

Missional Living in the Workplace – Sharing by Victor – August 16, 2015
Matthew 25:14-23 & 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9

The other day I was driving around in my chariot, my sanctuary on wheels. Some of you know I drive a 2008 Mazda CX-9. I love this car. It is a great vehicle. In fact, it was a vehicle that was way ahead of its time. 2008. Rear view camera, blind spot monitoring, heated seats, navigation, bluetooth, Bose Stereo Sound system. Furthermore, just like my dear wife, this car has been a picture of reliability -- completely low maintenance.

So, imagine me, driving around town, happily engrossed in an audio book or maybe listening to my favourite spotify tunes as I coast into a 4 way stop intersection. It's one of those hot sweltering and stifling days, yet am I worried? No way. I am in a state of perfect comfort enjoying my climate controlled air conditioned environment.

As I step on the gas to drive across the intersection -- I am suddenly and harshly jolted back into reality by a piercingly loud blare of a car horn. As I slam on my brakes the culprit car slowly makes a left turn in front of me, the driver's steely eyes burning holes into my forehead as I slink back into my seat. As he pulls ahead of me, I reluctantly follow him down the road and notice those same eyes staring back at me in his rear view mirror. Finally, to put the nail in the coffin, he proceeds to raise his index finger and starts wagging it in the most condemning and judgmental manner.

Have you ever had someone explode at you?
Have you ever had someone cross you?
Have you ever been thoroughly and possibly even maliciously misunderstood?

Such is the nature of living and working alongside other members of this fallen yet redeemed species -- the human race.

The topic I've been given to reflect upon this morning is 'Missional living in the Workplace'.

I am well aware that not everyone here has a workplace to go to. Some are in the midst of discerning God's direction for them in the realm of career, some are called to work in the home, some are between jobs.

Still, for most of us, and for most of humanity, one day, for better or for worse, we will have a workplace where God will place us. A context to toil away and live out the days of our lives.

My qualifications to speak on such a title as Missional Living in the Workplace are quite simple. I am alive, I have a place of work and our God is on a mission in this world.

If you are expecting a three point recipe for being God's soldier, demon slayer and soul winner in the workplace, I am sorry but I am going to disappoint you.

Instead, my thoughts are actually better captured by the title 'Mission-ish Living in the Workplace'

Just in case you fall asleep during my monologue let me give you the conclusions right up front:

1. It's God's mission -- not my mission.
2. Boiled right down, God is on a mission to love. To love you, to love the world, and to love the world through you.
3. Focus on faithfulness
4. Put on God's spectacles: God will show you what He is doing in, through and around you

By way of background, I was trained as a medical doctor graduating from the University of Toronto medical school way way way back in 1995. I crossed the country to spend the following 6 years associated with UBC based hospitals completing my surgical specialty training in General Surgery.

So what is a General Surgeon? Well, one could define a general surgeon by some of the commonest diseases I deal with: colon cancer, hemorrhoids, appendicitis, hernias, and gallbladder stones.

However it might just be easier to imagine a group of 10 year old boys talking around the dinner table about various bodily functions -- add an operating room and a knife and presto -- you've got an idea of my surgical specialty.

To explain how I got here I will need to start with Victor Tsang, circa grade 10 or 11. At that age, setting one's sights on a career in medicine, would make most immigrant parents happy. Being a pleaser by nature, and thoroughly lacking any creativity I decided to focus my energies in this direction.

God was also very kind and early on I noticed that He had given me an unusual gift. The gift of MCQ. Does anyone here know what MCQ is? That's right, Multiple choice questions. I had an incredible knack for seeing into the mind of the MCQ question writers. It was like knowing a special secret language. I rode this talent all the way through every academic hoop of university, medical school, and finally a residency in my chosen career path of surgery.

All the while, I always had this fear that this special talent might be taken from me. To insulate me from this horror, I committed to two rituals. First, I would always seek God's blessing in prayer prior to writing a test and second, I would always give glory to God if I did well. While the theological foundations of such an approach were sound, I would be lying if I didn't admit that some of the rituals began to border on superstition.

For example, when I was in High School, I would often secretly inscribe the letters PTL (for Praise the Lord) in super tiny microfiche size fonts on some corner of a test page. I got a bit more sophisticated in University and used the acronym SDG (Sol Deo Gloria - To God be the glory, popularized by Johann Sebastian Bach)

As the stakes of my educational aspirations grew higher, I increasingly bargained my life away to God.

'Lord, I prayed and pleaded, if I pass this exam, I will devote my life to your service'

I remember hoping to get into the surgical program here at UBC back in 1995. This, in my mind, was the pinnacle of aspirations. In exchange, I vowed to God that I would be his missionary. What could be more of a sacrifice, eh?

A strange thing happened, however, on the journey to the edges of the African jungles where no ear had ever heard the name of Jesus and where children lived on less than \$1 a day. Instead of a life lived with and for the poor, a coveted city job in beautiful Vancouver no less became available at the exact moment of my graduation -- and so I took it.

The rest, as they say, is history. I have been doing this very same job as a surgeon for the past 14 years.

From time to time, I must confess I still feel guilty for not being on the mission field preaching the gospel to the heathen, eating bugs, using outhouses, and showering only on furlough.

Yet, being part of this church family, and hearing every week that we do not go to church but we ARE in fact the church wherever we go has slowly made an impact on my soul and the life I lead in the workplace.

In Matthew 25:14-30, in the famous Parable of the Talents, Jesus tells the story of a master who went on a journey and entrusted his property to his servants.

To the servant he entrusted 5 talents - this servant doubled the investment and returned 5 more talents. To the servant Jesus entrusted 2 talents - this servant also doubled the investment and returned 2 more talents.

I don't know about you, but since childhood, I've always associated this parable with fear. Fear about being the 1 talent lazy servant who only hid the talent in the ground. We all know what happened to him, right? His talent was taken away from him and he was to darkness, the place where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth. Maybe some of you have the same psychological complex that I developed. Maybe some of you had the same Sunday school teacher!

Shame, Shame Shame. Bad Bad Bad. Lazy, lazy, lazy!

Well this morning as you may have noticed, I intentionally asked Vince to stop midway in the story.

For now, I'd like suspend time and pause on Jesus' commendations to the first two servants. Those who had been given 5 and 2 talents respectively.

Do you hear the love in the master's voice? Do you hear the love in Jesus' voice calling out to you, this morning?

Does Jesus say, well done, good and missional servant? Does Jesus say, well done, demon slayer, mass evangelism expert?

No, he said, 'Well done good and faithful servant'

Well done, good and faithful servant!

Phew! Take a breath! Relax!

In so many ways, this juxtaposition of the words missional and faithful has allowed me to set, in my mind, more reachable goals for myself in the workplace.

The charge to be missional and especially an agent of the Great Commission outlined in Matthew 28 frankly scared me. It seemed like such lofty and impossible mission that I would be crippled by either decision paralysis or feelings of guilt. Perhaps God's mission is best left to the experts, I thought, let's leave it to the pastors, the preachers, the theologians, the missionaries.

But faithfulness. Faithfulness. There was something intriguingly welcoming about this. Now here is something I think I can strive towards.

So I set a new goal, I told myself, OK Victor, God doesn't need you to win any Christian Mission and Evangelism awards. All I wanted to hear were Jesus words to me, 'Well done good and faithful servant'.

Focus on Faithfulness. Faithfulness. Faithfulness.

What does this even mean?

Over the past 14 years, faithfulness to God has turned out to mean different things.

At the outset, faithfulness meant making it my job to be a competent and skillful surgeon. Not only did this keep me out of the courtroom from lawsuits, but I wanted to represent my God with professional excellence in the career path that He was so gracious to give me.

Scientific/Academic recognition or administrative power had no appeal to me as I focused my efforts towards surgical excellence and running an efficient and productive surgical practice.

I have vivid memories of God leading me during difficult surgeries and complicated clinical decisions. I have many memories of caring for patients with seemingly unsolvable problems ultimately improving after careful and thoughtful management coupled with my quiet, secret prayers.

I also felt God's presence with me whenever I went the extra mile and took the time to listen to a patient's story or offer sympathy to a dying patient and their family.

Things were going well, I felt that God was using me as his servant in a variety of situations. Still, I must confess, part of me always felt a little bit guilty that I wasn't doing enough about sharing my faith with my patients or my colleagues at work.

Things were not always smooth sailing, but truth be told, the more experienced I became, the less the practice of surgery would stress me out.

Work, however, wasn't without its stresses.

Remember the rude and out of left field honking horn I received in my introductory story?

Well, over the years I have received my fair share of jolting surprising honking horns in the workplace. Most often these have come about through unexpected and painful interpersonal conflicts.

As I reflect on my years in practice it has become surprising to me how frequent and effective a tool these honking horns have been for God to use to prune me into his workplace mission-ish disciple.

Please indulge me as I will relate, in some detail, two stories that typify the kind of interpersonal conflicts I have had to endure.

The first story I'll entitle: Lessons with Dr. Cancel

For more than a decade I have been working with a certain anesthesiologist -- I will call him Dr. Cancel -- just to be clear, that is not his real name. In an operating room setting, there is an important physician relationship that needs to be carefully managed for both workplace peace and patient safety. At times, though, surgeons and anesthesiologists can be like cats and dogs, oil and water. You see, anesthesiologists and surgeons are cut from different cloth and come from very different training paradigms: for the surgeon we are tunnel visioned and focused on 'how to effectively and efficiently perform an operation for the benefit of a patient', for the anesthesiologist their focus is 'Is the patient healthy enough to withstand what the surgeon is proposing?' Unfortunately, Dr. Cancel is, as his name implies, rather infamous for canceling surgeries. To give some background, family doctor's send patients to a surgeon's office for an opinion as to whether surgery is appropriate or not. After a complete workup and evaluation, a surgeon will make a final decision as to the appropriateness of a surgical intervention. Once surgery has been agreed upon, the surgeon and his office staff will then make dozens of arrangements to organize a date and time with the patient. As you might imagine, there is a great deal of background and preparatory work that needs to occur before 'game time' 'show time' 'surgery time' or whatever you want to call it.

Well let me tell you, there is nothing more deflating and irritating to both a surgeon and patient as when Dr. Cancel -- in what seems like the 11th hour -- cancels a surgery. Typically, he cites concerns over a patient's fitness for an anesthetic. To a surgeon's eye, this can seem to be soooo subjective. In truth, if you lined up 100 anesthesiologists, there would be variability in practice and 'case cancellation' enthusiasm. At our institution, Dr. Cancel is the King of cancelled surgeries. In my early years of practice, I repeatedly became frustrated when I felt Dr. Cancel canceled surgeries too freely. To be fair, he is a very safe anesthesiologist, but there have been times I wondered if he just did not wish to take on any risky or challenging patient or maybe he just wanted to leave work early.

I remember once exploding at him in frustration, as yet another patient's surgery was cancelled. I was literally foaming at the mouth, vocalizing and venting sarcastic comments that would have best been left unsaid. I remember confronting him in the hallway and he just cocked his head, canceled the case in triumph and turned his back to me. He had won the battle.

Well, God started to work in my heart that day. I remember starting to feel bad for having blown my top at him.

The other detail that you should know is that Dr. Cancel is gay. Growing up, I had a happy church experience. Looking back, however, it was a typical narrow conservative evangelical background -- unusually gifted in judgmentalism. As the AIDS epidemic gathered steam, gays, unfortunately, would frequently surface to the top of the list of 'sinners' as evidence of God's judgment. Shamefully, as a youth I particularly relished jokes where gays were at the butt end of the joke. In my subconscious, I felt that Dr. Cancel was lashing back at me and society. Whether or not there was any merit to this sentiment, God began softening my heart and teaching me to see things from his perspective.

After yet another blow up, I felt God convict me of my sin of hypocrisy, judgmentalism and lack of self control. Later that day God gave me the courage to seek him out and offer up an apology -- albeit meekly. While I still felt strongly in the rightness of my cause, I put this aside, and I chose to respect his professional decision. God was teaching me that the relationship with my colleague was also important.

Amazingly, our relationship started to improve.

Shortly thereafter, I received an invitation to his annual summer party. FYI the gay community REALLY knows how to throw a party -- Christians take note! And in response to his proclivity to cancel cases, over the years I have worked harder at better preparing my patients to avoid unexpected last minute case cancellations. I haven't blown up at him in ages and the truth is we have developed a mutual respect. In fact, I am humbled that he regularly recommends me if a personal friend of his is in need of surgery. Again, just the other day, we coincidentally saw each other at a pizzeria and he and his partner graciously invited my friend and me to dine together.

So God used this honking horn, this interpersonal conflict as a way of shaping me into a less judgmental and hypocritical person.

This next story or workplace vignette tells the story of God's ongoing battle with my pride. One of the dangers of scholastic and professional achievement is a bloated sense of self.

You'll soon see how God shot his arrows at the heart of this sin of mine in this next story. I call this story hero to zero.

I remember being called one evening to assess a 50 year old man with severe abdominal pain, distention and vomiting. After evaluating him, I realized that he had a surgical emergency called sigmoid volvulus where the colon had twisted on itself and was cutting off its own blood supply. Left untreated, the colon would expand, rupture and feces would leak their poisons throughout the body. I think you are getting the picture that this would not be desirable.

While there was no question that this man needed an operation, there were a couple of major factors that stood in the way of his definitive medical care. As the most responsible physician looking after this man, I needed to navigate complex ethical and system issues before even getting him to the operating room.

On the ethical side, it turns out that this 50 year old man had sustained a severe brain injury 25 years prior rendering him unable to speak and incapable to make decisions on his own. In order to prepare him and consent him for surgery, I needed to speak with the

public trustee and coordinate the agreement of a team of health care professionals that this was necessary and life-saving surgery.

On the system complexity side of the equation, I had to coordinate the timing of this surgery. Would I call in the operating room staff in the middle of the night to toil all night? Not only would they all be bleary eyed, but extra emergency medical resources are not easily available until daylight hours -- so would it be safe? Furthermore, union rules for the length of a nurse's shift could result in the cancellation of the next day's surgeries even though many of those patients had waited months for their surgery. On the flipside, if I waited too long, would his intestines burst?

After intense thought and negotiation -- and what seemed like a thousand phone calls and conversations, I made a calculated risk and decided to medically resuscitate the patient through the night and start his surgery as the first case of the day -- bumping into another surgeon's room.

So there I was finally, at 7 am bumping the first case of the day and finally prepared for the medical challenge -- to carefully slice into his now severely bloated balloon like abdomen, find and correct the problem. Fortunately, I was able to quickly and efficiently remove the dead bowel and complete the surgery with only a minor interference to the day's pre-planned elective schedule.

With an immense sense of satisfaction, I snapped my bloodied surgical gloves off -- throwing them into a nearby garbage can with flair and flourish -- just like how I remembered Hawkeye do on an old TV episode of MASH. My chest full of pride and accomplishment and brimming also from successfully navigating a myriad of complex decisions, I proceeded to saunter out of the operating room to make my way to my office. I was a little bit late, but who cares? I had just saved a life!

There was only one last conversation I needed to relay. As I left the operating room, I leaned in through the doorway of another operating room where another surgeon was already working on his case. I announced to the surgeon in an insincere self effacing manner that 'not to worry' the complex surgical emergency had been deftly dealt with. I trusted that he could manage with the remainder of the day's workload.

KABOOM. HONK.

Unbeknownst to me, Dr. Blowup, the anesthesiologist had been brewing all morning long with discontent. The upshot of my decision to bump into the day's surgical slate meant that she would have to stay late to finish up any surgeries. She exploded at me and shot arrows of sarcasm in my direction. Shocked and bewildered, I meekly asked if there was a problem. "Oh yes there most certainly was" she emphatically shot back at me.

For the next 10 minutes, she proceeded to elaborate on how rude a person I was. According to her, I had just barged into her sanctuary, her sacred anesthesia working space and without even a good morning or hello, had spoken right past her to my surgical colleague without even acknowledging her.

Shocked and my ears still ringing from her accusations, I offered up an apology. Despite being thoroughly mentally and physically exhausted I dug down and stood there while I received a barrage of accusations like bullets on the receiving end of a maniacal firing

squad. After what seemed like an eternity, I said sorry one last time, turned around and left. I closed my eyes, prayed and hoped that I had repaired the damage.

As I tried to slink unnoticed past the front operating room desk, the unit clerk stopped me, looked at me and whispered into my ear 'how did you do that?'

Do what? I asked? Unbeknownst to me, she had witnessed the entire spectacle, the entire tirade, the entire verbal lashing. Speechless, all I could meekly utter was -- 'Umm, I don't know, it must have been 'Jesus' helping me.

'Jesus'. That's all I had to say to the unit clerk. She was the inadvertent audience of my public shaming, my crowning with thorns, my fifty lashes.

You know, whatever situation you find yourself in, whether it be the in workplace, in the home, or even in the world of anxious, confused and conflicted thoughts of discernment. Jesus is the answer.

Our situations will differ, our circumstances and opportunities will not be the same. But the number one Sunday School Answer - Jesus, will always be there to guide and sometimes quite simply carry you through.

By some miracle, I have since worked with Dr. Blowup and while we are not best friends, there is sufficient mutual respect that nothing gets in the way patient care.

Comically, and by way of celestial irony, God has even seen fit to place this very doctor in some of my social spheres. Every time we pass each other in the halls of Westside dance picking up our respective daughters, I am reminded of my public shaming.

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul says this, So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

What was Paul's thorn? Was it physical, emotional, spiritual? Was it a person?

In fact, there is no agreement among experts as to the identity of Paul's thorn. I like this because it invites me to insert any irritant that God can redeem for His purpose.

In my life tension in the workplace and in particular interpersonal conflict has been used by God to shape me into his tool. His missional / mission ish representative. In many ways, some people are the very 'thorns' in my flesh that number 1. are not going away anytime soon, if ever, and number 2. are being used by God to draw me closer to him, to shape me, to humble me.

So there you have it. 'Hero to Zero' and 'Dr. Cancel'. Two stories of how God has used conflict in the workplace to prune me more into the likeness of Christ. Even though I am still a long long way off, I am comforted and reassured remembering that it isn't about me, it is about Him, embodying Him, reflecting Him and pointing to Him.

The next time I make a mistake, or am falsely accused or am misunderstood, I will remember that it is Jesus who forgives me and gives me the courage to seek the

forgiveness of another. Jesus died for all of us -- including my enemies. And whether I can see it or not, Jesus is working in the life of the other as well.

In recent years, God has seen it fit to place me as the head of surgery at my hospital. It is a far cry from the missionary dream I once had of eating bugs, using outhouses and abundant soul winning.

As the head of surgery, I feel ill prepared in many ways, but the episodes of conflict in the workplace have taught me much about listening to others and learning to see their points of view. Lack of self control, judgmentalism, hypocrisy, pride, and a critical spirit obviously have no place in the heart of the leader God wants me to be. Head of surgery. This was never my goal. This was never my mission. But somehow it was and is God's mission for me.

As I conclude I hope my stories have helped you to see some of the lessons I've learned about Missional Living in the Workplace:

1. It's God's mission -- not my mission. And boiled right down, God is on a mission to love. To love you, To love the world, and to love the world through you.
2. Focus on faithfulness
3. Put on God's spectacles: God will show you what He is doing in, through and around you

While it has been a privilege for me to share these stories from my workplace, I know that God is good and is actively working in your lives, homes, families, friendships and workplaces. I know this room is full of similar stories of trials and triumphs, laughter and tears on the road to missional living in the world -- wherever that might be: the workplace, the home, the family, wherever.

For the purposes of encouragement and edification I am going to suggest we spend some time reflecting and sharing on the following questions.

Questions for sharing:

1. What might faithfulness look like in your current situation?
2. Has God ever used interpersonal conflict to shape or prune your character?
3. What is God doing in, through and/or around you?

Depending on the size of the group we might share in small groups or large group.