

“Work”

Amos 5:11-15; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13;
Matthew 21:28-32

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Since it is Labor Day Weekend, I was thinking about labor and work. In doing so, I began to think about different passages, and this Thessalonians passage helps us begin to think about the nature of work. Work is something we do to help our community. We work so that we can take care of ourselves and thus not be a burden on our community. We don't just sit there and criticize our community; we actually work and do something to be part of it and support it.

I recognize that when we work together, amazing things can happen. Simple things. I remember when we were putting up the tent and taking it down for Ames' wedding out at Lael. It was amazing how fast it came down when we had somebody on every pole. We worked together and out of that came a very good thing, at least in my mind. It was wonderful to have that done.

As we think about work, I remember looking back as a youth, and what's the question you always ask children? What do you want to be when you grow up? They start thinking about what they want to be. So we have that sense of beginning to think about what we want to be and we begin to look forward to work and what it will be. I remember I had enough experience through high school and summers that I realized that work wasn't all fun. But you have the sense that you're going somewhere, you're going to begin to do something, you're going to begin to work. And there's this sense of joy around it.

We can think about work in relationship to that: there is a joy in it. When we do cooperative work, collaborative work, when we achieve something together, we have a social group and there can be some real joy in that kind of process of work. How come it's not always all joy? When does work begin to be something other than that?

I had a friend, when I was working in Berkeley, and he was working there as well, but he was from San Francisco. He wouldn't think about where milk came from other than from the grocery store. Nothing beyond that. I heard a study recently of children in London who had no idea that milk came from anywhere else but the grocery store. Now the point of that is not just that we sometimes miss a whole process, but when we do that we miss all the work that goes into it. To bring milk to market, there are a lot of people in between. We could say thanks to the cows, thanks to those who milk them, thanks to those who bottle and deliver and make it available for us. But it's so easy to forget because it's just milk you pull off the shelf. How many kinds of things are there like that, where we forget the labor that went into it because it's so easy to have?

There are other times where we begin to recognize how important the functioning, the work of a community is. Not only is Houston a tragedy because of the way Hurricane Harvey disrupts lives and destroys homes, but it destroys the whole fabric of

the social network and the work that can be done. All of a sudden, the work that was being done, the supporting of one another, can't be done and there has to be help coming in from outside. It doesn't matter whether it's Houston or Mumbai. When there's a tragedy, we recognize, we realize the kind of work that was being done to keep things going and how they are not able to do it anymore. It's a disruption of our lives. Not only are the places we live disrupted, but also our work, our way of life is disrupted. It reminds us of the importance of that community and its work, its ability to function and process together.

We could think beyond that. It's not only natural disasters that cause problems with work. It's not only forgetting of the process of work. In our world today there are struggles around people having meaningful work because they are forced into work. The estimates are somewhere between 20 million to 45+ million people who are basically in slavery. Somehow that work can show up on our shelves so that some of the things we buy are tinged with that injustice.

When we begin to think about work and appreciate work, it means appreciating that people get the benefit of their own work, that they are able to bring that work to their community and support their own community and themselves. That's what Amos is talking about—when there isn't equitable benefit for the work we do, and that's important and God cares about it. God cares that there can be good work and that we are able to bring the benefit of that work to our community.

You notice that in Second Thessalonians when Paul is talking about work he is suggesting that work isn't just a means to an end in terms of "you should work so you gain a reward." The idea is you work because you are part of a community. That's part of what we do. It's the support of our community and the life we live. It feels like it is so easy today to just focus on ends and not think about the means. If I find a quart of milk in the grocery store, that's the end I want. But what about the means? All across our lives, what about the means?

When you are in the process of doing something and it feels like you are working hard to achieve a goal and do something good, and then it's not appreciated or accepted or it's not rewarded appropriately, it feels like an injustice, doesn't it? It's because the process matters. The people who are doing things matter.

When we do things together, when we do work together, something grows out of it we wouldn't have expected. In Biblical terms, we often think about God calling us to work. Sometimes we talk about that as vocation. It's not just something we do so we gain a reward, but it's something that's part of who we are. It's not so much what we do as who we are that matters. But it's not just who we are; we have to do the work, too.

That's what Jesus is getting at. We can know who we are and say we will do good work, but if we never do it... It's not so much about exactly what a person does. The way scripture talks about it is we all have different gifts and those gifts are all needed to make up a good body. But the point is that we use the gift. That's what Jesus is talking

about, that we hear what God asks us to do and that we do it; we use our gifts for the good of our community.

As we think about work, it's not just the work we do. Whatever kind of work we do—anything from the school work we do, to the work we do in our job, to the work we do as a volunteer, to the ways we encourage one another, to the work of relationship and family—as we think about that, who is the one we want to work for? I think God is always hiring. God is always inviting us to do the work God has for us.

It's described a couple of ways in our scripture today. "Seek the good and not evil that you may live, so that the Lord God of Hosts will be with you. Hate evil and love good and establish justice." That's way back in Amos. And in 2 Corinthians 3:13: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary of doing what is right."

God always has that work for us. It's interesting to me that as we watch Jesus do the work of God, one of the things that he does, a very simple work of his, was to gather around him a group, a community. He makes it possible for us to continue to gather around a community, to gather together. It is part of our work to be a community together, to do the work that supports it, the work of gathering.

Sometimes it seems easier to do other things but it is coming and gathering around the table, realizing that it is that work of coming and gathering that all of a sudden brings us sustenance and joy and life. So we come and gather. We do this work—this work of worship, this work of faith, this work of gathering. And when we are making our lives and our work consistent with the will of God, we can truly celebrate the labor that we do and the work the saints before us have done. Amen.