not only preaching but teaching as well."

The idea that developed from Sri Ramakrishna's system and plays a central role in the

Mission today is work as worship—the belief that social service, helping others, and even doing one’s daily job can be just as sacred a form of worship as more traditional types of worship done in a temple or church. Ramakrishna’s approach emphasized the practical aspects of religion; he says, “The secret of religion lies not in theories but in practice. To be good and to do good—that is the whole of religion.” By encouraging work as a legitimate means of worship, the Mission included the uneducated masses that could not study Sanskrit or renounce their livelihoods. At the same time, their philosophy stressed social service as an important value.

The same philosophy was very much present in EMCOP, the group of Catholic women I spent a month with in Peru who run a women’s micro-finance organization. The work they do—providing loans to the poorest women in their community—is inspired by the messages they study in the Bible. When I asked the group leaders how their work of providing loans was connected to their faith, they responded that when they serve the women, they feel as though they were also serving God. The leader Neme said, “You think it is not the person you are talking to, but attending to God or the Virgin. You always think of Him first. The good deed is received by Him.” Another woman agreed saying, “If I am doing a service for the community, for my people, I am doing it for Jesus, for God.”

Two main ideas are consistent with both the philosophy of the Ramakrishna Mission and of the group of Peruvian Catholic women: One is that there are so many people to be helped in the world and so much work to do that God would rather us serve others than spend all of our time carrying out religious rituals. By serving others we are actually serving God and serving him in the most significant way.

To me, this is what is meant by the scripture that we’ve heard today from Matthew. Although they did not know it, those who served their neighbors had served God. And the reverse is also true; those who did not serve their neighbors were not welcomed into the kingdom of God. In this dramatic passage, nothing else was drawn upon to decide the fate of the people—not hours spent in temple worship, high status positions, or wealth. In a very black-and-white fashion, those who served others were welcomed and those who did not were sent away.

The second party of the work as worships philosophy is that you can worship simply by doing your job well and being a hard worker. This is underlined in today’s passage from Proverbs which ends by saying that a skilled worker will stand before kings.

Now both of the places from which I learned “work as worship” are poor and developing communities. It makes sense that such a theory would arise from these areas of the world, where social service is so necessary. While our own community does not face the same struggles as India and Peru, we can learn much from the faithful in both countries. The “work as worship” philosophy has two main benefits: first, it encourages those who are able to help the downtrodden and legitimizes this service as the highest form of worship. Second, it allows the every-day worker to be a spiritual person. In ancient Hinduism, those workers who were not able to master Sanskrit or devote all of their time to prayer were not seen as holy men and women. Ramakrishna’s approach, however, demonstrated that workers are able to worship through their every-day toils.

The lesson of work as worship can be applied to our own lives in these same two ways.

First, we should recognize that we can use our positions of privilege – and by this I mean the fact that we are not living in poverty – to help those around us. While our communities do not face the same type of desperation that exists in developing countries, we certainly have many neighbors who could use our help. Let us take more time to engage in community service, knowing that by serving our neighbors we are ultimately serving God.

Next, let us see our daily work as worship. It is easy to get caught up in the same day-to-day routine of work and sometimes what we do to earn money can seem meaningless. We should try to see our occupation as another opportunity for worship, for serving others. Sure, some jobs make this easy for us – society more or less recognizes the contributions nurses, teachers, and social workers make to their community. But even in the most dull desk jobs lies an opportunity for worship.

I have an extreme example – as many of you know, my dad is an insurance agent. Those last two are often seen as dirty words and most people would laugh at the idea of anything holy coming from such a job. I believe, however, that my dad, whether he knows it or not, is able to put his faith to work each day with the cheerful attitude he has towards his customers. Sure, every now and then he might grumble or even curse his job, but ever since I've been young I've watched the way he works. He is always genuinely concerned for his customers and helps them in any way he can. In this way, I see his service to his customers as a form of worship.

I challenge you all to think about the ways that you can similarly find worship in your everyday lives. There are most likely positive things you've already been doing that you wouldn't consider worship – but I challenge you to reconsider your definition of worship. Remember that when you are serving any person, you are serving God. When you smile at your co-workers, when you commit a random act of kindness – consider these things small daily doses of worship. Do not think that just because you couldn't get to Church on Sunday you aren't maintaining your faith. We come to Church not as a once-a-week one-time-only worship session, but to re-center and re-charge ourselves spiritually and to reflect on the week behind us. Do not restrict your worship or reflection to an hour on Sunday morning; recognize the opportunities for worship every day and in even the most unlikely circumstances.

Ernesto Cardenal, a South American Priest, wrote *The Gospel in Solentiname*, a collection of conversations between Nicaraguan villagers who discussed their faith as a way to battle the violence in their country. One villager hoped that “work could be seen as sacred as temple work. And everything was temple work and everybody was a priest.”

Let us leave here today knowing that any work *we* do can be as sacred as temple work and knowing that we too can be ministers in our community. Let us remember that when we serve anyone who needs us, we are ultimately serving God.

Amen.

