

Using What the World Gives You

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Matthew

As the plot to kill Jesus moved forward and events progressed quickly towards his crucifixion, Jesus shared a final meal with his disciples. In that meal, Jesus chose manufactured items – bread and wine – to represent himself and his coming sacrifice. Holding up a loaf of bread, he said, “This is my body” (Matthew 26:26); then holding up the skin of wine, he said, “This is my blood” (Matthew 26:28).

The Son of God is the product of no one’s work, not even the Father’s. In the words of the Nicene Creed, he is “begotten, not made.” But he chose common, tangible things like bread and wine, made by people to illustrate his sacrifice.

When we remember Jesus’ last supper with the act of sharing communion today, we are similarly tied to the products of human labor. As Alan Richardson put it in *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*:

Without the toil and skill of the farmer, without the labour of the bakers, the transport workers, the banks and offices, the shops and distributors—without, in fact, the toil of mines and shipyards and steel-works and so on—this loaf would not have been here to lay upon the altar this morning. In truth, the whole world of human work is involved in the manufacture of the bread and wine which we offer.... Here is the strange unbreakable link that exists between the

bread that is won in the sweat of man's face and the bread of life that is bought without money or without price.

Since Jesus chose tangible products of human labor to represent himself, there can be no room to imagine the kingdom of God as a spiritual realm divorced from the physical reality of God's creation.

In his trial and the events leading up to his crucifixion, Jesus also suffered the physical realities that result from state corruption and from individuals' sins. He submitted to false accusations by the Jewish council, an inept trial by the Roman government, and death at the hands of the humanity he came to save. His own disciples betray, deny, and desert him. He takes on the lowest place in society, forsaken by God and men and women, in order to absorb all of the world's forsakenness. Perhaps being misunderstood, mocked, and deserted was as hard on him, as was being put to death. He was aware that his death would be overcome in a few days, yet the misunderstanding, mockery, and desertion continue to this day.

Many today also feel abandoned by friends, family, society, even God. The sense of abandonment at work can feel very strong. We can be marginalized by co-workers, crushed by labour and danger, anxious about our performance, frightened by the prospect of layoffs, and made desperate by inadequate pay and meagre benefits, as was so memorably described in Studs Terkel's book, *Working*. The words of Sharon Atkins, a receptionist in Terkel's book, speak for many people. "I'd cry in the morning. I didn't want to get up. I'd dread Fridays because Monday was

always looming over me. Another five days ahead of me. There never seemed to be any end to it. Why am I doing this?”

Jesus’ passion is not a pretty story for religious pageants but God’s gut-wrenching intervention in the grit and grime of our ragged lives and work.

Jesus took the reality of human work – both the good and the harrowing – and not only participated in it, but used it to make something new.