



GOVERNMENT
ACCOUNTABILITY
PROJECT

Sample Sermon

We Need a Theology of “Just Work”

By Brian McLaren

When I was a young boy growing up in an Evangelical Christian household, religion was about getting my soul from the sinking ship of earth to lifeboat of heaven. And getting safely into heaven was primarily about doing religious things like believing correct doctrines, praying, reading my Bible, going to church, and converting others.

But as I grew, I became less satisfied with that framework.

My spiritual migration has led me to see religion less as an evacuation plan and more as a transformation plan. Instead of asking how I can get “beamed up” to heaven, I’m asking a different question now: How can this earth become less of a hell, plagued by war, hate, fear, sickness, poverty, and ignorance, and more of a heaven, full of peace, love, joy, health, well-being, and wisdom?

My Jewish friends call this transformation process tikkun olam, repairing the world. Our shared Scriptures teach us that our most essential job as human beings is to join God in this transformative work by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

When I talk about this shift with friends of various religions, their eyes often light up. The details differ, but they have had a similar journey that led them from focusing on “doing religious things” to concentrating on doing everything — what we might call secular things — in a beautiful and transformative way.

Growing up, we had lots of theological specialties. Theology was the study of God. Hamartiology was the study of sin. Eschatology was the study of how the world would end. Ecclesiology was the study of the church.

But one thing I never heard being discussed, and that was a theology of “just work”. In these times, if we’re working for tikkun olam, we need a theology of work as never before. We need a theology of “just work” that gives meaning to the forty-plus hours we spend at our place of work.

We need a theology of “just work” that motivates us to do our best, to be fair and honest, to treat all our fellow workers with the respect we would want to receive, and to be sure the goods and services we provide are actually good enough and actually serve well enough to be worth what customers or clients pay for them.

But it’s possible to work hard for a government, company or profession that does harm, and so we need a theology of work that helps us working toward healing the world, rather than further damaging it.

Such a theology of “just work” would take seriously these words from C. S. Lewis: "The greatest evil is now conceived and ordered in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices."

This theology would resonate with early religious teachings. Buddha’s teaching on right livelihood guides followers away from jobs or professions that do harm. The Buddha offered specific examples in his context of jobs to avoid: weapons manufacture and trading, human trafficking and enslaving, producing and selling meat or intoxicants, and making or selling poison. Similarly, according to The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, early Christian leaders required soldiers, pimps, idol-makers, actors, gladiators, and magistrates (among others) to find a different line of work if they wanted to be considered Christians.

A contemporary theology of just work would urge us to think about whether this or that job opportunity qualifies as “right livelihood” in our time and situation. Even more, among jobs that we would consider morally acceptable, this theology would help us consider the best ways to do this work. We would ask questions like these:

- How should we pay and treat our employees? What is a living wage in our area, and what working conditions and leave provisions should we promise?
- What is the window of pay inequality that we consider morally acceptable? Is it OK that the CEO is making 500 times the pay of the average worker?
- Do we understand the morality of taxation, and have we figured out ways to pay our fair share for the commons, or the common good?
- Are we working in the most ecologically responsible ways? How do we be restorative rather than exploitive of our fragile earth?

- What is our bottom line? Is it profit or shareholder return alone, or do we care about other benefits that we bring to our employees, customers, and society at large?

And something more. The theology of “just work” that we need today would also take seriously the role of whistleblowers, truth-tellers who point out wrongdoing in violation of the public trust and refuse to let crimes and injustices go unnoticed or covered up.

In recent years, many of us have been worried as never before about the state of our democracy. If it weren’t for brave truth-telling whistleblowers who come forward about wrongdoing within and around the government workplace, we would not know about important crimes and injustices taking place in violation of our democracy.

I think about government officials who take bribes, violate laws and ethics; business leaders who cheat on their taxes or launder money. I think about the cover-ups. Why do employees who know what’s going on remain silent? Is it because they don’t care? Are they afraid? Do they not know where to turn?

I was faced with such a situation when I was a pastor. A member of my parish was a government expert in foreign policy. He had privately briefed a highly-placed government official on an important matter, summarizing the best intelligence from a variety of agencies. Later that day, he watched that official go public with a flagrant lie and misrepresentation of the briefing. His conscience was troubled by this lie to the American people. He went to his supervisor. His supervisor was afraid to speak up. He came to me wondering if I could offer guidance. I listened, but there were no manuals for clergy about how to guide a would-be government whistleblower through a fraught situation.

I knew this whistleblower was a voice of critical importance to democracy. I wish I had the resources back then that are available now. In light of recent threats to our democracy by those in and around the halls of power, a new whistleblower resource specifically written for faith leaders, clergy and communities, called Bearing Witness, gives us a framework to safely and responsibly provide spiritual care alongside sound informed counsel in the months and years ahead.

Working with whistleblowers is complex and much needs taken into careful account: security and safety, vetting and legal support, psychological and emotional support, the pro’s and con’s of publicity and more. This theology of “just work” equips us to help build ethical workplaces and helps prepare us for when things go wrong.

We are the faith communities in which these whistleblowers gather for strength and faith, and we are called to offer support through our own moral courage and kindness. Those driven by their faith to speak truth to power need the spiritual support of their faith leaders and

communities. They are our modern-day Davids v. Goliath. The consequences of their courage can be dramatic. We are called to support, protect, and honor brave insiders who seek to tell the truth in the face of personal and professional cost. If not for them, far too many crimes, injustices and coverups will remain hidden, and even more will be successfully planned and implemented.

All of our faiths aspire to the moral courage shown by whistleblowers, and all of us who are clergy must stir our moral courage to stand with them. Otherwise, our faith communities are too heavenly minded (or perhaps too obsessed with self-preservation) to be of actual, down-to-earth good.

Sample Scripture and Faith-Inspired Quotes

Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. [Exodus 18:21]

Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, and plead the widow's cause. [Isaiah 1:17]

When you tell the truth, justice is done, but lies lead to injustice. [Proverbs 12:17]

A truthful witness saves lives, but one who breathes out lies is deceitful. [Proverbs 14:25]

He has told you, O humanity, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? [Micah 6:8]

Rebuke your neighbor frankly so that you will not share in his guilt ... love your neighbor as yourself. [Leviticus 19:17-18]

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. [Ephesians 4:25]

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. [2 Timothy 2:15]

Let there be among you a community calling to the good, enjoining right, and forbidding wrong. It is they who shall prosper. [Qur'an 3:104]

I heard the Messenger of Allah say, Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith. [Hadith 34]

Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom. [Buddha]

There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth; not going all the way, and not starting. [Buddha]

They bark and speak, telling only lies; all thought of righteousness has left them. Those who have no honor while alive, will have an evil reputation after they die. [SGGS p 1242 holy Granth, Sikh]