

## **Holy Work: Being Good for Something**

### **Genesis 2:4-15**

I wish I could have us all together right now. For one thing, I am missing terribly looking out on the congregation and seeing your familiar faces. This social distancing thing has gone from being a somewhat intriguing interlude from routine to becoming more of an ache in my stomach and heart. There is so much to talk about and catch up on with each other. I feel we have missed each other long enough.

If we were together now, I'd begin my sermon by asking you to name one job you dreamed of doing when you were a child, and how that worked out for you. Now that I have children, I am reminded of how young people go through a time when they dream about the sort of jobs they might do in their lives. Some, however, figure out what they want to do early on and never waver. My daughter, Kira, has been talking about delivering babies for more years than I can count. She is so fixed on that idea, I am beginning to think that she might one day actually go on to do that.

She would be different than me. I remember going through a phase of imaginary job-hopping. First, I became intrigued by archaeology. My dad and I even joined an archaeology club focused on the various Native American sites in our part of Mississippi. Then it was the study of rocks, and I started collecting and tumbling rocks. This was followed by astronomy, which included maps of the sky and a telescope.

By the time it came time to choose a college, I had not the slightest idea about what to do. So rather than following my bliss, I decided to please my dad and be practical and get a business degree. By the last semester of my senior year, I felt depressed thinking of ever doing anything in business. I realized that, at least for me, anything I did in business would only be work, just a job to make money, and it left me feeling empty. So I began to listen to my heart again, and my heart spoke what was something more like a call from God. It involved facing some terrible fears of inadequacy. But by then, the call was screaming at me, and I felt no other choice but to venture to Emory University and see it through. And here I am - a testimony that following your bliss also means facing some of your biggest fears.

Today, I would like us to focus on the practice of the holiness of work. We share with our Jewish brothers and sisters a common understanding of the place of work in our lives because we share a common story, the one we find of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. We learn from that story that, from the very beginning, work was a gift from God. God places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden not to goof around haplessly without any sense of purpose, but to do meaningful work. The first job was tilling and planting and caring for God's garden. Apparently, when God created everything, the job was not finished. God has the man and the woman in the garden to continue to do what God is so good at doing: bring order and beauty and purpose out of the chaos. In other words, we are all called in one way or another to be co-creators with God.

People often joke about the drudgery of work. One employee's boss told him, "Have a good day," so he went home. That is not the way work is described in the Garden of

Eden. God's work is holy work for the two of them. By that, I mean it was purposeful work. They had a sacred part in caring for God's garden. Like God, they also had the job of bringing order out of the chaos of this world and creating beauty for some greater purpose. In that role, they understood their place and knew their value and found satisfaction from what they did. At the end of a long week, they could look at all they work they did and join God in saying, "It's good. It's very good."

I remember the great joy I had in building two box gardens, carefully mixing the soil so that it would rarely need watering and growing the most beautiful and tasty vegetables. It was rather like the Garden of Eden those first two years. The soil did not need water. There were no weeds in my garden, and we raised the tastiest tomatoes I have ever eaten. I felt I had created something wonderful with my hands, and God was making it grow.

But about the third year, there were weeds in my garden. The soil now needed watering. Blight came upon my tomato plants, and the rabbits discovered the lettuce. No longer did I feel that "good-tired" and satisfaction after working in the garden. No, my back hurt, and I felt frustrated, and wondered about what to do about a garden that was not as productive and pleasurable as it once was.

We discover that something like that happened to Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit. Everything changed for them. After that time, they still went to work, but the joy was gone. That "good-tired" feeling at the end of the day now turned to dry, cracked hands and sore muscles and counting the hours until the weekend and a day of rest. Work became only "work," the purpose of which was to put bread on the table and to live another day. When work becomes only "work," the days get longer even in the wintertime, and you live with a nagging sense that there should be something more to life.

Many people in this world will recognize themselves in the description of what life was like after the forbidden fruit was consumed. The working poor are often devalued for what they do, and also judged. Often, they are misjudged as lazy, ignorant, and unfortunate souls, even though so many work more than two jobs and still live paycheck to paycheck. They know it only takes an illness or a broken-down car or a bad economy to put them out on the street. The idea that work might also be purposeful and rewarding seems a stretch they do not have the luxury to consider.

But we all know something about what it is like when work loses its purpose.

- When you are a parent working at home, and you've changed too many diapers and handled too many tantrums, you aren't thinking about the noble cause of raising happy, contributing human beings.
- When you are making good money for the family, but dread showing up for work. When you are tired of the people you are working with and wish you could do something else, but you feel trapped, work has lost its purpose.

- Even if you are doing what you know you need to be doing, there comes a time in everyone's life when much of the joy is gone. Sometimes having an avocation is something we are called to do, and it helps to have joy. I have known men who do what they need to do at work, but go out on the weekend for their true joy of coaching a group of soccer kids.
- Every job has its challenges. I find that being a pastor is a job where I never feel my job is complete. There is always much left unfinished, and a lot of the work is head and heart work. There is nothing I like more than to get out of my head and do a project in my home or yard, where I work with my hands and can actually complete and appreciate a finished job.

I have a quote on the door of my office. It is from Henry David Thoreau. It says, **"Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of too much of life. Aim above morality. Be not simply good; be good for something."** That is what holy work is; it is doing something that helps us find our bliss, and enables us to be good for the sake of something else. There is a big difference between people whose work is self-absorbed, about what they can take by working, and people who know deeply, that what they are doing is being good for something larger than themselves. You can do a job to put food on the table, or you can feed your body and feed your whole self.

In Buddhism, work is one of the key flagstones of the Noble Eightfold Path. In Buddhism, every moral job can be a Spiritual Path. When Gandhi would spin yarn to make thread for cloth, he was not wasting time. He was losing himself in the joy of the moment of what he was doing, and making clothes that the British could not tax. The focus is no longer on what you get out of what you are doing in terms of financial reward or prestige. The focus is on the joy of that moment you are in, and knowing, as insignificant as it may seem, it is a piece of being good for something. So the janitor that is brave enough to clean the toilets in boys restroom, in the middle of the night while everyone is asleep, so that kids can come to school the next day with clean bathrooms, can find joy in something so menial. In fact, he may have an easier time than the rest of us who are so tempted to think about the size of our paycheck. [\[i\]](#)

Do you remember the "Garden Song" sung by Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary, and also John Denver?

Inch by inch, row by row  
 Gonna make this garden grow  
 All it takes is a rake and a hoe. (It goes on)  
 And a piece of fertile ground  
 Inch by inch, row by row  
 Someone bless these seeds I sow  
 Someone warm them from below  
 Till the rain comes tumbling down  
 Pulling weeds and picking stones  
 (We are) made of dreams and bones

Feel the need to grow my own  
Cause the time is close at hand  
Painful rain, sun and rain  
Find my way in nature's chain.

So this is the good news: that we are made for a purpose. We are co-creators with God. Our work is holy work at all stages of our lives. We (all of us) are called to find our way in nature's (God's) chain. Amen.

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[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World, "The Practice of Living with Purpose," p. 114.