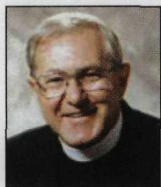


# God at Work at Work

**Even the Filing of a Patient's Chart Involves Creation, Redemption,  
and Sanctification**

Periodically, we are advised “not to sweat the small stuff.” The suggestion is a sound one, of course, especially if work is often stressful or if we are easily preoccupied with the endless details which require our attention if we are to be successful at any given task or activity. The “small stuff” does matter, however, particularly if precision is necessary. Nevertheless, it is equally important to keep the big picture in mind.



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Our job satisfaction demands paying attention to the larger context as well as to minute details. For work to have meaning in our lives, moreover, we need to feel that it makes a difference. The bigger the difference, the better; and the larger the impact, the more each detail matters.

One of my favorite examples for keeping the big picture in mind is taken from the assembly line at any automobile plant. Four people stand in a row, each one performing the very same action as his or her neighbor. Ask the first person, “What do you do?” and the answer might be: “I put this little screw into the edge of the car door like this.” The second person, performing the very same action might respond, “I make cars.” The third individual, again employed in inserting the same type of screw, could say, “I help get kids to school safely.” Finally, the fourth person might step back, smile, and say, “I help people journey through life toward their final destiny, the welcoming arms of a loving God.” The same limited action has a capacity for a bigger and bigger context.

Each of the workers tightens the same type of screw into identical places in a car door. But they exhibit varying degrees of understanding in terms of the “big picture.” Depending on the day, they have very different ideas about the work they do. And, as a result, they may have significant differences in their respective levels of satisfaction.

## WORK IN HEALTH CARE

The very same diversity can exist at a health care facility. Four individuals, each performing the same task in the medical records department, for example, can end up doing different things, depending on the size of the “picture” each brings to the work. One person simply files papers. Her neighbor, doing the same thing, sees it as completing the health profile of a patient. A third views the filing as ultimately helping to heal wounds. And a fourth knows that she is restoring recovering persons to their families and friends.

For Christians, the notion of God as a sacred Trinity is at the heart of the universe. God is also the largest “picture” possible. The Triune God is the framework that encompasses the entire world within which we live and work. Although that level of the divine mystery may seem rather remote from daily living, especially given the countless domestic tasks that consume our attention and energy each day, we will only become fully alive as daughters and sons of God when we find a way to have our entire lives encompassed by the Divine.

The reality of God is so far beyond the limits of our human understanding and experience as to almost force us into silence, like Job before the mystery of God (Jb 40:1). Yet we do know something about the way God works in the world. Each of the parables of Jesus regarding the Kingdom of God is a small human portal into that sublime realm of God at work in our world.

The parables of the Kingdom (Mk 4; Mt 13) speak of God at work in silent, subtle, and virtually unnoticed ways. Like the field that slowly grows and produces a harvest, like weeds and wheat that grow side by side almost indistinguishably until the final harvest, like yeast that causes the flour to rise and be transformed into nourishing bread, like buried treasure or a pearl of great price, God's action in the world is woven into the daily lives of God's people, who become partners with God in the gradual transformation of the world. Even the smallest action can be

used by God for dramatic purposes.

Whoever respectfully watches as things develop and mature is, in that very stance, just like God. Whoever changes a situation or an environment for the better transforms part of reality for the better—as flour is changed into bread—is like God. God is at work in and through that person.

### **GOD'S TRIUNE MYSTERY**

For us Christians, the mystery of God is experienced as somehow Triune. All of the clues about the nature and workings of God that are scattered throughout the New Testament suggest the utter mystery of three distinct persons within the One God.

God the Creator has established the entire world and sustains everything within it. The Son was sent to reveal God's love by redeeming the world from its fallen state. And the Spirit was sent to make us and it holy from within. Each task, though the work of the One God, can be understood by pondering its specific character. We speak of the work of God as *creation*, *redemption*, and *sanctification*. Each of these three major works of God, subtle and mysterious, can illumine our own work as well as that of God. Each overarching task of God, taken by itself, can provide a bigger picture for some daily effort of ours, whatever it may be.

To discover that bigger picture for our work, however mundane it may seem, it helps one to sit back and to explore the inner meaning of each of these three great works of God. The effort can provide a deeper sense of meaning for the tasks that fill our lives.

To *create* the world, especially as the great epic accounts in Genesis remind us, God called it into existence and put things in order, one day at a time. Restocking supplies, rearranging medications on a tray, sorting towels, or filing medical charts—all are mundane tasks that echo and extend the great work of creation. God uses those daily efforts to put the world in order and to continue the work of creation. God is described in that same passage of Genesis as having brought human beings into existence out of the dust of the Earth. Medical discoveries that lead to new cures are certainly extensions of creation. Any action which makes things better continues the divine work of creation. That is indeed the big picture.

To *redeem* the world, as Jesus of Nazareth did by his death and resurrection, is to summon it back to its original purpose and to restore things

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to their original relationships. To redeem the world is to rescue things from their isolation and put them back into their proper place of loving service. For example, anyone who restores lost personal items to confused patients is engaged in some small way in the work of redemption. Any aide who brings a patient back to his or her room after treatment is busy about the work of redemption. The nurse who restores an ailing loved one to the embrace of an anxious family continues the work of redemption; and if some measure of forgiveness and welcome can be experienced in the process, that is indeed the big picture.

To *sanctify* the world is to change it from the inside out. Traditionally ascribed to the work of the Holy Spirit, this continuous action in our work changes people's hearts and thinking. One might say, therefore, that postcardiac surgery rehab, overcoming the inevitable depression of that experience, and restoring a positive attitude to the patient are an extension of the work of God's Spirit. A communications department that reflects truth and real caring—not merely sentimental fluff—changes the attitudes of a community and can be God's Spirit at work. That also is the big picture.

As the poet Mary Oliver has suggested, we need to "walk slowly, and bow often."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the same should be said about all the multiple jobs, small and great, acclaimed or unnoticed, that fill out the full picture of the work of health care. Walk quietly and bow often, for God is always at work at work. ■

### **NOTE**

1. Mary Oliver, "When I Am among the Trees," in *Thirst: Poems*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2007, p. 4.

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