

Working with All Our Heart 6th Weekend after Easter
SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY May 19 & 20, 2007

Genesis 2:1-3, 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.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

1 Corinthians 15:54-58 (NRSV)

⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Colossians 3:23-24 (The Message)

Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you’ll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you’re serving is Christ.

What is the place of work in our lives? How do we find meaning and purpose in all our work? How do we work from our hearts?

This series has been about having a vision for our lives, an all-encompassing vision that touches every aspect of our lives. Our relationship with God. Our relationship with others. Our finances. Our health. And now, our work. In his book *Chazown*, Craig Groeschel helpfully differentiates between our *life’s work* and our *work life*. Our life’s work is to grow into ever-truer disciples of Jesus Christ so that we may truly be the light to the world, so that we may make more disciples of Jesus Christ, and so that we may build for the kingdom of God.

But, today, we are going to focus more on our work life, what we do with those productive, waking hours that make up so much of our life. It is intriguing that the first biblical reference to humanity’s work isn’t an elevated discussion of the our life’s work, but to the seemingly mundane task of working a garden.

The garden

Whenever we come to the subject of work, it is 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 become 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.

“Celebrate and elevate”

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 giving and encouraging in all things.

In fact, I’m sure that I’m doing now what God wants me to do. You may feel the same way about your own work life. If so, “what now?” we might ask. Groeschel urges us to “celebrate and elevate.” If we are living the dream, take the time to enjoy it. Thank God for it. Celebrate. But also push onward. Don’t settle. Ask God, “What’s next?”

“Meaning in the mundane”

Still, many people know that they are not doing the work God wants them to do. They know that there must be something else. Something new. Something that will bring passion and satisfaction. Groeschel’s advice to such is people is (1) don’t panic and (2) trust God.

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.¹

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.

Working from the heart

If you read today’s passage from Colossians closely, you might be able to infer that it comes from a passage written to those in the Christian community in Colossae who were slaves. The passage is from one of the many “household codes” that we find in Paul’s letters. Such codes were common in the Greco-Roman world and spelled out how the members of the households were to conduct themselves. There was advice for the husbands and fathers, for the wives and mothers, for the children, and even for the slaves. Ownership of slaves was taken for granted in the Greco-Roman world and was common to wealthier households.

Here, Paul urges that the slaves understand that all the work they do is work for their real Master, Jesus. Their work may be mundane, unimportant, and not of their choosing. But they are to work from the heart, endeavoring to work well and with love. The sacred was not to be a separate category in their lives, nor in ours. The sacred pervades every corner of our lives. We are to acknowledge that truth and, like Brother Lawrence and his dishes, affirm as God’s even the most ordinary of tasks. For in this, we unify our work life with our life’s work and get a foretaste of the kingdom of God.

¹Brother 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.”

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.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAY 20 – MAY 26

Sunday, Acts 21:27 - 22:21 Why is there trouble in the temple? What has Paul done to instigate the disturbance? Why do you think the Romans coming running? What are the key points that Paul makes when defending himself to his fellow Jews?

Monday, Acts 22:22 – 23:35 Why does the tribune stop Paul's flogging? Why would the Romans take Paul before the Jewish Council? What parallels are there between Paul's "trial" before the Jewish leadership and Jesus'? Why might Luke want to emphasize similarities? How does Paul divide his accusers? What does Jesus say to Paul about these events? Why do the Romans get Paul out of Jerusalem?

Tuesday, Acts 24 Who do the Jewish leadership send to handle Paul's trial before the Roman governor, Felix? What is their charge? What evidence do they have? How would you summarize Paul's defense here? Why do you think Felix doesn't simply turn Paul over to the Jewish authorities and put an end to all this?

Wednesday, Acts 25:1 – 25:22 When it seems that Festus is going to hand Paul over to the Jewish leadership, why does Paul demand an audience with Caesar? What gives him the right to make such a demand? Why does Festus need advice from Herod Agrippa? (Bernice is Agrippa's sister, not his wife.)

Thursday, Acts 25:23 – 26:32 How does Paul's speech before Agrippa differ from his other speeches? Do you think that Paul actually thinks that he might help bring Agrippa to belief in Jesus? In the end, what is decided about Paul's guilt? Why must he still go to Rome?

Friday, Acts 27 Why do you think Luke gives us so much detail about Paul's trip to Rome? Indeed, why does he devote so many chapters to the story of Paul's arrest and trial?

Saturday, Acts 28 On Malta, why do you think that the natives think Paul is a murderer because he is bitten by a snake? Why doesn't Luke tell us more about what happens to Paul in Rome? Why end Acts with Paul under house arrest but still waiting for trial? What do you think happened to Paul?

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Much of our life can and ought to be devoted to productive, satisfying, God-given work. Yet, if we are to do the work that God wants us to do, how do we know what that work is? What is God's hope and vision for our work lives? How might you go about understanding better the work that God might hope for you?

First, you might examine the gifts that God has given you. There are a number of tests and exercises that can help in this. Your friends and family can help. But understanding what we are innately good at doing is important. I might decide God wants me to be a plumber, but I'd be wrong. If that is what God hoped for me, he'd have given me at least an ounce of talent for it. But he did give me gifts in teaching. Even as an air force pilot, I was an instructor pilot. There's an apt book title I remember, "Do What You Are." Good advice.

Second, ask yourself what gets you excited. What work makes you passionate? There's a reason that career advisors urge people to turn their hobbies into careers. It's their passion. Leo Buscaglia wrote that having passions in our lives is essential to our happiness. He's right. Perhaps such passions are signposts to the passion we are to have for God.

Craig Groeschel offers us two questions that reveal a lot about what the work life we ought to seek:

1. "If money were no object and you could do anything you wanted for the rest of your life, what would you do?"
2. "Besides ministering to those who are most important to you, what is the number one thing that you believe God wants to accomplish through you?"

How would you answer those two questions? How can they help you to understand what God wants you to do? Finally, how would this whole issue of work and career be different for you if you were not a Christian?