

Getting Practical (Working for a Living)

12th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

Psalm Reading: (130)

Eccl. (2:22-26), Eph. (4:25-5:2)

Ecclesiastes is one of the more curious books of the Bible. It was written by a person we call Koheleth. "Koheleth" is a Hebrew word that means teacher. Some of the ancients believed that this Koheleth, he being so wise, might even have been Solomon, himself.¹ The book is philosophic in a way that diverges from the theological view that we get in most books. It looks at the way things are in this world and comes to practical conclusions.

In verse 22 of Chapter 2 the author poses the question, "What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?" Yeah, what do we get from getting up at the crack of dawn, dragging ourselves into the bathroom to look in the mirror at that tired face, with crowsfeet etched behind our eyes. It is a face we barely recognize at that time of day. What do we get from driving to work and pushing keys on a keyboard, or driving a tractor-trailer for eight or ten or twelve hours and then dragging our tired rear ends home again at the end of the day? What do we get?

At one time in my life I worked in a lumber yard. I stacked lumber, put together orders and drove a fork truck. It was heavy work much of the time, but it had its perks. I lost a ton of weight. The work got me down to my fighting trim of 165 pounds, and I could easily lift three times what I might be able

to lift now. I can remember one day a delivery truck showed up on a slippery, icy, windy, January morning with the temperature at about 20 degrees. A wet sleety rain was coming down sideways. I jumped on the fork truck and drove out to the trailer, and already I was cold. That fork truck had absolutely no traction, but three of us worked diligently in spite of that, pulling off large pallets and loads of lumber to be stored in a warehouse or stacked out under some eaves. I don't think I have ever physically suffered more doing work than I did those two hours or so with the wet wind whipping through my four layers of clothing, and my ears and my fingers feeling as though they were just about to fall off. But I should not have been worried. They say as long as you can still feel your extremities, you probably aren't frostbit yet.

It was one of those times that made me question my place in the grand scheme of things. Made me wonder why I was not one of those folks with a place in Florida or Texas or Arizona. For that moment I wanted to be among those playing pickleball in the sunshine, sipping lemonade in the intervals between games. It took a good hour to recover from the experience, so really it was not all that bad, and when I got home for dinner that night the whole thing was just a story to tell Robin and the kids over a pot roast and a cup of strong green tea.

But this experience and others like it was just enough to give me a bare understanding of what Koheleth means when he writes, "All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This ... is meaningless." (v.23) Koheleth can hardly make sense of the fact that in the average human life we must always be working so that we can survive. His only

answer to the question “Why we keep doing it, how we can carry on...” is, “A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.” (v.24)

And eating is something we Presbyterians are pretty good at. Yes, we are fond of preparing and eating tasty dishes. I hear the trifle at the Kirkin’ of the Tartan is amazing stuff.

(Shameless plug: It is coming up on the 30th of September, by the way.) So, I think we can all appreciate at least part of Koheleth’s answer. When talking about drinking Koheleth is referring to alcohol. Now as we all know drinking should only be done in moderation, and not at all in many cases. But I think we can understand the attraction in ancient times when there was not much leisure time. Then there is this thing about getting satisfaction from our work? What is that all about?

What Koheleth is saying is “enjoy life while you can.” Many believe that the expression “Eat, drink, and be merry,” comes from the book of Ecclesiastes² where this idea becomes a kind of refrain. Really, it is a barely adequate answer to the question of why we “toil”. Perhaps it is the best answer any of the ancients could have come up with, especially in light of what Koheleth says next, “This too, I see, is from the hand of God.” Yes, God gives us the need to labor in the first place, but also provides us sustenance. God gives us life. And God gives us work, gives us labor to do, and since we must do it, then we may as well get satisfaction from it.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (4:28) has something to say about this. He tells us that people “must work, doing something useful with their own hands...”

But how do we know when something is useful? Well, if someone is willing to pay us for doing work, it is pretty obvious that the work is valued. It is valued by someone in our free economy. But we also know it is valued if someone thanks us with a smile or a card. Work is useful if it improves someone in a physical way, a mental way, or in a spiritual way. It is valuable work if it is given to us by God. I think we get satisfaction from our work when we know that it is, indeed, useful. So, here is how we tie Koheleth and Paul together...Satisfaction comes from knowing that our work is useful. So, maybe God gave us this work to do for a reason!

I think what Paul says is revealing because he adds that we work so that we might have something that we can “share with those in need.” So, our work, how we are productive, comes to have a relational aspect. We work not just for ourselves, but to benefit others. I think this happens unconsciously in some respects when we get a job, say working in a factory or selling cars. When we make or distribute goods and services it is helping the community at large. But there are other things that we do that we do not necessarily think of as work. When we help others in our spare time it is a kind of work. When we volunteer as a deacon or teach in Sunday school, or pull weeds around the church, all that is work as well, and I would classify it all as highly valuable work as it is done to build up the Body of Christ.

This is supported in verse 26 of our reading from Ecclesiastes, “To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness...” So, how is it we please God? We do it by obeying God’s commandments, which, of

course, we can sum up in what Jesus told us to do, to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Then Koheleth says “...to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth” The one who simply stores up wealth is getting no real satisfaction from it because it is never put to good use. Now, I don’t mean to say that you should not save up for a rainy day, or your retirement. But you should not be a miser either.

So here we get at least a partial answer to Koheleth’s question, “What do people get for all of their toil under the sun?” We get the ability to not only help ourselves, but to help each other, and in helping others we get a great deal of satisfaction. I think this is how Koheleth can support the idea that we can do nothing better than to “eat, drink, and find satisfaction in toil.”

There is another way that we can do work that pleases God...Liturgy...and you know what liturgy is. It’s all those words we say every Sunday that are printed in the bulletin. The word “liturgy” comes out of the Greek and means work performed by the people for the benefit of others.³ Isn’t that interesting? “Liturgy” means “work of the people.” Now, I bet that is a surprise many of you. When you say the Call to Worship or sing a hymn, you weren’t thinking that you were one of the people doing work to help others. But, indeed, we are doing work. We are coming together to support not only ourselves in our faith, but to support each other in mutual love. We do this most obviously in our offering, but what about when we give each other a sign of peace? What about when we join in the pastoral

prayer? You know, even the presence of each and every one of you in church is a comfort to those around you. Just by being here you are working. When you are missing, the rest of us feel a hole in our hearts. When you are here, we feel uplifted, we feel a mutual support that you cannot feel through an electronic keyboard, that you cannot hear on the radio, that you cannot see on TV.

So, to completely answer Koheleth's question, "What do people get for all the anxious striving with which they labor under the sun?" I will tell you...We get fellowship, satisfaction, and mutual support from one another both inside and outside of the Body of Christ, and as we work in this world and toward the next, we build up our close relationship with our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now please bow your heads and pray with me...

Eternal and Loving God, we thank you for the work that you have given us to do. We work in your world and draw satisfaction from it because we know that in that work we are helping others both spiritually and physically. We praise you and glorify your name. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen!

¹ CEB Study Bible (2013) 1053 OT.

² <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/126700.html> (accessed August 09, 2018).

³ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* 3rd Ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000) Kindle Loc. 296.