

# **WITH DIGNITY FOR ALL**

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker

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All Souls Unitarian Church, New York

So you go to a party and you don't know a lot of people there, and a complete stranger comes up to you to start a conversation. What is the first thing they ask you after your name? More than likely the question is "what do you do for a living?" Or something very close to it. This assumes that you are at a party North of the Mason Dixon line. In the South they're more likely to ask "what church do you attend?" But let's assume you're at a party in New York City, where everyone is wearing black or whatever color the new black happens to be; someone is sure to ask you about your occupation.

I think we ask the question because we are searching for something to talk about that we believe is common to everyone in the room. We believe that everyone does something and so it's a pretty safe question. But what happens when we get the answer? We asked the question for the most part to find common ground, and yet the answer can do just the opposite. When we find out what a person does we begin to put them in categories and these categories start to build barriers instead of bridges.

We make assumptions about their income, their education, their social location and we compare them to ourselves. Do we think they make more or less money than we do? Are they less or more educated than we are? Are they of the same social status as we? All or these things that can divide us, because we asked the wrong the question, even if it was for the right reason - connection.

If you have an occupation that fits the community of partygoers, you are made to feel pretty welcome. If not, then you might find yourself looking for the door pretty quickly, thinking of a suitable excuse that your host will accept and not call you the next day wondering why you had to leave so suddenly. Or you might find yourself judging everyone else and feeling sufficiently smug and slightly superior you decide to stay.

Either way you feel somewhat disconnected from the community and slightly uncomfortable for the rest of the evening.

It's not just parties that can make us feel that way. Any social setting where someone asks the question "what do you do for a living?" can evoke the same reactions. Instantly a connection that might have been possible is severed because the questioner and the questioned can feel a barrier being built in the minute it takes to answer. We think we are just asking a question because we want to know something about the person we're speaking with. There are so many more interesting things to know about a person yet we keep asking that one question as if what one does is who one is.

We are not our occupations. If, God forbid, tomorrow I could not be a minister anymore I would still be Cheryl M. Walker. All of my life experiences would still be the same. My favorite color would still be my favorite color and foods I don't like I still wouldn't eat. The things that bring me joy would still bring me joy, though I would sorely miss the joy of ministry. Anyone who has ever lost their job can tell you they soon found out that if they had defined themselves by their jobs, they quickly had to relearn who they really were. Now I'm not planning on either losing my job or giving up ministry, but if it happened I would not lose the person that I am. I would still be the same compassionate and obstinate woman I have grown to become.

I might lose my social status, but even that doesn't in the end define who I am. Having made a serious career change in my life that indeed affected my social status, I am fully aware that the ability to have Grand Tier, center, Friday night tickets at the Metropolitan Opera didn't define who I was. It was real, real nice having them, don't get me wrong, but I don't love opera any less because I now sit a few sections higher. What makes me the person that I am is so much more than where I fit on the economic ladder. What makes any of us who we are is much more than where we stand in the economic landscape. None of us is defined by the work we do, we are defined by the ways in which we leave our mark upon the people we encounter in the most tender moments and in the most mundane. We are known and knowable only by how we touch each other's souls.

So what does it say of us when in our first encounter with a stranger we ask a question that can build a wall between us and that person - what do you do for a living? It can be a barrier to hospitality when a visitor comes here for the first time and this is what they are asked. I know for many people it may be hard to understand how this question builds a barrier to hospitality. True hospitality is putting yourself in another's shoes and asking how would this person like to be treated and then doing so. The first thing any of us would like, I suspect, is to be made to feel welcome for who we are. And if we are not our work, then how does asking a person about their occupation welcome them for who they are?

Put yourselves in the shoes of someone who is out of work or maybe doesn't have a fancy job that pays lots of money. Or maybe they're retired and they don't plan on ever working again. If that were your employment situation, how would you feel if someone asked you about your work? Would you feel that the person asking is interested in you or in your social location and in the underlying question - do you fit in here? In this church, it should never be even suggested that without a college education or a "professional" career one doesn't fit in here. In this church, everyone no matter their social location, is welcome if they are of a good heart.

If we are truly to be a welcoming community where we say we affirm an inherent worth and dignity in every person then we must mean that we are not concerned with their occupation but with their life's vocation - what do they do with their life? Our dignity comes not from what we do but how we do whatever we do. A person can have the most prestigious occupation but if she or he does not do it with care for the impact their work has on their fellow human beings, then their occupation brings little dignity to their lives. And conversely if a person has the least prestigious job but does it knowing that no matter how small their job may seem, it still can make a difference in people's lives, so they do it with the utmost care and consideration, then their occupation does affirm the great dignity within their hearts.

Imagine you are going into surgery and you have the best surgeon in the world who cares deeply about you and all of her patients. Doesn't it matter that the person who cleaned the operating room took as much care as your surgeon? Or would you be fine with a germ infested operating room? Isn't it the dignity with which a person does their work that truly matters? It doesn't matter what we do it matters more how we do it.

I wish that we lived in a world where we cared as much about a person's character as we did about a person's title but we don't; and we sometimes succumb to the judgments of class and occupation. I know I am no exception. A few weeks ago I was meeting a friend of mine for a day in the park with her and her young daughter. As things happened she had also mistakenly booked another appointment and rather than reschedule we decided I would just hang out with her one-year old for the hour or so she would be gone. Now my friend is a white woman and so too is her daughter. When I was left alone with her child I realized everyone was going to think that I was the nanny and there was a part of me that was rather upset and indignant. I have Master's degrees from prestigious institution, the Union Theological Seminary in New York, I'm a minister at All Souls! I'm not a nanny.

As soon as those thoughts came into my head, I was filled with shame. What's wrong with being a nanny? My aunt was a domestic worker and she supported her family and put her children through college by working hard. And she did it with the utmost dignity and grace. Who did I think I was that I could be upset with the idea that someone might

think of me as a nanny? When I got off of my high horse I got to meet some of the women who were taking care of other people's children and we had a very pleasant afternoon.

But I also saw the way some of the women who had hired these women treated them, and that was shameful. They spoke to them as if they were not grown women but were children. In fact they spoke to their children with more respect than they did these women whom they have entrusted with their children's lives. They seemed to think because they were the employers that they did not have to respect these women whom they called their "girls." I know they would have a fit if anyone called them "girls" at work, but they did not seem to think it inappropriate or disrespectful to call a forty plus woman "girl" because she was on a different rung of the economic ladder.

It made me feel even more ashamed that I too had fallen into the trap of thinking that somehow my education, my wealth and my status had made me in some way better. All it made me was blessed not to have to deal with people who would call me "girl" and think they could treat me anyway they wanted because they were writing the checks. I knew that because of the hard work of my parents, a token clerk and a secretary, I was fortunate enough to have more choices about how I could earn my money. And just because I had achieved a certain status, my work did not make me a better or even smarter person, it just meant that I had opportunities that others were not fortunate enough to have been given.

What I was reminded of that day was that when we judge people not by the dignity they bring to their work but by the riches their work brings to them then we have lost what it means to be in our community of faith. What we profess here on Sunday morning must have an impact on what we do during the rest of the week. If on Sunday we speak of the dignity and worth of every person and on Tuesday we judge ourselves more worthy because of the jobs we have then we make Sunday morning a lie. We are not worthy of respect because of what we do for a living, we are worthy because of how we live and how we work. We do not bring dignity to our lives by the size of our paycheck, we bring dignity to our lives by the size of our hearts and our willingness to use our hands for the greater good.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a time set aside to honor the hard work of women and men who receive no glory for their labors. It has become a day of rest before the summer ends, but it's true purpose is to celebrate the American worker, who is hard pressed these days. Many people will be spending this Labor Day without a job and wondering how they will make ends meet. Many more people will be wondering how much harder they must work not to get ahead but just to keep ahead of the bills and demands of their lives. And some people after a lifetime of working hard are afraid that their pensions will not be enough to keep them fed and housed adequately. Each of these people must know

that here in this church they will find a place that welcomes them. Alongside the CEOs and the doctors and the lawyers, there is room for the nannys and the bus drivers, the token clerks and the secretaries and the unemployed. In this house of faith, there must be room for all of us.

So if you meet a new person today, don't ask them what they do for a living ask what they do with their lives. Welcome them into this house by being interested in who they are, not where they work. And that goes not just for the newcomers but for all of us. What brings us joy this fine August day? What sorrows need we share that the burden we carry may be made lighter by the generous listening of a friend? Ask not what work we do, ask what gifts do we bring to the work of living.

There is dignity in all work and all people who would use their hands not just for riches but for the richness of life are welcome here. Celebrate the work of your hands and your hearts. May they be open to all people of good will and may each of us find, in this house, a place of peace where we are welcomed just for who we are.

Amen and blessed be.