**Joining in God’s Work & God’s Rest**

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Texts: Genesis 2:1-3; Ecclesiastes 3:9-15; Luke 10:1-9

One thing is very clear from the earliest verses in the Bible: work is part of God’s design for life. God works, and from the beginning, invited humans to work in a weekly rhythm that included both work and rest.

Work is, as I said, part of God’s original design for life in the world—it is not a result of the fall from grace—humans were given work from the beginning. What is the nature of work in the Bible? There have been some interesting conversations about this over the years, and I’ve addressed some of it in the past so I’m not going to spend a whole lot of time on some of these questions, but it does bear a little time. In Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let us make humanity in our image, to resemble us so that they mye take charge of all the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.” Some people have interpreted this phrase “take charge” which was translated as “have dominion over” in earlier translations, to mean that we could do whatever we wanted with the stuff of the earth. There are a few problems with this argument:

* First, in the very next verses, God says that all the plants were available for our food. Typically those who claim we can do what we want ignore this mandate to plant-based eating.
* Second, the word that is translated “take charge” here, and “have dominion over” in earlier versions, is the word for “rule” and several places throughout the Scriptures, God points out the difference between good rulers and bad rulers. Being a ruler in the Bible does not mean it is okay to exploit those whom you rule. Good rulers care for those in their care.
* Finally, in the next chapter, the charge given to humans is to “farm [the earth] and take care of it,” or as one translator rendered it, “to serve and preserve the earth.” The Common English Bible points out that the word they have translated as “farm” almost always means to “serve” (I don’t know why they didn’t translate it that way; they don’t explain that). So the work for humanity is to take care of the earth and its creatures, including other people (as will be made clear in the commandments and law).

As the Bible goes on, it is clear that part of caring for the earth and those who live on it is embracing God’s mission of justice. We know this from numerous mentions throughout the prophetic books. It’s not just the one verse, Micah 6:8, although that really encapsulates the teachings of the prophets very succinctly:

He has told you, human one, what is good and
   what the Lord requires from you:
            to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

Isaiah has many passages that make it clear that our work should be about God’s mission of justice, like this passage in Isaiah 42:5-7:

God the Lord says—
    the one who created the heavens,
    the one who stretched them out,
    the one who spread out the earth and its offspring,
    the one who gave breath to its people
    and life to those who walk on it—
I, the Lord, have called you for a good reason.
    I will grasp your hand and guard you,
    and give you as a covenant to the people,
    as a light to the nations,
    to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison,
    and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.

Indeed, Jesus quoted a similar passage (Isaiah 61:1-2) as he preached his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, Luke 4:16-19

**16**Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. **17**The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

**18***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*
    *because the Lord has anointed me*.
*He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,*
    *to proclaim release to the prisoners*
    *and recovery of sight to the blind,*
    *to liberate the oppressed,*
**19**    *and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

And the passage we read from Luke 10, when he commissions 72 of his followers to go out and work—the work is about healing, justice, and caring for people.

And yet, as important as the mission of Jesus is, he follows the rhythm of the week that is established in that first chapter in Genesis: work and rest, work and rest. He follows the rhythm set out in Ecclesiastes, working and then enjoying others, gathering for meals and conversation. The Divine Plan is not a grim one of all work and no play. Play is part of the plan, as are laughter, conversation, breaking bread together and even sharing wine. Indeed, these are so essential to a good, whole, and holy life that Jesus makes breaking bread and sharing wine a way to remember him. And, while we have brought these into worship, Jesus didn’t describe it that way—he seems to have intended that we gather around tables and enjoy one another as he is described as doing again and again with others.

Life is to include both good work and good times, good effort and good friends. As I’ve said before, God’s plan is for shalom, which means peace, in part, but more fully means wholeness and wellness. And the life of shalom includes work and rest.

All of this raises a couple of questions. The two that come to mind for me are:

1. What if your work isn’t really about making justice? Does everyone have to be working for a cause?
2. What about retirement?

Starting with the first question—no, not everyone is working for a cause. There is room in the world for the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker—but whatever we do, our work should not be characterized by greed or exploitation. No matter what we do, we should be in right relationships with other people. As I read the Gospels, Jesus didn’t have a problem with people making a living, even a good living—but amassing significant wealth indicated a life out of focus. We all should be concerned with ensuring the hungry are fed, the naked are clothes, the lonely are visited, and the oppressed are liberated.

So we may not be explicitly working for justice in our work, but we should be living in a just manner—paying fair wages, not being cruel or harsh, being honest in the way we deal with others.

As to the second question, clearly this is something I’m interested in, since I’ve just announced that I’ll be retiring in a few months. The Bible doesn’t seem to have a retirement plan. Work is part of life. But as I read it, for us, in these days, the nature of our work can change considerably. I have a friend who used to work as a music teacher, but now she paints, quilts, and sews for her granddaughters. She is still working, to be sure, but not for pay. I can think of someone in our congregation who taught at one point, worked in a different way, and in retirement has become a master gardener and does volunteer work. She is still working, making a difference to her family, friends, and community. Our lives need to have balance. I know a much older person whose work is mostly reading and learning about the world, and making phone calls and writing notes to people. That is still a life that is oriented to other people and making connections in the world. Clearly, there may come a time when someone is so frail that they can’t make connections easily. Even then, can they offer loving support to the people around them? Can they offer a kind word or a smile to the people who care for them? The nature of the way we care for others in the world will change at different times in our lives, depending on our skills, our energy, our wellness. And throughout most of our lives, our temperament, our interests, and our abilities will govern how we make a difference in the world.

But in every stage, and at every age, there are ways for a life of wholeness and balance—for finding ways to connect with and give to others; for enjoying some of the delights of life in the world; and for rest.

This week’s sermon is supposed to be about the rhythm of the week, and for many of us, this rhythm of wholeness will vary during the week—perhaps more rest on the weekend, although some of us work on the weekend and need to plan for sabbath time, time not oriented to our work, on some other day. Even during this pandemic, with so many routines upended, I still don’t do church work on Mondays. I usually spend Sunday afternoon looking ahead to the next week’s worship, but I set it aside on Monday. Whatever your work is, it is good to have a day when you do other things. And the same goes for the rhythm of being with people—if your work is done in solitude mostly, then it’s good to have a time each week when you gather with others (although these days that might be by Zoom); and if your work has you interacting with people most of the time, then you probably need to schedule in some period of solitude during the week. Again, it’s a question of balance. The life of wholeness *is* the life of holiness.

The traditional Sabbath greeting in modern times is “Shabbat Shalom”—may your sabbath be peaceful and whole. May you be well this shabbat. And so I greet you in this way today: Shabbat Shalom. May you all find wholeness, balance, and wellness today…and throughout your life. Amen.