

July 31, 2016  
Ecclesiastes 1 and 2

Proper 13C  
Joyful Work

*Grace, mercy and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Much can be said about a beautiful mural. Whether that be the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or perhaps murals painted in cities across the country and world in places that you may not think of murals. In Seminary I had the opportunity to spend a week in the Los Angeles area for part of my seminary training. LA is pretty remarkable city, but yet it also hosts some of the most troubled parts of the country. During the day our host took us to a gang infested part of town, when it was fairly safe. As we walked around that part of town, there was a beautiful mural painted on one of the buildings. This mural that was painted there captured the beauty of God-pleasing labor, yet contrasted with the area around it that was filled with hardship...poverty, pain, drugs, and death.

Unfortunately, you don't need murals and an entire city to awaken you to that tension. The tension of beauty and burden. The tension is something that is present in all our daily labor. You see, work is both a beauty and a burden. I've seen this in my vocation as pastor, not just that but also as husband, father, son, citizen, etc.

Before the fall into sin, when the world was created, God put Adam *"in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."* That was Adam's vocation. 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 it all the days of your life,"* and *"by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread,"* God told Adam.

As God's people, it is difficult for us to live in this tension. On the one hand, there is beauty to our labor. I see the beauty as I drive the roads and see the vast fields. They are beautiful. Our vocation, our work...no matter what it is, is a gift of God for service to him and service to others. On the other hand, such labor is not easy. It is difficult and painful. It demands the sweat of our brow and perseverance through pain.

What a blessing, then, for us, to hear this passage from Ecclesiastes this morning. In Ecclesiastes, God offers us a short but encouraging word that helps us find a double joy in the daily labor that we pursue.

God has given us a double joy in daily work.

In our text, we have *"the words of the Preacher, the Son of David, king in Jerusalem."* Although this preacher was king, he struggles with work. *"Vanity of vanities,"* he begins. *"All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil which he toils under the sun?"*

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. IN Psalm 90, Moses contemplates the shortness of life. *"The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength*

*eighty, yet there span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*" The problem with our labor in these cases is not much its difficulty, but its disappearance. Ultimately, it passes away.

In our text, the Preacher echoes this wisdom. He says that he hates his toil precisely 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 accumulated is left to others. That's what Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson.

That is why it is so important to listen closely as the Preacher closes this text. At the very end, the Preacher opens our eyes to what comes *"from the hand of God."* He reveals how there can be joy in our labor. The Preacher says, *"There is nothing better for a person than that he could eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil."*

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.

Too often, we turn our work in this world into an idol. It is the means whereby we hope to build ourselves a kingdom. We become like the rich man in our gospel lesson who was building barns for all his wealth. 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 or remodel the one we have, to take that vacation, to find a joy in life that lasts. Work was never meant to accomplish that. And such efforts will ultimately fail us.

Society and advertising tell us where to buy happiness. Happiness is only a feeling and its temporary. Happiness is for a moment. The car that we buy is totaled in an accident...the house that we buy, build, or remodel is destroyed by fire or water. The vacation of our dreams is ruined by weather or illness. The dream job that we thought we wanted comes crashing down with a bad economy or a disagreement with the boss or if you are self-employed, the weather in a certain year could derail your dream job. So many factors can stop your happiness. Things in life can derail happiness. Your labor was never meant to make you happy in terms of the world.

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden," Jesus said, "And I will give you rest."* 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 ALONE, we are freed from having work as our master. Now, work is a joyful place for service: service to God and service to others. In such work, God has given us double joy. In Christ Alone, God gives us joy. We have joy in Christ

alone...even in our labors, because of His life, death, and resurrection. The joy of our labors is found within.

God gives us the joy of service to Him in our daily labor. Christ's work of salvation has claimed all of our lives. Now, all that we do is done for him. There is a joy to be found in raising children (even changing diapers), in preparing food, in cleaning house, in working the fields for the harvest. There is joy to be found in being involved in the community as citizens. There is joy in doing your homework and studying for the test. There is joy in your labors. God originally called Adam and Eve to care for creation, and now, after our redemption, the world is 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. God gives us joy in being an echo for him. In early editions of the Small Catechism, the petition "Give us this day our daily bread" was accompanied by a woodcut. In that woodcut, you did not have a loaf of bread on a table. Instead, you had Jesus feeding the five thousand with the bread of a small child. That image captures a second joy that lies in our daily labor. The joy of serving others through the fruits of our labor. Just as the child's small loaves in the hands of Jesus fed five thousand, so, too, our 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. The joy of serving others through the fruits of our labor is done In Christ Alone. In Christ Alone we can be an echo of Christ's love as portrayed in the woodcut of Jesus feeding 5000.

In St. Louis, MO there's a rather large church, St. Paul Lutheran in Des Peres. Driving there can be quite thought provoking. If you are driving from the south, you will find yourself driving through rolling hills. At one point, you're in a small valley and then the road takes you by West County Mall...this is a huge place. It would be easy to turn off at one of the many entrances and go shopping at one of the 184 stores. If you look straight ahead, however, you get a glimpse of the church. Up the road, at the top of the horizon, you can barely see the steeple. A cross, etched against the sky. In that moment, you are experiencing the tension of Christian vocation in America.

In America, people often associate work with earning a living. Even I do that and so do you! Having money not only for necessary expenses such as groceries, gas for your car, and a roof over your head, but also for the joys of consumption...a dinner at Ruth's Chris or an Alaskan Cruise or that 2017 Ford F150. 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...if you can call it joy.

Christians, however, live differently. For them, for us, 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. In Work we have a chance to echo God's love.

God has given us vocations, places for faithful service. For some, this vocation involves employment in the workforce...or even privately. 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 IN Christ alone. We find joy in serving God through daily labor and we find joy in serving others through our work, In Christ Alone.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.*