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Text: Galatians 6:1-10; Luke 10:1-11

### *Finding Good Work*

In 1984, J.S.G. Boggs sat down at a café table in Chicago. The young artist ordered a cup of coffee and a donut, and began doodling on a napkin. He began with the numeral one, and then he sketched out a familiar rectangle. When the server came to the table, she was impressed that his napkin bore a stunning resemblance to a dollar bill. She asked to buy it from him, but Boggs refused. He instead offered it to her in return for his 90-cent tab. When she offered him a dime in return, the wheels in his mind began to churn and a new art form was born.

For the rest of his life, Boggs set his artistic focus on money. He would create “Boggs Bills” that were very similar to American, Swiss, and British currencies, typically emblazoned with word plays such as, “In fun we trust.” He would then spend them to buy all sorts of goods from art supplies to a motorcycle. When folks accused him of being a counterfeiter, he responded, “I create images that say things and ask things. I take them out into the real world and try to spend them, not as counterfeits, but as works of art that ask us about the nature of money.”<sup>1</sup> He argued everything from his Boggs Bill, the goods purchased, the receipt, and especially the story of the transaction itself were performance art. When he completed a transaction, he would call an art dealer to purchase all of these elements and sell them as a display. Although incredibly self-serving, his point was simple and powerful: money has value because we commonly agree it has value. Therefore, we have power to use it and assign value to it in order shape the world we want.

Although the U.S. Federal Courts agreed with him on the intrinsic value of money, they disagreed with the values of his work. They decided the government’s interest in protecting the value of money outweighed his right to free speech. My hunch is that this decision may have turned out differently for Boggs if he had presented as more of a transgressive artist than a cunning charlatan. It is hard to separate the value of work from the values that went into making it.

As followers of Jesus, how do we devote ourselves to authentic and good expressions of our faith? How do we avoid the charlatan label? Today’s scriptures are about the values of doing God’s work. In our Gospel reading, Jesus commissions seventy missionaries to go out into the world and do the good work of sharing the Good News. He gives them instructions to rely on the hospitality of strangers and to trust that what they have to offer is indeed valuable. He also gives them a healthy dose of reality. Yes, there will be folks who accept you, but there will also be people who seek to prey on you as a wolf pounces on a lamb. Doing good work requires vulnerability. When a person rejects your work, sometimes the best thing you can do wipe the

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<sup>1</sup> William Grimes, “J.S.G. Boggs, Artist, Dies at 62; He Made Money. Literally.” *New York Times*, January 27, 2017.

dirt from your feet in protest and keep moving down the road. Jesus does not promise the commissioned that there is a playbook they can follow - one that will win people over from town to town without fail. Regardless of how others receive what they offer, Jesus calls them to the good work of proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near.

How many of you have ever heard of the Kingdom of God before? New folks, you are off the hook, but I should be seeing lots of hands in the air and heads nodding. It is in the prayer we say together every week: "For thine is the \_\_\_\_." Kingdom! Very good.

Now how many of you could explain what the Kingdom of God is? Definitely fewer hands up and head nods. It is a theological term that is by its very nature, difficult to define. The Kingdom—or Kin-dom for those who prefer a translation that avoids the patriarchal and hierarchical connotations of Kingdom—is an alternative world order to the status quo. It is the world as God wishes to be. To borrow language from our passage from Galatians, the Kin-dom is a reality in which we "bear one another's burdens" and we "work for the good of all." When Jesus says that "the Kin-dom has come near," he offers a new way of moving through the world. The Kin-dom is in our grasp. For those willing to work with God to build it, it offers a totally different currency of justice and peace that is of infinitely greater value. Currency free to spend for all willing to accept it.

Over the years, General Synod, the biennial gathering of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, has been a place for me to go and reconnect with the values of working for God's Kin-dom. General Synod is both an event and a particular body. Delegates represent associations, conferences, and ministry boards of the denomination. The General Synod is diverse with regards to age, gender, race, and ability. The General Synod worships together, deliberates on resolutions, and at its best is a prophetic embodiment of the Kin-dom.

I experienced this at my very first Synod as a visitor in high school. The hotly debated resolution that year was to affirm the rights of same-sex couples to marry. I remember the vigorous debate, the threats to leave the denomination, and then impassioned pleas for dignified treatment. Then came the rising and falling of voting cards and the utter silence after the resolution passed—a standard practice at Synod to respect the views of all members. Amidst the quiet, prayers reverberated through the conference center, and the Kin-dom indeed felt close. The moral courage of the General Synod that day inspired me to pursue ministry as a vocation.

This year it was a great honor to attend the General Synod as a delegate representing the Connecticut Conference. There were approximately twenty resolutions considered this year that covered a wide array of topics from local church autonomy, the Green New Deal, and condemnations of white supremacy. The resolution gaining the most buzz was one that would exclude denominational groups hostile to underrepresented groups, particularly LGBTQ+ folks, from using the exhibit space. Delegates offered differing notions of how to hold organizations accountable and whether it was right to bar any group for the actions of a few. They openly wondered whether the exhibit hall was a safe place that protected the vulnerable or a brave

space that encouraged discourse. Mirroring much of what is going on in our current culture, the Synod did not reach a conclusion and tabled the resolution.

While it is hard for any Synod to match the inspiration of my first, there were still moments that moved me with feelings that Kin-dom was within reach. Throughout the week, people spoke boldly about the injustices at our southern border and the practice of separating immigrant families. They organized a march to the local ICE center and held a non-violent demonstration. Our week together began with the threats of family raids and ended with that horrifying image of the father and child floating in the river flooding social media. When that fateful image flashed on our phones, someone walked to the microphone and disrupted our ceremonial final plenary to ask for a moment of personal privilege. Yes, the work of the General Synod was about to end, but the work of living into our call to proclaim the Kin-dom continued. She asked to pray. I don't remember her words, but I remember the feeling her prayer stirred in me. I felt connected to others that shared my shock, unsettledness, and anger. I did not know yet what I was going to do, but I felt God moving among us working through our creativity and differences. The courage to determine what was next would be rooted in our togetherness and our reliance upon God. Putting those values first felt like good and authentic kind of work. The Kin-dom felt near indeed.

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