

"Joy or Burden?"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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JOB DESCRIPTION

Just before mother's day someone e-mailed me a job description for the position of mother. It went something like this:

Position

Mother, Mom, Mama, Mommy

Job Description

Long term team players needed for challenging permanent work in an often chaotic environment. Candidates must possess excellent communication and organizational skills and be willing to work variable hours which will include evenings and weekends and frequent 24 hour shifts on call. Some overnight travel required, including trips to primitive camping sites on rainy weekends and endless sports tournaments in far away cities. Travel expenses not reimbursed. Extensive courier duties also required.

Responsibilities

The rest of your life. Must be willing to be hated, at least temporarily until someone needs \$5.00. Must be willing to bite tongue repeatedly. Also, must possess the physical stamina of a pack mule and be able to go from zero to 60 mph in three seconds flat in case, this time, the screams from the backyard are not someone just crying wolf.

Must be willing to face stimulating technical challenges, such as small gadget repair, mysteriously sluggish toilets and stuck zippers. Must screen phone calls, maintain calendars and coordinate production of multiple homework projects. Must have the ability to plan and organize social gatherings for clients of all ages and mental outlooks.

Must be willing to be indispensable one minute, an embarrassment the next. Must handle assembly and product safety testing of a half million cheap, plastic toys and battery operated devices. Must always hope for the best but be prepared for the worst. Must assume final, complete accountability for the quality of the end product. Responsibilities also include floor maintenance and janitorial work throughout the facility.

Possibility for Advancement and Promotion

Virtually none. Your job is to remain in the same position for years, without complaining, constantly retraining and updating your skills so that those in your charge can ultimately surpass you.

Previous Experience

None required unfortunately. On the job training offered on a continually exhausting basis.

Wages and Compensation

Get this ... you pay them! Offering frequent raises and bonuses. A balloon payment is due when they turn 18 because of the assumption that college will help them become financially independent. When you die, you give them whatever is left. The oddest thing about this salary scheme is that you actually enjoy it and wish you could only do more.

Benefits

While no health or dental insurance, no pension, no tuition reimbursement, no paid holidays and no stock options are offered; this job supplies limitless opportunities for personal growth and free hugs for life if you play your cards right.

The person who sent me offered her own conclusion.
If the job had been presented to us this way, none of us would have ever done it!
Funny the things people will do for love.

I had a friend who had a lot of trouble with her children. She used to say,
"I just keep telling myself that my children are a gift from God. But, sometimes I wonder. Are they a gag gift?"

Despite her complaining, she continued to try and do the best she could for her kids despite limited resources. Funny the things people will do for love.

HURTING THE ONE YOU LOVE

How does that old song go? You always hurt the one you love?
Many parents would say that's true when it comes to their children, but let's not just pick on the kids today.

How many young people when they are alone with each other say something like,
"You won't believe what my mother said yesterday.
It was so...o....o embarrassing. I can't wait to leave home."

Sometimes the problem can due to the misperception of the young person, but sometimes their comments are true. We parents can be terribly controlling and unwilling to let our children grow up. We can say the most embarrassing and hurtful things.

You always hurt the one you love.
In fact, I would say that this is true of almost all important relationshipschildren and parents husbands and wives best friends. You name it.

Important relationships are ... at the same time ... both a great joy and a great burden. Important relationships are always a struggle. And yet we seem unwilling to admit that very obvious fact. We seem to think that a loving relationship "should" always be smooth and calm.

But, I have come to believe that just the opposite is true.
If people don't really care about each other, it's easy to have a very placid relationship.
It's when people love and love deeply that the trouble really starts.

Love by its very nature often involves great sacrifice.
Indeed, the wonder of love true love ... is that when it comes down to it, no sacrifice seems too great for the one you love.

STRUGGLING WITH GOD

If this is true of important human relationships, why should the divine/human relationship be any different? Why do we think that our relationship with God should always be smooth sailing, a kind of Zen Buddhist technique that lowers our blood pressure?

Think about the stories of the Bible.

Do you think the people portrayed in the Bible had their blood pressure lowered when God's call came into their lives?

I don't think so.

Think about Moses ... called to stand up against the mightiest nation in the ancient world and proclaim to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." I'm quite sure that his blood pressure was not in the normal range when he heard that news!

Think about the prophets ... called to tell their nation in a time of war that they were wrong and God was going to punish them for their sins by delivering them into the hands of their enemy. Can you imagine what that would be like to challenge the "powers that be" in a time of national crisis?

Just ask the Dixie Chicks!

Many of the prophets wanted nothing to do with God's call. They didn't want a relationship with One who would require so much of them.

They said, "God, I'm only one person.
There is no one left to help me with this."
They said,
"God, I'm too young.
I'm too old.
I'm not a very good speaker."

The arguments sound familiar to me. At various times they have been my excuses as well. But, this God who chooses us out of love is like a loving parent in another way. Our heavenly Father will not take "no" for an answer. This God struggles with us like a parent struggles with an unruly child.

God knows that oft times the best thing for us is not the easiest thing.
No, the best thing for us is sometimes the very thing we would rather not do.

So much for having a smooth, loving relationship with God. Loving God with all your heart, soul and mind has been and always will be a burden as well as a joy. A relationship this important is an all consuming fire as well as a healing balm.

There is no love without sacrifice. You can't have one without the other.
There is no resurrection without first traveling the way of the cross. That was true for Jesus, and it is also true for us as well.

PREPARING DISCIPLES FOR SACRIFICE

And that is also the message of our lesson for today from the gospel of John.

We're coming toward the end of John's story.
Jesus is about to die on a cross for the sins of the world.
And so the Savior is trying to prepare his disciples for the hard days that ahead.

Soon these disciples will be responsible for carrying on the message and ministry of the risen Christ. It would not be long before these frightened, confused disciple would be entrusted with the Spirit of God and the awesome responsibility of spreading the story of divine love throughout the world.

How could they do that? How could they keep the story of hope and resurrection going in a world that neither believed nor cared about such things? The answer was sacrifice.

Jesus told the disciples that they must deliberately take upon themselves the burden of discipleship and love. Jesus told the disciples once again that he hadn't promised them a rose garden far from it. There were commandments to follow and act of selfless service to render.

Some would even go so far as to follow their Lord completely and actually lay down their life for the sake of God's kingdom. When we read this, we can't help but think, "What a burden Jesus is putting upon such hapless, clueless disciples! How in the world could they be expected to do this?"

Of course, at first they did fail. They did run away on the road to the cross. They did deny their love for Jesus. They did betray and give up on their deepest hopes and desires. One of the disciples even committed suicide his despair over his treachery was so great.

But, in the end, it was once again the power of God which made the difference in this relationship of love. In the final analysis, it was not what the disciples said and did that mattered most. It was what Jesus said and did that really made a difference.

And what did Jesus say to the disciples that made such a difference?

FRIENDS

"I have called you friends." All the burdens of discipleship could be born by that one simple sentence. Jesus was and always would be their friend.

In the Bible Jesus is given many titles ... Lord, King, Master, Teacher just to name a few. But, sometimes I think that this unassuming title, "friend," might be the most significant of all.

It's no accident that one of the most popular hymns of all time is the one we sing today, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

That hymn is popular because it expresses one of our deepest desires. What people want and need most is a friend with whom they can share their burdens and joys. Did you ever notice that when a spouse wants to pay a compliment to his or her mate that they say something like ... "and she's also my best friend."

Friendship is the ultimate expression of love. And, according to this passage, friendship describes God's feeling toward his disciples. The King of kings, the Lord of lords and the ruler of the universe is also our friend. "What a friend we have in Jesus ... all our sins and grief to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God and prayer."

What does this mean ... that God is our friend?

I think we should take our cue from human friendship at its best. Friends do not have an "agenda" when they come to us. Friends don't come to us because they want something from us. Friends come to us because they are friends.

Now that certainly doesn't mean friendships are always smooth sailing. Friends may disagree with us ... sometimes even strongly ... when they think we're making a mistake. But, their primary goal never changes. They seek out our company and want the best for us simply because they are our friends.

And it is this unconditional love that calls forth friendship from us in return.

Friendship at its highest and best can even cause a person to give his or her own life for the sake of the one who is a friend. That was the love that Jesus had for his friends. Jesus told his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The love of God in Jesus is like the unconditional love of a friend. That friendship is a great joy. But, that friendship like any friendship carries with it an implied burden.

The old song has it right. Love hurts.
Love, by its nature requires more of us than we think is possible.

I think one of the best explanations of love ever was written by C.S. Lewis. He wrote,

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal.

Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But, in that casket safe, dark, motionless, airless ... it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable

The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love ... is Hell."

You sometimes hear of a person dying of a "broken heart."

But, I can think of something much more deadly dying of a "hard heart."

I suspect that there are many more people in our world dying of a hard heart than of a broken heart.

BETTER TO LOVE AND LOSE

Remember that famous line by Tennyson?
"Tis' better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?"

Tennyson wrote those words when a dear friend died. Though his friend's death caused him great mental anguish, Tennyson still believed the joys of the time he had with his friend overshadowed the loss.

And, I think that his statement implies that he was willing to take a chance on love and friendship again that the power of knowing a really good friend was worth the burden of risking loss.

Those who would be disciples of Jesus must also take that same risk. Disciples of Jesus must be willing to take up the burden of love and friendship. Jesus bids us take up our cross and follow him ... to love one another as he has first loved us ... to sacrifice ourselves in the cause of love and friendship.

Jesus calls us to do this not because he wants to hurt us but because he knows that the road to true joy always often follows this most difficult path.

It is the way of the cross that leads home.

Amen.