

The Sock-Doll Lady could sew up her magic in two hours.  
 From first snip to final stitch, it took Nellie Elvidge two hours to turn a boy's crew sock into a miniature Pillsbury Doughboy. In a typical week, Nellie produced a baker's dozen of the sock dolls for Fair Oaks Hospital. It's what the hospital gave young sisters and brothers of newborns as a present all their own. Nellie didn't start making the dolls until she was 98. Just two days short of her 104th birthday, her total production was 1,847 dolls. At the end of her life, this tiny woman found structure and meaning darning socks. The work kept her going. It was her vocation. What's your Sense of Call – your vocation? Are you laboring for the world's sake, or for God's? Often people will describe their calling by talking about jobs or careers. Few will describe a true calling, a vocation. Yes, work is about making a living. But that is not the whole of it.

**Jesus** has work to do, daunting work. He now sets his sights on Jerusalem, where he will be tested as none of us ever will be tested. It is his calling. The disciples are beginning to realize what their work is. The realization began in last week's lesson: Jesus asks, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Peter exclaims, "You are the anointed one, the messiah, Son of the living God."

And Jesus commends Peter for his true-spokenness. "On you, Rocky, I will build my community, which even the land of the dead cannot overcome." In today's lesson, Jesus explains what *kind* of Messiah he is, a suffering-servant Messiah, as Isaiah prophesied Israel would be:

*He was despised and rejected,  
 a man of suffering, of no account.*

But the idea of suffering astonishes the disciples, especially Peter, the Rock. Today's scene between Jesus and Peter inverts Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. The tempter takes Jesus to a high mountain, shows him the real world, and pledges to Jesus, 'I will give you all this if you but fall down and worship me.' And Jesus rebukes Satan: "Go away!" In our passage today, it is Jesus who shows the disciples the real world – its horrors, not its splendors. He promises the exact opposite of Satan: "I will suffer greatly at the hands of the lay leaders and senior pastors and bible teachers, then be executed, and after three days be raised." At the thought of this, Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him: "God have mercy, Lord! This cannot be your fate." We are right behind Peter, echoing his alarm. Suddenly Jesus reprimands Peter. "Go away, Satan. Get behind me! You are still setting a trap for me." Right there my bible has a break in the text – a space for the disciples (and us) to register shock at Peter's sudden loss of standing. It's like the shock when a linebacker intercepts a 4th down pass – *Yay!*

but proceeds to run the ball to the wrong end zone – scoring a safety for the opposing team. *Boo!*

For Peter's sake, Jesus explains:

“You are not gauging things

by God's expectations,

but by human expectations.”

Jesus' story moves from this point forward according to God's plan, astonishing as it seems.

He accepts the fate Isaiah prophesied:

*It was the will of the Lord  
to crush him with pain  
and make his life an offering for sin.*

In the break in Matthew's text, we make a choice, alongside the disciples. Will we accept Jesus as our Suffering Savior, following in his footsteps? Or will we reject suffering as being salvation, ever?

History has chosen the latter. Look around you.

Where do you see suffering touted as the way of salvation?

When was the last time you saw an advertisement for a car that cited the number of fatal accidents involving that make?

What college puts a disclaimer in its recruiting brochures,

‘Some graduates never earn enough to pay for the cost of this education.’

Who would ever give someone a cross pendant and say, ‘Each time you wear it, remember Christ's excruciating death.’

About the closest thing our culture has to confessing suffering is the warning that appears on every pack of cigarettes.

Suffering doesn't sell now any more than it did in Jesus' time.

Our society embraces worldliness without considering the cost.

Our culture pressures us, from a very early age, into accumulating material things.

Ever wanting, never satisfied.

The tax structure rewards us for carrying huge mortgage debt.

The pharmaceutical industry, coupled with medical technology, creates the illusion of Eternal Youth, vibrant and full.

We have fallen for the fallacy that we can improve ourselves.

Self-help is more than just a section on Amazon.

Self-help is a cultural assumption.

Self-help has made America great.

As a result, we are failure-phobic.

Even churches are afraid of failure.

Jesus asks the church,

“Is there nothing that you will not exchange for life in the kingdom of God?”

Jesus, who sees ahead

to his own shameful crucifixion, calls to us,

“Will you get behind me?

Will you bear a cross with me?”

The Kingdom is not the way of self-help but self-denial.

To really get behind Jesus

we must adopt a radical discipleship.

As in risky, revolutionary, even subversive.

The call is clear:

“Set your mind on the godly, not the worldly.”

That means the opposite of what you might think:

To set your mind on the worldly is to aim high.

*Caffè Vanilla Frappuccino Venti  
with whipped cream, please.*

(In case you were wondering, that's a 24 oz. beverage with 570 calories, 14 g protein, 21 g fat, and 75 g sugar.)

To set your mind on the **godly** is to aim low.

*A 6-ounce regular black decaf, if you please.*

The worldly is majestic, super-sized, lightning-fast.

The godly has no form or majesty  
that we should look at.  
The worldly is upward-bound.  
Satisfied. Abundant.  
The godly is crushed underfoot.  
Bruised and bleeding.  
Satan leads upward: the pinnacle of the Temple.  
God leads downward:  
Blessed are you who hunger and thirst.  
Satan is the source of human obsessions  
with greatness, success, achievement, security.  
God is the inspirer of concern for the weak,  
the rejected, the blind and the lame.  
Let's admit: we resist the godly  
and succumb to the worldly.  
Peter's misplaced alarm is ours –  
ours, the church's.  
Many concerns for the church are misplaced.  
'The church needs more young families.'  
Oh, such a concern may be church-centered,  
even Christ-centered, just not **cross**-centered.  
It is a misplaced concern  
for a church of Jesus-followers.  
If you want to come after me, deny yourself  
and take up your cross and fall in behind me.  
Would Jesus worry that anything less  
than success for his church is failure?  
Would Jesus care if a church loses a member,  
or a presbytery loses a church?  
Falling in behind Christ (that is, discipleship)  
can lead to suffering –  
not because suffering is what Christ wants,  
but because Christ threatens all that is worldly –  
including the worldly side of churches. ■

Tomorrow is a national holiday  
to honor all who labor.  
Luther wrote that our vocations come to us  
through the positions in which God has placed us,  
through which we love our neighbor as ourselves.

For Luther, 'positions' include the many ways  
we relate to others,  
inside and outside our paid occupations —  
as a husband or wife, a child, a parent,  
a church member, a citizen.  
Calvin added to this by saying that  
God has given each person  
specific talents and gifts  
that should be used for the sake of others.  
Yet it's no surprise to read  
that most people hate their jobs.  
Most people find no meaning in their livelihoods.  
Most people see no relationship  
between their work-life and their faith.  
Or they make an inverse relationship between  
work and faith:  
Job dissatisfaction is the cross I have to bear.  
But discipleship and work are inter-twined.  
If laboring for a living is a cross to bear,  
ask yourself:  
Am I laboring for the world's sake, or for God's?  
If what you do for a living has no meaning,  
ask yourself,  
Am I judging this work by the world's standards,  
or God's?  
Jesus calls working folk to make a decision:  
Decide whether your cross is worldly or godly.  
What this is getting at is the difference  
between a career and a calling,  
just-a-job and a vocation.  
The most menial labor can be a calling,  
if it serves God's purposes.  
Darning socks can be a vocation  
if it is performed with a sense of God's call.  
The complicated task you can perform effortlessly,  
no matter how routine it seems to you,  
is putting your God-given talents to work.  
Even failure at your job (in the world's eyes)  
may be exactly the lesson God wants you to learn.

His work done, Jesus is waiting for us  
on the other side of the cross.  
Our response is to trust  
that God's strength is sufficient  
for the tasks God puts before us.  
The world points us upward. Christ downward.  
Trust that losing yourself in God's service,  
however lowly, is the way to find yourself.  
Vocation, performed in service to the kingdom,  
is all positive.  
Will you choose to heed your calling?

### CONCLUSION

Theologian Frederick Buechner said these words  
in a graduation address two decades ago:

The voice we should listen to most  
as we choose a vocation  
is the voice that we might think  
we should listen to least,  
and that is the voice of our own **gladness**.  
What can we do that makes us the gladdest?  
What can we do that leaves us  
with the strongest sense of sailing true north?  
Is it making things with our hands  
out of wood or stone or paint or canvas?  
Is it making something we hope is truthful  
out of words?  
Is it making people laugh or weep  
in a way that cleanses their spirit?

Personally, I believe that if work  
makes us truly glad, it's a good thing,  
a Godly thing.

Let us answer our Sense of Call  
with our livelihoods as well as our lives.  
Amen.