

Unless God Does the Work...

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Psalm 127

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Most of us probably have some mixed feelings about the idea of labor, or “work,” as we consider the matter this Labor Day Weekend. Many of us enjoy opportunities for fulfillment and purpose in our work—at least some of the time—and most of us also know what it is to feel frazzled and frustrated as a result of our work. We Americans enjoy a historically unprecedented standard of living as a result of the attitude toward hard work we have inherited, even as millions of us are unemployed or underemployed and barely scraping by. Some in our church are today desperately seeking more work.

There sure is nothing holy about a lot of activity and keeping very busy. Many men and women work at least 40 hours per week outside the home, then come home to do housework or yardwork or to “work out” or “work on” our relationships. “A woman’s work is never done...” particularly these days. There’s work in the boardroom or in the classroom, or work at the desk or computer, or at the store, or work to learn “texting” to keep in touch with the grandchildren, or work in the nursery, or in the kitchen.

There is good news to all this, in the perspective of the Psalmist: our work does not need to be dull or drudgery or dehumanizing, at best a necessary evil. For us who take God seriously, our work may become a source of fulfillment and growth and even joy.

I Something has gone wrong with work. Long before the psalms were written, Genesis 3 spells out one of the consequences of Adam and Eve disobeying God, and breaking relationship with God: Adam and his male heirs have to face a continuing series of curses regarding our work. (Remember Eve and her daughters were assigned troubles enough of their own—but different ones.) Outside of Eden, it will be toil to produce enough food; there will be weeds in the fields and obstacles in the process. It will feel like work, and I suppose it’s not such a big step from there to boredom on the job, and a downsizing economy, and office politics and difficult bosses.

Psalm 127 describes two opposite reactions against the difficulties of work. Two opposite reactions: becoming either a workaholic or a slacker. You “labor in vain” if you try to accomplish everything on your own, independent of God. How many we know who “labor in vain.” Long hours, pushing, pushing, making good money and often very good money. People driven, competing,

good at the work they do—and who too often have lost sight of what’s important, forgotten what is best in them.

During our family vacation, one of the movies we watched again was the Harrison Ford remake of a classic, entitled “Sabrina.” (A fun movie, as far as it goes.) Not to worry if you haven’t seen this one—you have seen any number of other similar characters in other movies and TV shows. Ford (he’s the older brother “Rufus,” believe it or not) is the driven, successful tycoon. He’s good at making money and closing deals. He works around the clock, checking markets in Tokyo or Paris while most everyone else is asleep in bed. He has no time for romance or relationships; others exist as rivals to be defeated. The point even of marriage, to him, is to consolidate dynasties and build a stronger empire.

Older brother Rufus is the workaholic; the younger brother, played by Greg Kinnear, is the other extreme: the slacker. Maybe he knew he couldn’t keep up with his older brother; maybe he figured early on he looks a lot better in a white tux. This is the happy-go-lucky brother who wants none of the hassles of being involved in the family business, who flits from one pretty young girl to the next, and who enjoys the heck out of being a wealthy heir able to indulge and afford his perpetual adolescence. Neither brother knows who he is or what his life is for, though of course the movie shows each beginning to “figure it out” as a result of the maturing and healthy influence of Sabrina.

(Most of us are not heirs or heiresses to an earthly fortune; we need to be working, one way or the other. But we each have a choice; there’s more to life than economic activity.) It’s no good to “eat the bread of anxious toil,” says Psalm 127. Neither a workaholic nor a slacker be...

How important to keep reminding our young people. Some of you know that we Fishers are in the process of getting Katie and Matt matched up and shipped off to the college to which they believe God is directing them. (Believe me—this is a new stage in the life of us parents, and it’s bringing me the unavoidable awareness of those things I wish I had been doing differently, all these years of being a daddy. So quickly they are up and out and away...)

Something has gone wrong with “work,” and being children of the church is no guarantee that our children “get” what work is for: if I’m not clear, and if I don’t teach my own, how would they ever know? Our children are always learning what the world is teaching.

What if we asked students at the local high schools why they study so hard and work so diligently to keep a high GPA and to do well on the SATs? We know their answer: “to get into a good college.” And why would they want to get into a good college? Either so they end up getting paid to do what they like to do, or so that they graduate and can make good money. Preferably both, if they do really well at a really good college: earn the prospect of making good money doing what you like. Not long after graduation the cycle begins to repeat: then we teach our kids to work hard so they can get into a good college and make good money to do what they like and live in a nice area...

Nothing necessarily wrong with that cycle, only that the Psalmist feels sorry for those caught up in it. “It is in vain that you continue that cycle, eating the bread of anxious toil.” “Unless the LORD does the work, you are working in vain.” And it’s for us disciples of Jesus to understand, and teach our children, the reason many of you young people are called to work hard and pursue your education and get admitted to a good college is to gain credentials which open doors and which equip you and prepare you with skills which will be useful as you as you offer your life to serve God and to work for God in the work and the career or calling which is His best plan for you. So that you are neither a driven “workaholic” nor a “slacker” who has dropped out from a lifetime of work which, sure enough, in and of itself, may not be very fulfilling or exciting apart from the call of God and the guidance of His Spirit.

II If something has gone wrong with work (point one): if it is impersonal or frustrating or boring or unfulfilling, work has also been made right for us (point two.) People of faith in God, and disciples of Jesus who take seriously that He embodies the person and the will of God on earth for us, have the option of participating in what God is doing in the world.

“Unless” the LORD builds the house, guards the city, we labor in vain. The “unless” means that indeed God is building the house, God is guarding the city. God is working; are we working along with what God is doing or what God wants done? The bane in the lives of so many people is not work, but pointless work, mindless work, detached work—work which takes place independent of God. If God is the central reality to whom we orient our lives, then God can make even our work to be fulfilling. God can make our work right again.

God is a working God, and the kind of God in whom we believe makes a huge difference in how we understand our work (and, without fail, in the economic

level of our society.) Back at the beginning, God spoke the worlds into existence: “and God said...” God worked for six days before taking off the Sabbath for a rest break. God is not an intellectual god who sits around far away, pondering and thinking about things. God is a working God, and the Bible is the ongoing story of God’s work of creation and redemption and rescue, of compassion and healing and comforting and answering.

Jesus said, “My Father is still working and therefore I also am working still.” [John 5:17] Jesus fed the multitudes and healed the sick; Jesus walked up and down the countryside and cast out demons and preached to the multitudes. Jesus worked to get thru to His disciples in endless ways, and Jesus washed their feet in the Upper Room. A working Savior, working purposefully to do the work of the Father. Such a different example than, say, the Buddha. Eastern philosophy and religion tend to view all human effort as tainted by selfishness or pride, and therefore see the solution as withdrawing from activity or “doing” into “being.” Notice how the Buddha is portrayed: motionless, without activity. His tummy more than a little plump. If trouble comes from doing too much, then quit “doing.” Opt out of the rat race of illusion, which causes suffering. Say little; do little—and at the point of perfection, there is nothing but withdrawal from passion, thought, action. Sheer “being.” Hence the portrayals of the sitting Buddha.

(Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington, Harvard professors, have recently published a new volume called *Culture Matters—How Values Shape Human Progress*. It’s an anthology of articles by 22 leading scholars exploring how faith and values create prosperity in society. One of their conclusions: “Work is not highly valued in progress-resistant societies, reflecting a philosophy current that goes back to the Greeks. The entrepreneur is suspect, although the manual laborer somewhat less so, since he must work to survive. At the top of the prestige ladder are the intellectual, the artist, the politician, the religious leader, the military leader. A similar prestige scale characterized Christendom until the Reformation...the Reformation, and particularly the Calvinist interpretation of it, inverted the prestige scale, enshrining this [new] work ethic. It is this same inverted value system that importantly explains the prosperity of Western Europe and North America—and East Asia—and the relative poverty of other Third World areas.” Their work joins *The Victory of Reason* by Rodney Stark and others in helping to explain why economic prosperity has tended to follow where the gospel, and the Reformation of the Church, have taken root.)

Have you ever seen a painting or statue of Jesus

sitting down?

And sometimes we forget Jesus worked in the shop, presumably supporting Mary and His younger siblings in Nazareth for maybe ten times as many years as He worked His public ministry after being baptized. The Second Century patriarch Justin Martyr wrote that during his lifetime it was still common to see farmers at work with plows handmade by the carpenter Jesus—a century after He had made them.

One of the best insights of the Reformation was the reminder that Jesus was not simply a spiritual worker. He was a carpenter, a laborer—and every honest labor has dignity and worth in the eyes of God. (God works!) Not the work of the bishop or priest or nun only; not the work of Michelangelo or Charlemagne or Dante or Bach—but the one who cleans the floor of the basilica or the library or the theater or the nursery or stables. The one who plants and waters the seeds which bear the fruit eaten by the most powerful emperors or generals may be more pleasing to God than they. (In this way, also, we disciples of Jesus, and others, contribute to “the Bearable Society” of which Karen spoke last Sunday. Plows made to last; CEOs who treat their workers justly and humanely; moms who pour their lives into the lives of their children; workers who fight the fires with courage and receptionists who welcome the patients into the dentists’ office cheerfully; laborers who mow our lawns and paint our houses and trim our trees and service our cars and do an honest job for a fair price—in endless ways honest work can help the Kingdom come a little more near here on earth.)

III Work has gone wrong; work has been made right for us (since God is a God who works, and our work has value and dignity when we participate in the work God does); Right work also builds relationships.

Jesus was building plows and tables and things all those years. Is it likely He was standoffish and moody with his customers, or took advantage of his fellow workers? We seldom think about such things, trained as we have been to think of the “spiritual Jesus.”

But we do know the ministry of Jesus kept stressing relationships with others. He spent His life inviting others into the Kingdom of God as heirs of the Father above. He redefined what’s most important, even redefined family, claiming that His sisters and brothers were not primarily His blood kin—but “whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is my sister and brother and mother.” [Matthew 12:50] He poured out His life for others; literally and finally upon the cross, but gradually and certainly into His 12 apostles and those closest

to Him. He invited the tax-gatherers like Levi and the overlooked Zacchaeus into His circle; He spoke with the woman at the well and the woman taken in adultery and the blind men and the harlots and the lepers and all sorts of assorted sinners and the self-righteous authorities. He prayed tirelessly for His disciples, His Church.

How little He spent His life chasing or accumulating things; how little in trusting in human measures of security. How little in His wallet He left behind. But He was working all the time! Investing in people and relationships—not by the hundreds or millions but one at a time.

The “gold watch” and inflated IRA will not follow us beyond death into eternity: the loving relationships we cultivate in Christ surely will. No wonder Jesus set His priorities as He did. Whatever our work environment, whatever our work—there is almost always the chance to reach out to colleagues. To remember names, to take time, to show respect and kindness and humor and cheer, to invite, to cultivate friendships, to help bear the burdens of another: we may help transform almost any workplace into something better. (Who knows who may or may not respond to your sincere open hearts and your caring?—but that’s not your business.)

Those of you who have helped out for a weekend at Open Arms daycare center have observed this unfailing source of wonder. When you go to help, the work you do is not very glamorous or “fun.” Last trip there were Mary and Mayra and Katie and Archie and Sarah and Emily and others painting a few rooms, primer first then color, over and over without a breath of fresh air. Joe and Rick and Matt on ladders at odd backbreaking overhead angles mixing and placing and smoothing “mud” on drywall in a stifling hot, dark room, hour after hour. Wendell was part of a team laying and cutting and sealing water pipes in the ceiling. Some also helped make lunches for about 50.

These tasks which needed to be done were “grunt work” of the highest order—nothing “fun” about them. But I heard no word of complaint and in fact noticed a lot of committed, contented workers. Because we were enjoying participating in the work that God is doing at Open Arms. Because we were enjoying each other during the long drive down and the longer drive back. We enjoyed worshiping God together, and hearing how each was experiencing the Holy Spirit, one way or another. The most dreary series of tasks can become a joy in the context of building relationships in Christ.

In the next week or so our church offers several opportunities for most of us to help cultivate new relationships. Small weekly Bible study groups are starting back up again, and most would be delighted to invite

you to start in with them. You can read about two new opportunities this fall which Pastor Heather, and Laura MacKinnon and Pam Brown respectively, will be offering. There will be opportunities for sharing and enjoying poetry, and for book discussions and DVD viewing and discussions. Our Faith Teams also offer the possibility to get to know others in a deeper way. And I hope you've been able to clear space in your schedules for the mid-October Retreat and teaching which Bruce Van Blair will offer: yes, for the learning and new understandings and inspiration we will receive—but also for the chance to get to know and care about one another more deeply. Our weekend retreats are always rich with this possibility.

I hear over and over again from guests who worship with us how friendly many of you are to them—in the pew or later in the courtyard. Every time we gather to worship is a chance to extend ourselves to others for Jesus' sake.

Every time we worship, we come once again to offer ourselves in living service to the God who keeps working in the world. Little by little, God may transform us from consumers who see our work as the vehicle for getting what we want in the world into sisters and brothers of Christ and therefore one another, more and more wanting to be genuine and caring friends in His name. We may more and more be transformed into sons and daughters of the Father in heaven, who see our work always as a chance to be in creative relationship with others. In our workplaces or alone in our homes, we may learn to see what God is doing, and what God wants done—in serving and healing and cheering others—knowing that all around us, “the LORD is building, the LORD is guarding, the LORD is saving and healing and loving.”

Our participating in His work is never in vain.

Psalm 127 Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.