

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/1/2010, The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 18:20-32, Luke 11:1-13
Laboring Beneath the Sun, and Above It

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It seems to me that to be a human being in this fallen world is to live betwixt and between two sayings about labor. It is as if our poor heads are reverberating between two great tolling bells. BONG! BONG! One bell is named “Thou Shalt” and the other is named “All Is Vanity and Vexation of Spirit.”

The first bell gets its name from the judgment of the LORD when he banished Adam and Eve from the garden. It is about the necessity of backbreaking work. Because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, the Lord told them this:

... cursed is the ground because of you; *in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life*; ¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground...(Genesis 3:17-19, RSV)

We *must* labor. We must earn our bread by the sweat of our brows. And the labor is not always pleasant as before, back in Eden, because the ground is now contrary to us. Thorns and thistles grow there.

The second bell gets its name from the opinion of King Solomon. It comes from Israel’s wisdom tradition, from the book of Ecclesiastes:

¹⁴I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit... (Ecclesiastes 1:14, KJV)

Putting these two sayings together, we seem to get this: On the one hand, we *must* labor. On the other hand, it often vexes the soul to have to labor. It is not simply that thorns and thistles grow in the ground and the work is hard. It is also that sometimes the work seems pointless. It is just one darn thing after another, and then you die! Not only do you die, but sometimes a fool inherits your work and your things.

You see the distinction, I bet. The problem with work is not so much that it is hard. In fact, hard work often is satisfying. I remember working under the Maryland sunshine in my youth, picking strawberries, tomatoes, peppers... mowing the lawns. I remember the tired muscles at the end of the day, but also the sense of satisfaction that I was gathering good food for the marketplace and mowing good rows in the lawn, making things look tidy. You have your own memories of good work, I am sure. No, the problem with work is not so much that our muscles get weary, but that our spirits do. To use the words of our text,

²²For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? ²³For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23, KJV)

At first glance, you might think this reading from Ecclesiastes flows from a depressed pen. But I do not think that that is what the book is about. Its goal is much higher than to somehow express the sad question, “What is the point of all our labors?” Rather, the goal of this book is the same as the goal of the whole Bible: to lift our hearts up to God.

You see, Ecclesiastes is wrestling against the same temptation that seems to have conquered the rich man in this morning’s Gospel story. That temptation is to work away, but to forget about God. The rich man figures he does not need God because he has his wealth. He has barns that are full and overflowing. He plans on sitting back and taking his ease, to eat, drink, and be merry, with no mention either of God or of his poor neighbors. But then the sudden outcome of his life is the dreadful judgment: Fool!

²⁰But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

What ailed the man is not that he was a good manager, nor a man of practical sense, nor that he prospered. The problem with him is not that he was foolish in the things of this earth, but that he was *ultimately* foolish. He labored *under* the sun fair and square, but he did not labor *above* the sun:

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

Or again:

¹⁹Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: ²⁰But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: ²¹For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, KJV)

One of the ideas on Chapter Four of today’s Coffee Hour class - Robert Jenson’s *Story and Promise* - is that the resurrection of Jesus means hope *for you and for me*. This might be a commonplace idea, because we have heard it so often, but think of the possible alternatives. Think, for example, of what it would mean to say that “This rich man, who owns all those barns, is risen from the dead!”

Well, that is not necessarily good news for you and me, because this rich man does not seem to care much about God or his neighbors. What he cares about is sitting back, eating, drinking, and being merry. In fact, I'm not so sure it would be good news at all for the rest of us if this rich man were risen and in charge of things. He might order the rest of us to work for him. If Jesus were a self-absorbed man, indifferent to God and man, the Church probably would not have been so convinced that his resurrection is "Gospel," good news! But the Church is fully convinced that the resurrection of Jesus is good news for you and me, and that is because it was the character of Jesus, from beginning to end, to labor on behalf of you and me and the whole world. It would not be such good news that the rich man in the parable were risen. But it is good news that Jesus is risen.

So, our text from Ecclesiastes asks us to be like Jesus and not like the rich man with all his barns. Solomon himself, the pinnacle of wisdom in Israel, is reminding us that this world's wisdom is good, but not enough.

Wisdom says all kinds of sensible things:

- ✦ Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
- ✦ Do not put off till tomorrow what you can do today.
- ✦ Better to be safe than sorry.
- ✦ A penny saved is a penny earned.
- ✦ A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
- ✦ Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, and supper like a pauper.

And then a couple from Proverbs:

- ✦ Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices *with strife*. (Proverbs 17:1, KJV)
- ✦ A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold. (Proverbs 22:1, KJV)

Ecclesiastes does not mean to reject such wisdom, but rather to do what seeks to be done throughout the Holy Bible: to draw the mind and the heart upwards to God. Let us not be wise simply in the ways of the world, but also in the ways of heaven. Let us strive not only for wealth on earth, but also wealth in heaven.

To be a faithful Christian we need to work "under the sun," but with our heart set "above the sun."

That is how Jesus worked in this earthly life. Recall his answer to his parents when he was but a twelve-year-old boy. He had lingered behind in the Temple, separated from his parents for three days. When they found him, they were amazed at his absorption in his conversations, "sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and ask them questions." When his parents asked him how his could treat them so, he answered in terms of the necessity of his labors:

And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I *must be* about my Father's business? (Luke 2:39, KJV)

In the midst of his preaching about the lilies of the field and so forth, he suddenly stops and speaks of the necessity under when he labors:

⁵⁰I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am *constrained* until it is accomplished! (Luke 12:50, RSV)

When certain Pharisees told him the story of the awful death of John the Baptist, he could have gone into retreat and withdrawn from the field of battle. But not our Lord Jesus:

³¹The same day there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee. ³²And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. ³³Nevertheless I *must* walk to day, and to morrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem. (Luke 13:31-33, KJV)

Jesus labors. He is a relentless worker for the Kingdom and for humanity. And he would be glad for our help. He would welcome your labors, he would welcome mine. If we offer them to him, he will sanctify our labors and use them for the building up of his kingdom. He, then, invites us to walk with him and throw our strength in along side of him, working both under the sun and above it. He is the chief Laborer, and in him, our own labors become important and full of meaning:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, KJV)

After the miracle of the loaves and fishes (John 6), Jesus departed from the crowds to a mountain by himself alone. His disciples took ship and set sail for the other side of the sea, over toward Capernaum. Jesus joined them that evening, walking on the sea. Eventually, the people crossed to the other side of the sea too, seeking Jesus. Jesus asked them to work not only under the sun, but also above it:

²⁶Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." (John 6:26-27, RSV)

That's it! Let us labor, yes, but not simply for the food which perishes, but rather for the food which endures to eternal life.

St. Paul knew that in this world we can become weary and sick of trying. And so he exhorts us to continue in our efforts:

⁹And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (Galatians 6:9, KJV)

To be a Christian does not spare of us from two of the realities about work: We must still labor, we must still earn our bread by the sweat of our brow; and the work is often hard, for the ground is contrary to us. But to be a Christian can spare us from the third reality, from that other tolling bell, the one named "All Is Vanity and Vexation of Spirit." For if you belong to Christ, you shall not have toiled in vain.

Some of you have been carrying heavy burdens for a long time now. Your vocation is hard, your job lays relentless pressure on you, or your responsibilities to your loved ones sometimes leave you discouraged or threaten to wear you out. But in Christ, your work is not in vain. In Christ, the fear of Ecclesiastes finds its answer, finds its Savior: It simply is not true that "all is vanity," for Jesus is alive right now to make use of your labors in the building of the Kingdom.

Labor away then. Go on working as wisely and as well as you can in this world, and when you lay your head down on the pillow at night, whisper a prayer that Jesus will accept the labors of your day and bring good from them. Then, in the morning, labor on again, and again. And then one day, we will hear some sweet words spoken to us concerning our labors:

His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. (Matthew 25:21, KJV)

And so it shall be, that one day, these toils and labors will give way to the "joy of thy Lord," through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.