

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

¹⁸This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. ¹⁹Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. ²⁰For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

It used to be in the Seattle Sunday paper, they would contrast somebody's first job experience with the job that individual currently has. I always like reading about people's early experiences and where that ultimately led them. Do you remember your first job? (Elicit stories from congregation...)

What some parents tell their children: *"It doesn't matter what you do. Finding your life's work is not about money or prestige. It only matters that you find a job that is meaningful. It only matters that you are happy and fulfilled."* Years later, that advice came back to bite them. They complained, saying, *"We were told, 'Go out and find meaningful jobs that will fulfill your lives. Grow up to be happy!' Can you imagine trying to live up to an expectation more difficult and unattainable?"*

Why didn't you make us aspire to something easy like becoming cynical millionaires?" Labor Day weekend provides a good opportunity to reflect on work. It is good to spend time thinking about labor and what a life of faith calls us to in relation to the work that runs the world we're in.

I found a list of what makes a job meaningful and gives people happiness in their work:

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| • Always learning something new | Meaningful work | Respectful atmosphere |
| • Feeling a sense of belonging | Good boss | Good people |
| • Recognition of work well done | Sense of control over environment | Trust/Fun |

Work is so intrinsic to our whole lives that one of the first questions we ask a stranger is: What do you do, what is your work? Po Bronson – (who was raised in Seattle, attending Lakeside High School) wrote ***"What should I do with my life?"*** says this is a spiritual question. There can be a difference between a job which pays the bills and our life's work, and pursuing our purpose for living. The gift is when the two turn out to be one and the same – finding a job that has personal meaning.

Our theology of work goes back to the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures in Genesis 1: God is at work creating the universe and everything in it. God calls it **ALL** good and takes satisfaction in the results. In fact, Sabbath is a time for God to enjoy what God has created! Then God creates human beings and invites them to participate by caring for creation. Genesis 2:8, 15 shows us that work is a natural activity: *"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."* On the other hand, from reading Genesis 3:17-19 we may get the idea that work itself is punishment: *"With labor you shall win your food ... You shall gain your bread by the sweat of your brow."* The reality of work has already been blessed by God. But because of disobedience to God, Adam and Eve are told that work will become difficult and painful. But when we look at Ecc. 5:18-20, we have a continuation of the theology of work: *This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom God enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil; this is a gift of God.*

Is it possible to find enjoyment in our toil? Or is that simply a luxury or elitist thinking? In our current economic state, almost 10% of the population are without work. Many people would simply like to find any job that will help pay the bills, let alone thinking about "meaningful work." Boring, dead end jobs with little intrinsic satisfaction seem to outnumber the enjoyable ones. How do we, as a Christians, begin to develop a

theological understanding of the meaning of our work? One of the basic tenets of the Protestant Reformation was that all work had value. One could serve God as authentically as a farmer or merchant or a priest. Presiding over the meal you have cooked for your family was every bit as sacred as presiding over the communion table.

*There is a story about a construction worker who was building a church. The priest came by to talk to him. "I just learned that you have a brother who is a bishop."
"That I do." Says the bricklayer.
"And you are a bricklayer," mused the priest. "It sure is a funny world. Things aren't divided equally in life, are they?"
"No, that they ain't," agreed the bricklayer, as he slapped the mortar along the line of bricks. "My poor brother couldn't do this to save his life."*

A story that well summarizes the power of finding meaningful work and a sense of vision is the story of three bricklayers. The story goes, that three bricklayers were working side by side. A stranger is passing through and asks each one the same question. *"What are you doing?"*

The first bricklayer replied: *"I'm a bricklayer. I'm laying bricks. That's what I do."*

The second bricklayer answered, *"I'm making \$10 an hour to feed my family."*

The third bricklayer responded, *"I'm building a cathedral so that people can find a sense of the holy and draw closer to God."*

Brother Lawrence, a contemplative monk in the 17th century wrote a small book entitled, "Practicing the Presence of God." In it he asserts that God can be found in all things, even in such menial tasks as washing the dishes. Perhaps this is at the heart of discovering meaningful work in all that we are doing, regardless of how menial or grandiose the task is. This is our true vocation: practicing the presence of God where ever we find ourselves, AND listening deeply to where God calls each of us. Biblically speaking, work is to be a vocation, a calling. The Latin word, vocare, means, the work a person is called to by God.

There are many different kinds of voices calling you to many different kinds of work in your life. Just as there are many different missions and causes, calling to this church. The quest is to listen deeply to the nudges of the Holy Spirit. When we look at any work that we are about as vocation, it makes a difference.

Performing meaningful work, whether for pay or not, contributes significantly to how we feel about ourselves as well as to our overall sense of well-being. God puts our desire to work in our hearts and expects our work to be satisfying to us. Work is a creative activity, a partnership of co-creating with God, and a calling or vocation. God still lives and creates! Life is not static and vocation changes throughout our lives, even after you are retired – so keep listening!