

Work and the Game of LIFE

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-part series

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Genesis 2:1–15 (NRSV)

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

⁴These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Deuteronomy 5:12,15 (NRSV)

¹²Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.

¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

How could work possibly be part of God's good creation? Too often our work is mere toil rather than a source of fulfillment and purpose. What should be the place of work in this game called life?

Why do you work? It is a simple yet profound question posed by Rev. Janet Collinsworth in her Fellowship Group curriculum for this week. Do you work because you need to support yourself and your family? Is it toil or does your work bring you fulfillment and satisfaction? What if you inherited millions from some long-lost, unknown relative. What would you do every day? Would you still work? If so, what sort of work would you do? Perhaps you've retired from your life-long vocation. What do you do now? Is work only a necessary hardship that we must endure? Or ought it to be something more?

The garden

Whenever we come to the subject of work, it always surprises people that work, much less working a garden, was part of the creation *before* Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Work can be so difficult and crushing for some people that it seems as if that is all work was ever meant to be. But in the story of the Garden of Eden, the work becomes difficult only after the humans wreck things by doing the one thing God asked them not to do. Only then does the soil in the garden become hard to break and till. Only then do weeds grow. Only then do Adam and Eve find out what it is like to be a Texas gardener.

But before their rebellion, the garden's soil is soft and fertile. I imagine it to be like one big bug-free, disease-free Miracle-Gro commercial. Even I might have a green thumb there! My own concrete-like weed-laden soil is a distortion of God's creation, a distortion intertwined with the distortion of my own relationship with God.

It is the same with the work lives of far too many people. Their work lives are a distortion of God's intent. They are burdened by a life filled with work that is frustrating, mundane, even dehumanizing. Too often, this is made worse, not better, by our co-workers.

Brother Lawrence

Brother Lawrence was a 17th century monk whose writings about practicing the presence of God are still widely read and appreciated.

Brother Lawrence found that every task can be a medium of God's love, even his dishwashing. Though he retreated from the world to find union with God, there is still an enduring word for us all. God is present with us in all things. His grace and love can be found in all things and all tasks.

In his kitchen Brother Lawrence wrote, "We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God."

Yet, some people are confident that they are doing the work that God wants them to do. Count me among them. I've had great jobs in the past and some that were soul-crushing. I've been very privileged and blessed in some of the places and people to which my work life has taken me. But now, at St. Andrew, I find myself doing important work that I enjoy with people who are encouraging in all things.

"Meaning in the mundane"

Still, many people know that they are not doing the work God wants them to do. Perhaps they even work out of fear of what will happen to them if they don't keep showing up at their job. They know that there must be something else. Something new. Something that will bring passion and satisfaction. But fear holds them back.

I don't believe that God has planned out each step of our lives, such that all we have to do is trust God and wait for the next place that God will take us. But I do believe that God works with all our ambitions, decisions, troubles, and mistakes to move us forward toward God's purposes for us. In my own case, it is pretty hard to see what much of my

previous career has to do with my work at St. Andrew. Yet, I believe that God has used it all to shape me into the person and teacher that I am now.

If you are in a mundane job, you might ask yourself how it could be preparing you for the work you believe you should be doing. What can you learn now? How might God use this job to make you ready for the work God wants you to do? You might even ask yourself how you can find God's presence and encouragement in the work you do now. Brother Lawrence found God's presence in the mundane task of washing dishes.

Therefore . . . our work, all of it, is not in vain

I've always been struck by the fact that Paul closes his great chapter on the resurrection with a "therefore." He writes, because we shall all be raised just as Jesus was raised, our work is not in vain. Paul means that because we know the entire human enterprise is headed for a glorious, God-created restoration, all that we do now has meaning and purpose. We are not just passing time, waiting for the end, whatever that might be. Instead, in all our work we are building for God's kingdom, we are helping to ready the world for God's great burst of new creation, a new creation already begun in Jesus Christ.

The gift of Sabbath

God worked six days and rested on the seventh. Thus, we should expect both rest and work to be woven into the fabric of God's holy creation. When the Israelites arrive at Mt. Sinai after fleeing slavery in Egypt, God began to teach them about Sabbath and the truly holy life.

Of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to practice Sabbath is the most richly detailed (Exodus 20:8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Out of his love and genuine concern for his people, God commands that they rest on one day out of seven. This rest is to be extended to all – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (see Galatians 3:28 for a

Practicing Sabbath

God worked six days and rested on the seventh. Sabbath, setting aside a day for God, is part of God's teachings at Mt. Sinai and is deeply connected with the biblical view of work.

About ten years ago, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA urged its clergy and congregations to rediscover the gift of Sabbath. Calling on both scriptural teachings and centuries-old Christian traditions, the Presbyterians articulated well the larger sense of Sabbath among God's people. They noted that the "gift of Sabbath" serves many purposes:¹

"Sabbath is for our joy and our rest." John Calvin wrote, "Work is good, but when we work all the time work becomes a curse not a blessing." As God rested on the seventh day to rejoice in the goodness of his creation, Sabbath invites us to rest and take joy in what already is!

"Sabbath is for deepened communion with the Living God." Sabbath is a time that we set aside for God to shape us within.

"Sabbath draws us into the sacred rhythm God has woven into all of life and all creation." In addition to a Sabbath day, God commanded that his people honor a Sabbath year. Every seventh year the fields were not to be sown and the vines were not to be pruned. The land itself was to have a Sabbath to God. After seven Sabbath years there was to be a year of Jubilee, when land was to be returned to its original family, for it was God's land, not the Israelites' (Leviticus 25). In the Jubilee year, slaves were to be freed, just as God had redeemed the Israelites from Egypt. The Sabbath is about the need for and goodness of rest, redemption, and renewal.

"Sabbath is profoundly prophetic." Again Calvin: "Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God."

"Sabbath is for our life in community." Sabbath is not a private gift from God. The Sabbath commandment was given to Israel as the entire community of God's people.

thought-provoking parallel) – even the livestock! Further, this rest is explicitly tied to God's redemption of his people from bondage in Egypt. Sabbath is to be a holy time, set apart for God, in whom we find true rest.

Jews observed Sabbath on Saturday but marked days from sunset to sunset. Thus, the Jewish Sabbath began about 6pm on Friday. Because Jesus was resurrected on the day after the Jewish Sabbath, Christians came to adopt Sunday as the principal day for worship.

For hundreds of years after the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews struggled to stay true to YHWH, to resist the pressures of cultural assimilation by their oppressors. This struggle with the pagan world was marked by several potent symbols of Jewish distinctiveness – and they were non-negotiable. Sabbath-keeping was one of these symbols. By definition, Jews were those who kept the Sabbath. It was a faith marker that all could see and, so they thought, judge.

In Luke 13, Jesus heals a crippled woman whose body had been in bondage to Satan for 18 years. To the dismay of the local synagogue leader, Jesus heals her on the Sabbath. Jesus' confrontation with this leader is not really about the legal niceties of Sabbath law, but about Jesus' frustration that so many Jews are unable to see that the great Sabbath day, the day of Israel's release from bondage, was breaking in upon them all. Thus, after the confrontation, Jesus teaches not about the law, but about the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:18-21). As Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote, "With Shabbat, we get what Jewish tradition calls a foretaste . . . of the Messianic Age, a higher Eden."¹

We Christians are Easter people, believing that the Messianic Age arrived in Jesus. We have been born a second time. We are new creations and part of this new age.

All of our work and all of our rest are to reflect this new creation into which we have been born. The Messiah has come and the Great Resurrection has begun. May we all strive to help make our own and everyone else's work worthy of Christ's victory.

¹ This is from an article, "Radical Shabbat," in *Sojourners* magazine.

Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the Bible and it is foundational to all that follows. In it, we learn that there is a God who created everything and created humans in God's image. We learn that God gave the humans a beautiful place to live and to work, a place in which their relationship with God could thrive. But we also learn that, in their desire to be like gods themselves, the humans tossed all this away, doing the one thing God had asked them not to do. Through this act of selfish defiance, the humans' relationship with God was deeply mangled and, indeed, all of creation became misshapen, only a shadow of what God intended. All of this happens in the first three chapters of Genesis!

The rest of the Bible is the story of God's efforts to make things right, to restore creation, and to bring humans back into a right relationship with their creator – our creator.

The story of Noah is really a story of “uncreation” and new creation, a fresh start. But this start goes wrong too. No sooner do the humans get off the ark than they begin building for themselves a tower that would reach to the heavens. Again, they would seek to be like gods. So God dashes the tower to the ground and scatters the people, even going so far as to burden them with a multitude of languages.

So . . . in the 12th chapter of Genesis, we learn that God undertook a new way forward, ever determined that his people would be restored to a right and loving relationship with God. We meet Abram, later called Abraham, the man God chooses to be the father of a people, God's people, through whom God would put things right. As Genesis unfolds, we meet Abraham, his wife, Sarah, their sons, Isaac and Esau, and Isaac's son, Jacob. Jacob, in turn, has twelve sons, from whom would come the twelve tribes of Israel. And, of course, the story of this restoration reaches its climax in Jesus Christ who, as Israel's representative king, would do for Israel what the people were unable to do for themselves.

Memory Verse of the Week

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

Because, as God's people, we have been born anew and are new creations, our minds must be renewed and reshaped into minds that can think themselves what will please God. And what is God's will for our lives? That our lives be characterized by what is good, acceptable and perfect.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Here are some questions on the subject of work posed by Rev. Janet Collinsworth.

1. Why do you work?
2. How does your work shape your life and the lives of your family and friends?
3. Is your work “toil” or “a labor of love”?
4. Name an element of fear which limits passion and balance in your work and life.
5. How does faith influence whether your work is “toil” or balanced and purpose-filled?
6. If you are blessed with “plenty” and don't really see fear related to your work, what is driving your work and how is that drive limiting in your life?
7. How can faith, love and relationships help you move from fear-filled toil to a balanced and purpose-filled life?
8. In Genesis 2:1-3, God finishes his work of creation. God does not have to work, obviously. Why do you think God works? How might this be a model for our lives?
9. Discuss specific ways you can change so your work is purpose filled and not fear-filled.
10. If you, like Peter, know that Jesus is right there with you, what great and unthinkable thing could you “step out” and do in your life?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Amos 8:1-6 The Lord warns those who wish the Sabbath to be over so they can get back to work (v.5)!</p>	<p>Tuesday, Luke 13:10-21 Jesus heals on the Sabbath and tells parables about the Kingdom of God.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Acts 18:1-4 Paul arrives in Corinth and sets up his business. He is a tentmaker and supports himself with the work of his hands.</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Thessalonians 3 Paul's work is to be a model for the others. None are to be idle.</p>
<p>Friday, James 4:13-17 All of our work, our dreams, our ambitions must all be lived out in the day-to-day presence of God.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

