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Work and Faith

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## Faith and Work

C. William Pollard

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**LAITY LODGE LEADERSHIP FORUM  
THE CLOISTER  
SEA ISLAND GA  
MARCH 4-7, 1999**

**“Faith and Work”**

**C. William Pollard  
Chairman  
The ServiceMaster Company**

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Thank you for this opportunity to be with you today and share with you some of my thoughts on faith and work.

I am an intense and passionate person - intense and passionate about my faith, my family and my work. I am a Christian. Some would label me an evangelical. I would prefer to be called a follower of Jesus Christ. As we came to this conference, we had in our packet a quote from Robert Louis Stevenson as he referred to his faith. He said: “When Christ came into my life, I came about like a well-handled ship.” I love to sail, and I know what it’s like to come about and change direction, and so my faith also involved that conversion experience which brought me “about” to face God. At the same time, I have found as I have lived my faith that although the winds from God are consistent, they often come from different directions, requiring a constant tacking and coming about to catch the full power of the wind.

Judy and I have been married for over 39 years. She was my high school sweetheart and has been a great partner in life. When I talked to her about describing our relationship as intense and passionate, she acknowledged that there were times when both descriptions were applicable, but in the long term, she came up with, I think, a better description – loyal and faithful. Wherever we have been

in life, we have been faithful and loyal to each other. We have four children and twelve grandchildren. My family has played a significant role in my life.

My work has involved the practice of law for ten years, being a professor and administrator at Wheaton College for five years, and working for ServiceMaster for the past 22 years.

We have talked about balance and priorities. I appreciated Steve Reinemund's comments about the pendulum that swings when one talks about balance in their life and the importance of having a mosaic instead of a departmentalized view of life. I can remember a time several years ago when I was discussing this subject with Peter Drucker. We were talking about setting priorities in life and in business. He reminded me that it wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we pluralized the word priority. Up until that time, it was only spoken of in the singular. It came into our vocabulary in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and during all that time it was considered only in the singular. He suggested that as one sorts through priorities, there may be only one priority. That evening in my hotel room, I was reading in my Bible and reflecting upon the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount when He said: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God in His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." The question this raises is not what comes first – family, church or business – but is God in it? If God is not in it, it probably is not a priority.

Frankly, I am the type of person who is involved in thinking about my business at home, and I am involved in thinking about my family while I am working, and I am involved in my faith in both.

The company I joined 22 years ago is much different today than it was then. It is 30 times larger. It is over \$6 billion of customer revenue, managing and employing over 240,000 people, serving 10 million customers. There has been a lot of change, but there is something that has not changed and that is our company objectives:

To honor God in all we do

To help people develop

To pursue excellence and

To grow profitably

The first two goals are end goals, the second two are means goals. While most people are ready to accept three of our objectives - to develop people, to pursue excellence and to grow profitably - it is the God language that usually raises the question. Is this appropriate for a public company? Is this appropriate in a pluralistic environment? For us, it's a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and to avoid that which is wrong. It is not a basis for exclusion. In fact, it's our reason for promoting diversity because different people are all part of God's mix and it focuses us and it requires of us a focus on the dignity and worth of every person. Now, we are not a Christian company (tell story about being asked to speak at a fellowship of Christian companies) nor do we just hire Christians. We did not start out that way and it is not a practice today. We have a leadership principle that tell us that we pay based on performance and promote based upon potential. (Here tell story of being petitioned by ServiceMaster managers.)

Now, as I share with you what we are not, I also want to share with you how it works. Our founder had a simple standard: If you don't live it, you don't believe it. (Here tell story of how he used to talk to new recruits.)

The second part of implementation involves understanding the role of faith in a pluralistic environment. The Christian, my faith, by its very nature is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity. It allows for order – a systematic way of thinking and learning. Definition, however, also sets boundary lines, determines limits of what is and what is not, what is truth and what is error. It can become exclusive in my thinking - results in the shutting out of those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition. How, then, do I relate and maintain my faith? Do I try to redefine it to make it more inclusive, tolerant, acceptable? Water it down so as to be not so defensive or do I maintain the old separation between the sacred and the secular and live a bifurcated life and accept the premise that religion, business and politics just don't mix? Or do I use my leadership to promote and propagate my faith or impose my faith? Or can I live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined, tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and, yes, even embraced by some – all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services, generate profits, a community that has a soul.

It is this latter avenue of expression of my faith that I have attempted to live in my work. I was introduced to it as I joined ServiceMaster. (Here tell story of being interviewed by Ken Hansen and Ken Wessner.) It has extended to my present role as I have shared with my partner and colleague, Carlos Cantu, in his recent sickness. It is there as I have spoken to various groups in ServiceMaster (here give examples) or talked to the investment community (here give example of Fidelity Fund manager who heard the Harvard Case Study). It played a role in my presentation in the launching of our business in China to over 300 government officials in the Great Hall of the People or as I participated in our partner's funeral in the oldest Buddhist temple in Japan or when I have reviewed what we have

done wrong as a result of defending ourselves in a lawsuit that is going to be filmed on Dateline.

And so my conclusions on this subject of faith and work are simply that:

1. My faith is exactly that – a faith. It is a substance of things hoped for and the confidence of things not seen. No matter what I do, no matter how I defend it, no matter how strong my apologetic is, my faith is still just a faith. It provides for **substantial unknown**. (not sure if this is right – it is what I heard). Therefore, when I relate to a person in the marketplace who does not agree or accept my faith, I must be very careful not to be sending the message: *I am right and you are wrong*. Because when I send that message, I destroy the opportunity for a relationship.
2. My faith starts with a person – Jesus – tempted in all ways like I have been tempted. A person who tired, a person who wept, a person with emotions. (Here discuss Tom Wright’s book *The Original Jesus* and Father Donovan’s book *Christianity Rediscovered*.)
3. My work is a calling – it is a ministry. I believe I am in a full-time Christian ministry.
4. My ministry is the marketplace where I need to be involved in delivering services that customers need and want and will buy and in the process need to generate profit and create wealth for my shareholders. These are the rules of the game. If I don’t like the rules, I don’t belong in the ballgame.

5. It is fundamental to my faith that every person has been created in the image and likeness of God, regardless of their race, their gender, their position, title or background.
6. My faith is not a perfect faith. I make mistakes. I need forgiveness, and as I seek forgiveness from my Lord and Savior, I am also reminded that I need to forgive others.

The bottom line, then, is people. How do I lead in providing an environment that will treat people as the subject of work and not simply the object of work? It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us that there are no ordinary people. We have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals who we joke with, marry, snub and exploit.

The issue, then, is: can the corporation be a moral community for the development of human character and behavior and excel at generating profits and serving customers? This is the grand experiment of ServiceMaster. And I conclude today with these lines from T. S. Eliot's *Choruses From a Rock*:

“What life have you if you not have life together?  
There is no life that is not in community.  
And no community not lived in praise of God.  
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.  
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,  
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.  
And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people.

Their only monument the asphalt road,  
And a thousand lost golf balls.  
Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?  
A thousand policemen directing the traffic,  
And not tell you why you come, or where you go.  
When the stranger says: 'What is the meaning of this city?'  
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?  
What will you answer? We all dwell together,  
To make money from each other? Is this a community?  
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert.  
Oh my soul be prepared for the coming of the stranger.  
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

As I reflect this Sunday morning on that one who knows how to ask questions, the question for me and maybe for you, is simply this: What is the reality of my faith in my life as I prepare to leave this conference, my faith in God, my faith in His Son Jesus Christ? Will it translate into my actions tomorrow morning at work?

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