

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Enjoyment in Toil”

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“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” (Eccl. 2:24).

Last summer, Jacklyn and I were getting her home in Wheaton ready for sale. The back yard had an old white picket fence surrounding it. It didn't look good; the paint was bubbling and chipping and falling off in places. It needed to be refreshed. The right way would have been to spend a long time scraping to get as much of the old paint off as possible, and then paint it. But we didn't have that kind of time. We had a list of projects for the house, and another for the wedding, and the mantra of the month was “Get er done!” So, I went around and did a hasty and superficial job scraping and then started to slap on some paint.

Have you ever noticed there's no joy when you're doing shoddy work just to get it done? That's the way it was with this fence. Without a thorough scraping, I wasn't fixing anything. I was only kicking the can down the road. It would soon again be a problem for whomever would buy the home. It was hot and humid and toilsome, and I could take no satisfaction in the work. In fact, I was ashamed of it.

So, I put the lid back on the paint, picked up the scrapper again, and started doing the job right. A couple of good Christian friends across the street, (a father and his son) must have noticed the slow progress. They came over with scrapers in hand, and by the end of the day the whole fence was gleaming white with two coats of paint.

It taught me a couple of things. First, not all Bears fans are rotten to the core. Those two were gems. Second, the pleasure of work comes when you're committed to excellence, and not just trying to “get 'er done.” Third, it becomes more rewarding when you remember your work is not just for yourself, but for someone else. An elderly woman ended up buying Jacklyn's home. With her in mind, I'm sure glad we did it right.

Our text says, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.” Solomon is suggesting joy in life comes by serving others in our vocations.

Vocation comes from the Latin word “*vocare*”, which means to call. Each of us has multiple vocations, multiple callings. I'm a pastor, but I'm also a husband and dad and son and nephew and brother and friend and citizen and so on. In all your vocations and mine, God uses them to serve others. In a sense, God hides behind you, Luther says, using you as a mask to serve others through your vocations. Similarly, when God blesses you, He almost always does it through other people. You were not born with the innate ability to read God's Word. God served you by using teachers to teach you how to read.

God protects us through the cop on the beat. God lets us travel through the ministry of auto workers and mechanics and road crews and car dealers. God keeps us clean through the vocations of plumbers and trash collectors and sometimes-undocumented aliens who clean our hotel rooms. God heals through doctors, nurses, dentists and pharmacists, but also through those who provide health insurance and those who send the bills to us.

The fast-food worker, the secretary, the grave digger, the group home worker: these are all high callings because God works behind these vocations to serve us.

When God is using you in your vocation to serve others, it certainly doesn't feel like God is doing the work. It consumes your energy, your emotions; it takes time away from other things you'd like to do, and it can be so hard, grueling even. Anyone who says at his retirement party that he loved every minute of it is lying through his teeth.

Work didn't always used to be toilsome. Adam and Eve were called to work the garden and keep it. That is, there was work to do in the paradise of Eden. Of course, that work was all blessing, all joy. It didn't become toilsome until they rebelled against God. Then they heard the words, “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you . . . and by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground (Gen. 3:17-19). Ever since, there's an aspect of toil to all vocations, even that of a grandparent, or celebrity, or professional athlete. Yet our vocations remain a blessing, not a curse.

Sometimes we think of our work as a means to an end. We work so we can live. We work so that one day we can retire and be free to do whatever we want. But if you're retired, you know that there's no joy in puttering around the house all day, every day. Joy comes in having something meaningful and rewarding to do, and it's only meaningful and rewarding when it's being done for others. When you don't have something meaningful to do in retirement, it can be harder to bear than the daily grind of work.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, the servants of the Beast's castle are bored stiff because there are no more guests who come to the castle. The Beast scares them all way. They simply have nothing to do, until one day a beautiful young woman seeks safety in the castle from a pack of ferocious wolves. The servants are ecstatic. "Be our guest, be our guest, put your servants to the test . . ." Then I think it's the French candle who sings, "life is so unnerving for the servant who's not serving." What is a servant when he's not serving? What is an NFL quarterback when he's no longer an NFL quarterback? Maybe that's why Tom Brady keeps coming back for yet another season. What is an autocrat when he's not autocrating? Someone suggested there is war in Ukraine because Vladimir Putin (now 70 years old) does not have a retirement plan.

God means for work to be meaningful and rewarding. A felon by the name of Ed made that clear to me. Ed lived in a 9-foot narrow cell in St. Louis. He could stand in the middle and touch both walls with his hands. If he took two steps, he was at the stainless-steel toilette anchored to the cement floor. Two steps in the other direction was the cinder block wall. When he woke up, there was nothing to do but wait for the next meal. He lived for his work, which was in the prison's laundry. That kept him going. Idleness was not his goal. Leisure was not his goal. Work was, for less than a dollar an hour, and he found pleasure in it.

Young people today face enormous pressure to "choose" their vocation, to decide what they want to do when they grow up, to pick a major in college, to pursue a career. There *are* many decisions to make. But in our choice-obsessed culture, the true meaning of "vocation" is often lost. We don't really choose a vocation. It is something to which we are called by God. You didn't choose the family into which you were born, nor the society in which you were born. God placed you into these relationships. You might think you chose your spouse, but your spouse also had to choose you, and looming behind all that is the providential work of God. "What God joins together, let no one put asunder."

Sometimes young people, hoping to get a job in which they will make lots of money, will choose a major for which they have no vocation, no calling. Maybe they learned that accountants make good money. But they might not be gifted in math. Tragically, they might muscle their way through and get the degree, only to find themselves in a job they hate. And if they hate it, they're probably not very good at it and doing no one any favors. So how *do* you find your true vocation?

I love how Frederick Buechner answers the question. He says the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 118). If you really enjoy the creativity of being a graphic artist, that's great. But you may not enjoy it so much if you are creating ads for the recreational pot industry. Again, where you want to be is where your deep gladness and the world's deep needs intersect.

As Christians we know that our labor, no matter how humble, is charged with meaning because God is using us in our labor to serve others. God hides Himself behind people to care for us. We would have died a hundred times over in our own filth were it not for those who changed our diapers. Therefore, Luther said that the one changing a diaper has as high a calling as a pastor preaching a sermon. It's all important and necessary work; there is no humble or lowly vocation, not in God's eyes.

There is one vocation, however, that stands out. The author of Hebrews wrote, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Heb. 12:2). I didn't understand that passage until I understood the doctrine of vocation. Of course, there's no joy in dying on a cross. Thousands were crucified by the Romans. Only One approached crucifixion with a willing heart. Going to the cross was the vocation of Jesus. It was His calling, and only His calling.

Moses offered to be cut off from God's people if it might be helpful to them (Ex. 32:31-32). But the life of one sinner is not enough to pay for another. Paul also was willing to be delivered over to the wrath of God in place of the Jews (Rom. 9:3). But this wasn't Paul's to do; it was not his vocation. One sinner cannot make atonement for other sinners.

Only Jesus was called by the Father to be sacrificed as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. On the cross Jesus was doing what He was called to do. He was suffering for you and me. That was his life's work, his purpose, his vocation. No one else was qualified to do this. No one else was gifted to do this. From the Lenten hymn we sing, "Yet cheerful he To suff'ring goes That he his foes From thence might free" (LSB 430, v. 5). He goes willingly because that's what He was born to do. He goes joyfully because it wasn't for Himself, it was for you. Your vocation is where you do what you most need to do and what the world most needs to have done. For Jesus, that was the cross.

God has multiple vocations for you. Find enjoyment even in the toil, because God is hiding Himself behind you and using you to serve others. Therefore, your vocations are worth doing, and they are worth doing very well, because God doesn't like to do shoddy work, just to get something done. Though the work is often hard and demanding, it is always a blessing . . . for you and for others. Thanks be to God. Amen.