

Sermon - July 31, 2016, Pentecost 11

Finding Joy in your Work

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–26



Dear friends in Christ,
May God's grace abound in our hearts as we meditate on God's word, which is based on the Old Testament reading for today.

The reading calls our attention to something that we seldom think about yet we feel its fruits, the lack of joy in what we do, in our work.

We work, we serve, we volunteer sometimes just because, just because there is a need, somebody has to do it, or because it is biblical to serve, God has commanded us to do so, but many times we don't feel joy in doing what we are doing. We know there is a reward, be it a salary, or appreciation for what we do, or simply the recognition that we can do things, but we simply not feel joy in the doing.

I'm reminded what a Facundo Cabral, a South American stand up revolutionary comedian used to say: "The one who doesn't like what he or she is doing is an unoccupied person."

In other words if your work, or whatever you are doing, doesn't give you joy, you are an unoccupied person.

Now that doesn't make much sense, does it? We must work, we must put bread on the table; we must take care of our families, of ourselves, and yes we are occupied, therefore, joy or no joy we must work. That's on the one hand, but then as we face our present economic situation we are just glad that at least we do have work for those who are working, that we have employment, whatever it is, even if we have no joy. What a contrast isn't it, we live in Grande Prairie, in Alberta where money has been no problem, yet there are many today, who are going through economic hardships.

But work, or anything else you do, is also a burden. Work is never easy, work requires our energies, our sweat and blood, work is hard thing to do. But work has to give you joy, yes it is a burden, but through it our text for today, encourages us to find joy. The question is how do we do it? How do we find joy through a heavy burden?

Remember that before the fall into sin, when the world was created, God put Adam "in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). There was a beauty to his work, caring for the world and serving his Creator. After the fall, however, God cursed the earth, so that Adam's work would be a burden. "In pain you shall eat of [the ground] all the days of your life," and "by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread," God said (Gen 3:17, 19). What a downer!

But as Christians, it is difficult for us to live in this tension. On the one hand, there is a beauty to our labor. Our vocation, our work, is a gift from God for service to him and service to others. On the other hand, such labor is not easy. It is difficult, painful. It demands the sweat of our brow and perseverance through pain, no joy there.

Yet in these verses from Ecclesiastes, God offers us a short but encouraging word that helps us find joy in the daily labor that we pursue, and not just joy but actually double joy.

I. Text: There is nothing better than to find joy from the hand of God in daily toil.

In our text, we have “the words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Although this preacher was king, he also struggles with work. “Vanity of vanities,” he begins. “All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:2–3).

In the Old Testament, there are many words for work. “Toil” is one of them. This word, however, stresses the pain of our daily labor. The problem with our labor and toil according to these verses is not so much the difficulty or the burden of work and labor but the fact that one day they will disappear. Ultimately, it passes away.

That’s one reason why the writer does not like his toils because he cannot control what happens to the fruit of his labor. He cannot gather the fruit of his labor and trust that it will last. In the end, he needs to leave it to others. He could build barns and then build bigger barns and use them to store all of his wealth, only to find that one night he dies and all that he has accumulated is left to others (Luke 12:13–21). Where is the joy in that? I suppose there is joy in leaving a legacy to your children and children’s children, but how sure are you that they are going to appreciate and manage what you are leaving behind well? There, right there, just by thinking about it, instead of joy a sense of despair begins to take place, if not at least doubt.

That is why it is so important to listen closely as the Preacher closes this text. He points us to where the source of your joy in your toils is, he says that what gives you joy is what comes “from the hand of God” (2:24b). He reveals how there can be joy in our labor. The Preacher says, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” (2:24a).

II. Application: God gives us joy in serving him and serving others through our work.

Joy in our labor, joy in our service, comes when we realize that God has given us the gift of daily labor and calls us to find satisfaction in that labor, day-by-day. We work not to build a kingdom for ourselves in this world but rather to give service to God and to others. In other words, when you work, you don’t think so much in your salary and the economics of it, but rather how you are serving God and others through what you do.

Unfortunately, too often, we turn our work in this world into an idol. It is the means whereby we hope to build ourselves a kingdom. Advertising invites us to think that the true enjoyment of life lies just on the horizon, with one more purchase. So, we work to earn money to buy that car, to build that house, to take that vacation, to find a joy in life that lasts. But work was never meant to accomplish that. And such efforts will ultimately fail us. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,” Jesus said. “And I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). Jesus came to bring us into God’s kingdom, and his work for us will never fail. He bore the punishment of God’s wrath for our sins on the cross, and he opened the kingdom of heaven to us, his creatures. Saved by Christ, we are freed from having work as our master.

Now, work is a joyful place for service: service to God and service to others. That’s what we mean with double joy. Double joy because in your work, in your service, you serve God, and there is joy in doing so, but also in serving others. Double joy!

God gives us the joy of service to him in our daily labor. Remember that Christ's work of salvation has claimed all of our lives. Now, all that we do is done for him, by him and through him. There is a joy to be found in raising children, in preparing food, in cleaning house, in serving clients at our place of business, in volunteering in our congregation or community. God originally called Adam and Eve to care for creation, and now, after our redemption, the world is wide open for service to God. There is no work in this world that is too small for God to find pleasure in our service.

God also gives us joy in serving others, in serving others through the fruits of your labor. Your acts of service in the hands of God can raise a family, care for the dying, contribute to the welfare of a community, and care for the world, there is much you can do, which not only will spark joy in you but that joy can also reach those whom you are serving.

In our culture today, we often associate work with earning a living. Having money not only for necessary expenses but also for the joys of consumption, going shopping. Satisfying your desires. Finding those things you can buy to make yourself happy. That's the joy that comes from work for many people. Christians, however, live differently. For a Christian work is not a way to fulfill consumerist desires. No. Work is an opportunity for faithful living. Christ has forgiven us our sins and called us to faithful service in the world. In work, we have a chance to reveal to the world just a glimpse of God's good design. Not just heaven, but what God does through and each one of us.

God has given us vocations, places for faithful service. For some, this vocation involves employment in the workforce. If you are not employed, however, that does not mean you are not working. Work can involve raising a family, serving the local community, caring for creation. To his faithful people, God gives a double joy in daily work. We find joy in serving God through daily labor, and we find joy in serving others through our work.

So is all vanity then? Not if you find joy in your work. The joy God enables you to have as forgiven children of God, serving him and serving others.

Have you lost joy in your work? Think of your job, of what you are you doing as a God given gift.

Now, what if you are not working or employed at the present? Remember that the Lord will never abandon you. Remember that he will provide always. That too gives us joy knowing that our Lord and Savior will never abandon us.

So as you explore that God given joy, may his joy be poured on you always, in his name!