

Sermon: Essential Workers Matthew 25:31-40 March 26, 2023
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev Steve Clifton

During the Second World War, the British government worked out a way to put a value on labour. They created the Gross Domestic Product or GDP as part of their war effort to measure productivity. The goods and services bought and sold in a nation in a year were quantified to create a number value. After the War the United Nations encouraged all nations to adopt the GDP as a universal measurement of the value of work.

The GDP has been proven to be a useful tool... but an imperfect one. The GDP only captures work that produces something tangible and measurable, work that creates money or things. Other forms of work are not given any value at all.

Consider this... a woman in Sudan rises early to walk 5 kms to the nearest well to get water for her family. She returns and feeds her children , gets them ready for school, spends the morning tending the soil in her family garden- its early summer and there is no crop to be taken in yet. In the afternoon she cares for sick and aging relatives and neighbors And in the evening she cooks the family meal and sings songs to her tired children, before discussing the concerns of the day with her husband... This day -she produced no goods, generated no wealth, spent no funds, made no money. As measured by the GDP, this woman`s considerable work has created nothing of value. Her day of labor is worth nothing.

Now consider her cousin, lucky enough to get paid work as a soldier. On this day he coordinates an artillery barrage directed at a village that is connected to a rebel cause. There is death and destruction. Dead must be buried. Buildings must be levelled so they can rebuild. Soldiers and medical people are paid to deal with the carnage. And then a great deal of government money was expended for many artillery rounds, for fuel and food for the army. The work of death and destruction has generated significant wealth, by the measure of goods bought and sold, by GDP.

By the economic order of our world a woman caring for her children and neighbors has does nothing of value. A military operation that destroys is measured as valuable work.

Three years ago, this month the global pandemic hit. And collectively the human family lived through a trying time. We are now dealing with the trauma we all endured. "Humanity is exhausted right now" writes therapist Sister Maggie Hover

But... we have learned some things. We have learned what we value. We may be putting our time and energy in different places than we did before the pandemic.

We have discovered too in Covid time the value of certain kinds of work. Health care workers, LTC staff, grocery cashiers... certain workers carried a big load and their work came to be valued more and more by their communities.

But then we can note that during the pandemic years its CEOs and not essential workers who have been valued most, best rewarded for their labor. CEOs now make 243 times the pay of average private sector workers – up from 227 times in prepandemic times.

In the gospel shared today we get a Biblical valuation of work; labour is measured on a particular scale. It's the labour of love and care, lived out in family, in community, that is of greatest value. The work of love, of visiting a sick friend, of bringing a meal to a grieving neighbor, of spending time with someone who is isolated, of offering kind words to someone having a hard time- these things may have no value according to GDP, may not be financially rewarded...but according to Jesus it is this work that really matters. This is the work that has everlasting value.

Jesus in Matthew 25 is talking about the great valuation at the end of all things , the final tally of worthwhile work. Jesus says: *'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'* The most important work is the labour of offering love to those on the margins, the vulnerable among us...

What about our work as a community of faith? Can we quantify it somehow? How valuable is the joy felt at a baby's baptism? How much is a great choir anthem worth? How do we put a price on the laughter created by the euchre group, or on the deep connection found in a UCW group...? What is the value of our rainbow banners that might tell some passerby that they, or someone they love, is embraced by a faith community, and loved by God, in spite of what many voices say...?

None of these things creates wealth, they are freely given away... What are things like this worth?

Another measure of value is the *Halo Effect* This phrase emerged from a study done in Philadelphia where Secular social scientists from the University of Pennsylvania, studied their city's churches to see what if any benefit these congregations gave to their community. They used economic measurements and tried to see what impact churches had in their neighborhoods, in terms of dollars and cents. They looked at the churches impact on individuals and collectives, looked at congregational spending that helped the local economy, considered education provided, space given, community and individual care offered, volunteers provided...They quantified all of this.

The researchers found that for every dollar a congregation spent in their local budget, the community benefit was valued at 5.2 times that amount. One dollar in the church became \$5.20 in the community. Congregational work meant that fewer social services were needed, community mental health improved, people belonged, felt connected, worked together... in many ways the churches were providing a great benefit that radiated out into their communities. They called this the "Halo Effect."

In Toronto a similar study found that in Canada too congregations provide a significant Halo Effect. In Toronto, researchers found that \$1 in the church became \$4.77 worth of community benefit, what they called "common good services."

So, what of our church? In our life and ministry, can we see and celebrate our own Halo Effect?

Using the Toronto Halo Effect study and our own budget numbers we can calculate that our Halo Effect value, the common good services value that we contribute to our community. In 2022 it was \$2,938,000.41. Just shy of \$3,000,000 a year. Wow!

The Halo Effect. A halo is of course a symbol used in art, a depiction of the unseen light and love of God shining forth from someone or something.

As individuals and as a community, however we measure it, have no doubt that God's light shines in us, in you, that God's grace radiates out from us, whenever we gather or work in Christ's name.

Whenever we work to help our sisters and brothers in need, we are doing work that has ultimate value.

Amen