

Message for September 3, 2017
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
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Scripture passage: Romans 12:9-21

Our job description

This is Labor Day weekend. Monday is a holiday in honor of the work that we do. We call the work we do our jobs. And for each job there is a job description. When Bruce and I started thinking about rejoining MCC as Area Directors for Central and West Africa, we asked to see the job description. It's a long one. There are many, many facets to that job. The list of things to be covered is extensive. At first glance it seemed rather daunting. However, as we looked down the list of tasks, we said to each other, "Yes, this looks right. That sounds familiar. Uh, huh, we've done that before." By the time we got to the end, we were able to look at each other in confidence and say, "There will be a learning curve, but we can do this!" Thanks to the job description, we understand in detail what the job demands.

As I read and reflected on our passage from Romans 12 it struck me: This is a job description, it's a job description for followers of Jesus. In very accessible language – a series of short descriptive phrases – we are given clear and precise instructions. In order to be a Jesus disciple, you need to do these things. It's all laid out there. A comprehensive job description. It's even in the form of a checklist, ready to be referred to when it comes time for that annual evaluation. Let's see, am I doing my job well? Am I covering all the bases?

This Romans 12 job description has been printed on the back of your joys and concerns. Like the MCC job description that Bruce and I looked at, it looks long and can seem daunting. But, also like that job description, I'll bet as you look down through this

list, you will think, “Yes, this is familiar. It is challenging, yes, but it makes sense.

There may be a learning curve, but with help I should be able to do this job.”

Actually, if I were the one in charge, I’d tweak the layout of this job description a bit. I’d start where the passage ends. Your job, I’d say to potential disciples, is this: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Oh my, they’d respond, that’s a tall order. How on earth do we do that? Well, here’s where you start, I’d say: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” Can you be a little more specific? Sure. “Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Do this with panache. Be fervent in your devotion. And stay focused on the goal, which is serving the Lord.

But what does this mean practically? Could you make this concrete? Of course: Be happy! Rejoice with those who rejoice. Know that there is always cause for rejoicing because you have hope in God. Live into this hope. At the same time know that there will be pain and suffering. Enter into this fully with each other. Don’t avoid it or sweep it under the rug. Weep with those who weep. And be patient. Wait on the Lord. Keep praying. That is important.

Don’t be stingy. Contribute to the needs around you. Extend hospitality to strangers. Do your best to live in harmony with each other. You can do this by not being haughty. No one is better than anyone else in God’s eyes. Hang out with those who are considered lowly. Remember that you never know the whole story. Always be ready to listen and learn. Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

But what does this have to do with overcoming evil with good? those potential disciples might ask. Ah, that’s where this job gets tricky. You are not only supposed to

do all this good stuff with and for those you know and love or those who seem trustworthy or deserving; you are also supposed to do it with and for those who are out to get you, those who make your life and the lives of others miserable, those who are not playing fair. Your enemies, you might say. Here is how you are to respond to them: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” Instead think about what is noble and right. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Yes, I mean it. This is part of the job. “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” And that means everyone. “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” Your job doesn’t include vengeance or getting even. That’s above your pay grade. You need to leave that to God.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Because this is Labor Day weekend and we’re thinking about work, I want to share a story of a business which seems to be taking this calling, this Romans 12 job description to heart. It’s a story written by Dorcas Cheng-Tozun for the July 24 issue of Epistle, the online magazine of Evangelicals for Social Action. The article is entitled, “Crossing Cultures to Fight Hate.” Dorcas Chang-Tozun writes:

Muamer Cisija was only a young boy when the Bosnian War of the 1990s hit his hometown. He and his family fled to Denmark, and he eventually ended up in California in the MBA program at Stanford’s business school. Now he’s demonstrating that business can not only develop economies, but it can also bring people together in powerful ways.

Using his education and his connections, Cisija partnered with co-founder Haris Memic in 2009 to build the fast-growing software firm Symphony. They collaborate with

some of Silicon Valley’s most recognized names, augmenting these companies’ projects with additional engineering expertise from the Balkans.

So why am I telling their story? This work sounds like standard high-tech fare, except for one important difference: Cisija and Memic see their business as a culture-driven technology house. And a big part of that culture is using Symphony as a platform to address economic and social wounds from that long-ago Bosnia/Serbia conflict.

Symphony’s first office was established in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Cisija and Memic knew that their fellow Bosnians have plenty to offer in the way of skill and talent. What they lack is opportunity. Today, the unemployment rate in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a staggering 40 percent. The youth unemployment rate has approached 60 percent in recent years. As a result, many educated Bosnians leave the country—typically to Germany or the U.S.—in search of better professional opportunities.

To help stem the brain drain, Cisija and Memic want “to create ecosystems where they are,” and “democratize access to great work.” They have worked hard to make their company as attractive as possible to talented engineers: modeling their office design after Google’s workplaces, prioritizing opportunities for growth and travel, and offering the chance to collaborate with renowned Silicon Valley firms on leading-edge projects.

But the entrepreneurs took their vision one step further. When they were ready to expand operations to a second office, they chose to locate it in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, which still has an uneasy relationship with Bosnia more than twenty years after the war. (Serbia has a more modest unemployment rate of 13 percent, but the threat of brain drain is just as real there.)

Rather than siloing these two offices to avoid potential ethnic conflict, Cisija and Memic intentionally bring their Bosnian and Serbian teams together. They collaborate on the same projects. Employees from one country are regularly sent to work in the other country, facilitating the development of close one-on-one relationships with their colleagues. “There is a mutual respect and welcoming,” Cisija explained. “They engage as engineers, not based on nationality. They ask, ‘What can we achieve together?’” This kind of collaboration doesn’t happen by accident. Symphony recruits employees who demonstrate empathy and openness; the company promotes a culture of feedback, learning, and growth.

Symphony has taken the best of what Silicon Valley culture has to offer—innovation, teamwork, diversity, empowerment—and applied it in a context that has been defined more by economic struggle and social mistrust. Not only do the company’s employees take pride in the high-level work they do, but Cisija reported that he regularly observes old ethnic stereotypes and prejudices fall away. In their place, he sees trust, camaraderie, and respect.

“They realize how similar people are across cultures,” Cisija said. And they see the value of diversity. “Every region has its strengths and brings a uniqueness to how they think. It’s additive. The whole gets better.”

The software business currently has 85 employees across its two offices and is already planning its expansion into another Balkan country, Macedonia. According to Cisija, “It’s another untapped pool of talent.” And it provides Symphony yet another opportunity to tear down cross-cultural barriers and to grow their global community of engineers.

[That's the end of the story by Dorcas Chang-Tozun.]

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” This is not a pipe dream. As we see in this story, there are very practical down-to-earth ways of doing this. In Bosnia and Serbia the enmity is strong. It would be easy for evil to keep the upper hand. To be consumed with vengeful thoughts, or to be led into putting such thoughts into practice, is to keep evil in circulation. The way to overthrow evil, rather than perpetuate it, is to take its force and give back goodness instead. Mr. Cisija and Mr. Memic creatively chose this second way. We can do this as well.

We can do this here in our own country. We can do this in our neighborhoods and communities. We can overcome the evil of hate and distrust with a strong and creative commitment to the common good. As followers of Jesus, that is, after all, our job description.

In his book, The Violence of Love, Archbishop Oscar A. Romero wrote: “The common good will not be attained by excluding people. We can’t enrich the common good of our country by driving out those we don’t care for. We have to try to bring out all that is good in each person and try to develop an atmosphere of trust, not with physical force, as though dealing with irrational beings, but with a moral force that draws out the good that is in everyone.”

This is our charge, but we are not running blind, my sisters and brothers. We have received instructions on how we are to put this moral force into action. Please take the insert that is in your bulletins. Let’s re-read our job description together.

Read Romans 12:9-21

May God strengthen our resolve to do the job to which we have been called.