

“Meaning & Purpose, or Toil & Worry?”

Matthew 6:25-34; Excerpts from Ecclesiastes – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might find purpose and peace
in your love, whether we work or rest. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

I don't know that I've ever preached a specifically Labor Day sermon before. As you know, I prefer to avoid mixing secular holidays into our worship practices. But it's very clear that we can't hold the traditional Labor Day cookouts this year. And more importantly, it occurred to me, as I was contemplating the holiday, that these six months of pandemic have highlighted some dynamics related to work that are certainly spiritual issues. So while I understand this won't be as tasty as a nice, grilled brat or Boca burger and some chips, perhaps it will be an acceptable alternative way to mark the holiday.

So let's start by naming some of the dynamics around work that have come into stark focus these past few months. Then we can get into how our scripture lessons might lead us to reflect on these dynamics. First of all, the pandemic educated us all about a new way to categorize jobs. We quickly learned the term “essential workers”; there are certain jobs that simply must happen in order for life to go on and that must happen where they happen. Because it was a health crisis creating this new reality, the first essential workers to come to mind are health care professionals. But there are so many others: grocery store workers, food processing plant workers, farm

workers, delivery people, waste management, first responders. Life as we know it just doesn't happen without these people leaving the safety of their homes and going to work.

Meanwhile, a whole other class of workers had jobs that allowed them to take their labor home. They may have had to re-arrange some things, but their work could continue more or less without disruption without them having to go into the office. For some companies, this is working so well, it's not clear if they will continue to invest as much capital in office space ever again. Others are finding – for example, most saliently at the moment, teachers – that working remotely is a pale substitute for the real thing.

Finally, there are all the people trapped somewhere in between or outside this spectrum at all. Salons and restaurants and such that have closed down and modified and re-opened and closed down again and re-opened again are in one kind of limbo. But people whose livelihoods depend on large gatherings of people – those working in hospitality or entertainment or tourism, for instance – still have no idea when or if their careers will ever return.

These starkly different experiences are putting stress on the fabric of our society and on all of us who are the individuals within it. Meanwhile, another dynamic became even harder to ignore: the tremendous amount of unpaid labor that is required to keep our economy running. This was most obvious when it came to caring for children, but it also showed up with cleaning, cooking, and caring for the

elderly. Whether it was who supervises the kids doing online school when both parents are supposed to be focused on work in the den and the dining room, or how the single mother with an “essential” job takes care of her kids when schools and after-school programs are closed down and the grandparents are “at-risk”, the gender disparities involved and the general de-valuing of these kinds of labor, which we already knew existed, have just gotten worse and more obvious.

When everything first shut down, the dominant narrative was that everyone suddenly had nothing but free time. We should all learn to bake sour dough bread or crochet or plant a garden, though the less motivated among us were given permission to just binge watch TV. This was a myth. It was a particularly irritating myth for those who suddenly had a lot more to worry about, like the families I just described. But it was a painfully hollow myth for those who were furloughed and applying for unemployment. There was a meme going around early on about how our grandparents had to make all sorts of sacrifices to save the world during WWII, so we darn well ought to be able to stay at home and watch TV if that was what was required of us. But the humor falls flat when you’re on week 14 of having no meaningful way to contribute to society.

And it’s here that we bump up against one of the most fundamental dynamics related to work that operates within our culture. This isn’t just a pandemic phenomenon, and it’s not just about being unemployed. Everyone who’s struggled to adjust to retirement has dealt with it too. The truth is that our culture encourages us

to find our sense of worth and even our sense of identity in our job. So if no one is paying us to work, it's highly likely that our sense of worth is threatened and we may struggle to even know who we are.

Now, some might argue that Christian tradition has encouraged this association of worth with work, reminding us of the pernicious effects of the storied Protestant Work Ethic or quoting 2nd Thessalonians saying those who won't work shouldn't eat. And that may be true. But it's not good news. It's not gospel. It's not Jesus. It's not even Ecclesiastes.

As Michael pointed out a few weeks ago in one of his Bible Readings emails, most of us know anything at all about the book of Ecclesiastes because of the Byrds' song "Turn, Turn, Turn", which is about timing, or history, depending on how you look at it. But it turns out that Ecclesiastes also has a lot to say about work, or "toil" as the NRSV puts it. Some of it leans in the general direction of the Protestant Work Ethic, but this Teacher is not saying that humans are worthy of the food we need because of the work we produce. Rather, they are saying that human life is best when we enjoy the work we do. The counsel here is to seek contentment. That could be about devoting ourselves to the process rather than the product, or it could mean that if you don't like the job you have, you should do whatever you can to get a different one. But the goal is clearly happiness, not productivity. While the Teacher clearly also sees eating and drinking as necessary for human life, "making a living" is not the main focus of work here.

This Teacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes, understands our human need to spend our time doing something meaningful. Work, ideally, whether it's paid or unpaid, should be something enjoyable rather than drudgery, even if it's enjoyable simply because of the sense of accomplishment. This is not the same thing as measuring our sense of worth by our paycheck or grounding our identity in our job status. Indeed, the Teacher has some strong words for that sort of orientation to work. When our work consumes us, it becomes a vexation, Ecclesiastes says; it keeps us up at night. Especially if we're doing our work in such a way that it's causing us to accumulate more wealth than we should.

This is a two-pronged condemnation. Firstly, the Teacher says that wealth is pointless vanity, because "you can't take it with you!" In addition to the stress and the sleepless nights, all you've acquired will be lost to you when you die. It's "chasing after wind," the Teacher says. Moreover, this accumulated wealth is clearly connected to the oppressive wickedness that has replaced justice and righteousness. The rich don't sleep well because, somewhere deep in their hearts, they know their wealth is ill-gotten, acquired on the backs of their workers who collapse each night on their beds exhausted. I have to wonder what this Teacher would say about the stock market gains we seen, when our "essential" workers are getting face masks with the company logo on them instead of hazard pay. It is a "grievous ill" that our supposedly "essential" workers are treated more like they are expendable. Meanwhile, it does make me curious what Jeff Bezos' will looks like.

Beyond Ecclesiastes' strong opinions, we need to look at our current labor situation in the light of the gospel. While we can agree with the Teacher's assertion that it is a gift from God to spend our lives doing work we love, the more important lesson here is in verse 26 of Matthew 6: 'Those birds – they've never done a lick of work in their whole lives! But God feeds them. And you are way more precious in God's sight, no matter how much work you've done or left undone or not been invited to do. Your worth is not connected to your productivity! Your value is not measured by your paycheck! Your identity is defined by the fact that you are a beloved child of the Most High God, not that you're a butcher or a baker or a candlestick maker. The good news is that Jesus has liberated us from this destructive mental trap!

God knows we need to eat and drink. This is why throughout scripture the clear moral imperative is to justly reward laborers for their work. It's also why we're commanded to care for the widows and orphans and strangers, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and give the thirsty a cup of cold water. We find our destiny not in our work but in our sharing of the gifts of God. In this time when the differences in our life situations have become so stark, when we are both restricted in what we can do but also aware of how much needs to be done, we must find our meaning and purpose in caring for one another, not because it's our job, but because that's who God created us to be. Hallelujah and Amen.