

We were down in southern Indiana earlier in the week, whipping the farmhouse yard into shape, weeding the flowerbeds, planting flowers, mowing, and cleaning up around the outbuildings. This place we go to relax is wearing us out. We're good friends with a couple in Danville who are building a cabin down there near Lake Patoka, so we made plans to have dinner with them one night, and they invited another couple to join us.

I got to talking with the man and I asked him what he did for a living. I don't like to reduce people to their vocations, but I didn't want to talk politics with him because I wasn't sure which way he leaned politically. These are perilous times and one wants to refrain from inadvertently poking a hornet's nest. So I just asked him what he did, thinking that was a safe topic.

He said, "I work at the wastewater treatment plant."

I asked him if he liked it.

"Been doing it thirty years," he said. "And I love it."

It immediately made me like him. Any man who is enthusiastic about working in a wastewater treatment plant probably has a good attitude about everything.

Driving home, I thought about all the kids in our meeting who are graduating this spring. I've been talking with them about their plans, what and where they want to study and do. Bright kids. Good kids. But not one of them is planning on working at a wastewater treatment plant.

In fact, I don't think that in all the years I've been asking kids what they want to do with their lives, that one of them has ever said, "I want to work in a wastewater treatment plant."

But I sure am glad that somebody does.

I was in New York last weekend and the lady sitting next to me on the airplane asked me what I did. I told her I pastored a Quaker meeting and wrote books, and she was fascinated by that. She said she'd always wanted to be a writer. I bet the man who works at the wastewater treatment plant has never sat next to someone on an airplane who wanted to do what he did.

But if you were to ask me who was more essential to our society, who was more indispensable, a writer or a wastewater treatment man, I know which one I would pick, and it wouldn't be me.

I was visiting my mom and dad at the nursing home and my dad pulled me aside and said, "You wouldn't believe what these people taking care of me make an hour."

He was referring to the aides who help him in the restroom, bathe him, and get him dressed. They feed him, shave him, and wash his clothes. When they have a spare moment, they sit beside him and talk about Notre Dame football with him. They remember what he likes to eat and what he doesn't like to eat. When he gets sick or has an accident, they clean him up. They sweep and mop his floor, wash his bedsheets, and hug him if he's sad or scared. When he's in a bad mood and snaps at them, they just smile and respond with kindness.

“You wouldn’t believe what they pay those people,” he said.

“How much?” I asked.

“Twenty dollars an hour,” he said. “Can you believe that?”

Guess what my first thought was?

I should have thought, “Yeah, and they earn every penny of that and ought to make more.”

But instead I thought, “Twenty dollars! That’s crazy.”

I’m not even sure it’s true they make twenty dollars an hour, but that was my first thought.

I hired a lawyer once to do some legal work for me on a book contract, paid him \$500 an hour, and walked out of his office all puffed up and feeling important. I even took him out to lunch. Last year, I paid a surveyor \$2,000 dollars for a day’s work. This past spring, I paid a dental hygienist \$200 to clean my teeth. Ten years ago, I paid a surgeon \$5,000 to repair a hernia. Hernia’s have gotten so expensive, I’ve decided not to have any more.

But let someone take care of our mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers when we’re no longer willing or able, and we’ll say, “Twenty dollars an hour! That’s a rip-off”

Perhaps because no one ever graduates from high school saying, “My life’s dream is to work in a nursing home and clean up old people.”

But aren’t you profoundly grateful there are people who will do that, and wouldn’t it be wonderful if our society treasured such people?

There was a time when jobs like that were considered a holy calling, the work of saints. If you wanted to be a saint in the early church, you did the humble work no one else would do.

In his letter to the Christian community in Rome, when Paul was fleshing out what it meant to be Christian—it was a new movement and he was trying to describe the nature of the Christian life—he wrote, “Don’t be full of yourself. That’s not who we are. Instead, associate with the lowly. And don’t think you’re better than everyone else.”

I got a buddy who came into some money so decided to buy a big boat and take his family out on the ocean. They were about five miles out from shore, a storm blew up, and their motor quit. Waves were crashing over the sides of the boat. He sent his wife and kids down below, then radioed the Coast Guard telling them he needed help. But they were busy rescuing other boaters and couldn’t get there. He pleaded with the Coast Guard to send someone, anyone. They told him they’d send someone just as soon as someone was available.

An hour later, they’re still down in the hold of the boat, puking and miserable, and heard this man calling out. My buddy went up on the deck and saw this old man in a dinghy.

My buddy told me, “Littlest boat I ever saw. The guy looked to be about a hundred years-old and he only had one arm. He kept rowing in circles.”

My buddy went back down to the hold. His wife asked him, “Is that the Coast Guard?”

He said, “No, it’s a one-armed man in a dinghy.”

She said, “Oh, my Lord, we’re dead.”

But they didn’t die. The one-armed man in a dinghy saved their lives.

It’s a funny thing about life. We never know who’s going to end up being utterly important to us. Might not be the rich and powerful, the ones we fuss and fawn over. Might not be the men and women of high degree whose names we like to drop. We might discover we’re utterly dependent on the wastewater treatment guy. Or the nursing home worker. Or the one-armed man in a dinghy.

Don’t be full of yourself. Befriend and respect the common man. Don’t get the big head, thinking you’re better than everyone else.

A long time ago, a little group of folks in Rome wrote to Paul asking what it meant to be Christian, and that’s what he said.

Don’t be full of yourself. Befriend and respect the common man. Don’t get the big head, thinking you’re better than everyone else.

Good words then. Good words now.