

“Faith at Work” Gen. 2:15; 3:17-19; Ex. 31:1-5; Col. 3:22-25; II Thess.
3:6-12 9/4/16

As I prepared my sermon for this Labor Day weekend, I thought about songs having to do with work. Folk tunes like “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” and “16 Tons,” as well as pop tunes like “She Works Hard for the Money,” “Workin’ 9-5,” “It’s Been a Hard Day’s Night,” “Workin’ at the Car Wash,” “Hard Hat and a Hammer,” “I’ve Got Work to Do,” and Huey Lewis’ “Working for a Living” and “Couple Days Off.” Not to mention the one I often hear Lou humming around the office, Johnny Paycheck’s classic “Take This Job and Shove It!” Just kidding! Lou loves his job. At least that what he always tells me!

There are lots of popular songs that talk about work, but there are very few hymns or praise songs about it. I think we Christians have often neglected the world of work, even though that’s where we spend most of our time! If Jesus is Lord of all, then he’s Lord of our work, too! So, let’s talk about work this morning. And I’m including full and part-time jobs, as well as the work of students, and stay-at-home moms in my definition of work.

Since the Protestant Reformation, Christians have leaned toward an understanding of work as a vocation or calling. Martin Luther, arguing for the priesthood of all believers, famously said that he saw little difference in

the vocations of the plowboy, the milkmaid and the priest because he considered plowing and milking to be priestly work. He said that all of us are called to our work, not just those in the clerical professions. This understanding of work is reflected in modern theologians, too, like Frederick Buechner, who defined vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” A few weeks ago, we demonstrated this understanding of work as vocation when we commissioned our educators for their work during worship. And we often refer to other kinds of work, such as the medical professions, as a calling.

There is biblical support for this understanding of work, going all the way back to Genesis 2, where Adam is placed in the garden with this mandate, “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*” (Gen. 2:15) God, who worked for six days in creating the world, then gave the man work to do- tilling and keeping the garden, and later, having dominion over the earth. That’s the work he was called to do.

In Exodus 31, as Moses prepared to build the holy tabernacle for the worship of God, the Lord directed him to a man named Bezalel, saying, “³*and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft,* ⁴*to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze,* ⁵*in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in*

every kind of craft.” (Ex. 31:3-5) Bezalel has been gifted by the Spirit as an artist and craftsman, which was clearly the work God had called him to do.

In addition, throughout the Bible prophets, kings, military leaders, apostles, and even government officials were called by God and given work to do. The idea that work is a calling is certainly found in the Bible.

And yet, the experience of many people is that work does not always seem like a calling or a vocation. For them, work is just a way to earn enough to support themselves. I think of the jobs that Mike Rowe often did on the “Dirty Jobs” show, or my father-in-law, who spent 35 years bent over in the coalmines, inhaling the dust that eventually took his life. Or people who work on assembly lines, in poultry plants, or the many subsistence farmers I have met in Mexico, who along with their wives, do back-breaking labor just to eke out a living.

In a “Dilbert” comic strip, Dilbert sits at his desk in front of his computer thinking, “I like to start each workday by visualizing how my work will make the world a better place.” In the next frame, he rocks back in his chair desperately yelling, “GAAAA! My life is meaningless and nothing I do will ever matter!!!” In the last frame, he calms down a little as he thinks, “Okay, good. I like to get that out of the way early.” Many of the Dilbert comics remind us that a lot that goes on in the modern workplace is an exercise in futility.

In fact, it's getting harder and harder to even think of a life-long career anymore, where someone trains for a particular job and stays with it throughout their working life. In today's economy, most people will change not only their workplace, but what they do several times. And a lot of people are working multiple jobs, increasingly jobs in the new sharing-economy, like Uber or Airbnb. There's nothing wrong with any of this, but it makes seeing one's work as a calling or vocation a little more difficult.

Christian ethicist, Gilbert Meilaender, believes there is a biblical and theological basis for seeing work not as a calling, but rather as something that is "dignified, but irksome!" Many people work just to support themselves and their families, with no sense of real meaning or fulfillment to be found in it. In the Bible, we note that the work that God gave Adam to do became much more difficult after sin entered the world. ¹⁷*And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* (Gen. 3:17-19) Work is affected by our fall into sin,

and winds up sounding more like “dignified, but irksome” rather than a divine calling, doesn’t it?

In the New Testament, Paul tells people to work because they should provide for themselves, rather than being on the dole! And early Christians tended to have this same view of work. So, if you are just “Workin’ for a Livin’” I don’t think you need to feel bad about that. I suspect that’s the case for most people around the world! And there is dignity in doing that.

Biblically, our work is sometimes seen as a calling, and other times seen as something we do simply to support ourselves and our families. Both views of work are honorable. So let’s spend our remaining time thinking about how we ought to work as Christians, no matter how we view our work.

Here’s what Paul says about work to an unlikely group of early Christian workers. *“²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.”* (Col. 3:22-25)

Slaves were common in the Roman Empire, with something like 30-40% of the Italian population being slaves! Slaves had virtually no rights and could be exploited in any number of ways. It was certainly not their chosen profession! And yet Paul teaches that even Christians in these circumstances ought to work hard, with integrity, because ultimately they are accountable to the Lord for their work.

Applying Paul's teaching to today, I think we Christians should be known as good workers, who treat people fairly, and give an honest day's work. And we should produce goods and services that are of good quality.

You see, work is a vehicle through which we live out the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. That has several important implications for our work lives. For example, since we have a choice about where we work, we should evaluate the product or service that we are producing. It should be something that contributes to the common good, which benefits people or the Creation. If it doesn't, we should probably try to find another job.

In addition, we should treat our fellow workers, our employers, our employees, and our customers with respect, compassion and fairness-treating them the way we would like to be treated, to use Jesus' ethic. We should also have the highest standards of integrity in our business dealings, always being honest and straightforward with others.

Work relationships also provide opportunities to share the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ with others. This must be done with care, so that we don't cause more harm than good, but we can certainly offer to pray for a co-worker when they are having a hard time. We can invite them to come to worship with us, or to a special program. We can talk about how Jesus makes a difference in our own lives. That's part of loving our neighbors!

Finally, a word of caution. In our contemporary society, some people are tempted to make work an idol. It can become the way we measure our worth. When work is going well, we feel great about ourselves. When it's going poorly, we can feel like a failure. In reality, our value is found in the fact that we are children of God, made in God's own image, not in a quarterly statement or our annual review! Work can also become the source of ultimate meaning in our lives, but what happens to our sense of purpose when we lose our jobs or retire?

When work becomes a god, it provides a shaky foundation on which to base our sense of self. And since it's so easy to become dependent on it for our value and meaning, it can easily steal time from our families, our community, and our church. Don't let it. Part of the role of the Sabbath is to force us away from work, allowing us to re-charge and to gain

perspectives on life that may elude us during the week. Keep the Sabbath to maintain a proper perspective on work.

Finally, if things aren't going well for you at work, there's nothing wrong with looking for something else, especially if you've tried to fix things and you can't. In the meantime, remember the lesson of Esther's story from last week: at least for now, God has placed you there to accomplish his work.