

United Church of Christ, Kent, Ohio  
4 October 2009, World Communion Sunday, Feast of St. Francis  
Homily by the Rev. David Pattee, senior pastor

***Anything worth doing..?***  
**Philippians 4:4-9; Mark 10:17-23**

It is a favorite axiom of American culture, and I'm sure you can all say it with me...  
*Anything worth doing is... worth doing well.*

In our house, as I was growing up, it got repeated over and over again, chanted like a mantra, acquiring a kind of religious significance... *Anything worth doing is... worth doing well.*

Echoing across the decades in the voice of my dad, it still resonates in the very core of my identity... *David... Anything worth doing is... worth doing well.*

I hope it's true for all of you... that each and every one of you can hear resonating in the core of your identity the voice of a parent, a teacher, a brother or sister, a mentor, or coach, or pastor, or friend, the voice of someone who cared for you, believed in you, and expected the best from you, the voice that challenged and affirmed you to strive for your excellence... say it with me... *Anything worth doing is... worth doing well.*

For the longest time I thought this must be something Jesus had said, perhaps in the Gospel of Good Sense, 'round about chapter three, just after the teachings on balanced diet, getting eight hours sleep, finishing your homework, paying attention and being on time...

*Jesus then withdrew from the crowds and, gathered with his disciples, said unto them, 'Anything worth doing is worth doing well.'*

In fact, there is no record of such words from Jesus, but this principle does make good sense to me, and it does fit pretty well with my understanding of Christian faith: appealing to the best of who we believe ourselves to be, and the more we might dare to do and to become, making the most of things, maximizing the value of what has been given to us, living life for all it's worth, and doing it well!

In church parlance, we refer to this kind of commitment as good stewardship: appreciating the gift, and honoring the giver of life.

Made in the image of God, created in the likeness of the Creator, each one of us has a vocation in being creative: using our time, our talent, and our treasure to explore and share the fullness of what God has given to us, to reflect that likeness of the Creator, cultivating our lives so that they bear fruit and multiply the blessing.

A holy charge from God, our lives are worth the living, worth living well, doing the best we can today, looking for ways to do more and better tomorrow.

The Letter to the Philippians written so long ago is just as compelling today:

*Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable... if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things... and do them... and the God of peace will be with you.*

Paul may as well have said it, and we probably ought to say it again... *Anything worth doing is... worth doing well.*

But according to whose standard is it worth doing? By what definition of excellence is it done well? Toward what end? Serving what interests, values, and truths?

In times of change and challenge (and friends, when are we not in a time of change and challenge?) when established belief is brought into question by new discoveries and new insights, when faith is strained by calls beyond our habit and invitations to more than immediate comfort, where then is the truth that grounds us and the light that guides us? When worth is a matter of question and your sense of wellness is under siege, when authorities disagree, when wisdom shifts and styles change, when you falter or fail, when the people you care about prove just a little too human, when the value of your stock crashes in whatever market you've chosen to invest your identity, whether it's security or equity, career, community standing, personal wealth, good works or good looks, an idyllic marriage and a happy family, whatever it is... Where do you go when the thing you most know is that you don't know and you wonder what you must do to be saved?

What must I do, O Lord? What must I do to find the excellence of life: that passion for living and joy in the journey which would outshine my faults and failures, my mortality and death?

As Jesus was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him to ask, Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to pull it all together, to find fulfillment that can be mine through thick and thin, through my living and my dying? How can I get to that kind of confidence and peace? And Jesus answered, Why do you call me good? God is good, and you know what you must do as God has revealed it in the law: do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother. And the man said to him, Yes, I know that. I believe in the law and keep it as well as I can, better than most, and I'm rich too! But I still haven't got it. I still haven't found the confidence and peace I can really trust. It all seems to be on me and on what I do, and, you know, some days I fail, some days I settle for far less than the best that I know, some days I am my own worst enemy. Where will I find confidence and peace that I can trust through thick and thin? What must I do, Good Teacher, to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus looked on him with love, probably smiled and put a hand on his shoulder, and said to him, You've done very well, and you're almost there. Now, sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and then come, follow me, and you will find your treasure in the journey. The real truth of eternal life, forever full and free, will find you along the way.

Eternal life will find you along the way... because the things that are most worth doing are not anything that you ever finish. They are always beginning and renewal. They will not be reduced to any one menu of goals or tasks, to any particular accomplishment or moment of measurement. Truth, honor, justice, purity, beauty and good will, none of these is a thing in itself – a fixed point in time or space – rather, they are all qualities of relationship, ways of living and loving to be acted out in every goal and task, through each accomplishment and all measurement. This is their excellence worthy of praise without ceasing. Anything really worth doing is just that... it's worth doing! It's worth

doing over and over again, through thick and thin, through success and failure, struggle and ease, in our living and in our dying, anything really worth doing is calling you into a relationship.

Love is more about what you give than what you get. It's the impulse to allow another and to empower the other out of joy in the other. Love is more about your faith than your fear. It wells up out of our hopes and dreams for the world -- the justice, beauty and truth to which God is calling us. Love is about what we would live into, not what we would run from. If it's born out of the fear of hellfire and damnation, or of being left behind, if it's driven by self loathing or self righteousness so that you might finally earn your way in or get nearer to the head of the line, then it's probably not about love. Love casts out fear.

Today is the Feast of St. Francis and, admittedly, beyond the apostles, saints are not very much a part of the Protestant Christian tradition, but I'd sure like to adopt this one, Saint Francis, as our rich young man par excellence.

He was smart, and well born, he was popular among his peers, and all set up to enter the family business. Indeed, he did, and early on was quite successful. But this appetite kept gnawing him, this hunger for more than what he could make for himself kept calling to him. And finally his life changed in something for which he was willing to give all the rest. His life became full in a purpose to which he could give his whole self, in a journey of love with God and neighbor. After selling off nearly every worldly possession to use the proceeds for the care of the poor, Francis said of himself, *I am a child of God and, in all things, richly blessed.*

What must we do to be saved. We've done very well. There's just one thing left. Whatever it is we're carrying around that cuts us off from fullness of relationship with God and neighbor, convert it into something new, something you would live into, something you would give... For we remember on this Saint Francis Day, in this celebration of Holy Communion with believers around the world... it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying to all our anxiety for this world that we are born to eternal life in this world and the next, through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior.