

“USEFUL LABOR: FULL OF THE SPIRIT AND GOOD WORKS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Exodus 31:1-11; Acts 9:36-39

Prayer: Holy Father, God of all creation and all vocation, on this Labor Day weekend, bless both our rest from work and bless our work. My work now is to proclaim your Holy Word. Though I am a sinner make me a pure channel of your grace that your people may be edified with spiritual food and drink. Speak to us now and help us by your Holy Spirit. In the name of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Amen.

Introduction:

Several weeks ago I was visiting with one of our senior saints and she wondered out loud with me why she was still here, since she wasn't able to do anything particularly useful. Her life has been reduced to sleeping, eating, sitting, reading, watching a little TV, talking with a few old friends, maybe a little hand work, but nothing particularly useful.

She got me to thinking about work and labor and what we do and about when we can't do what we have always done.

What would you say to her? How might you answer with an encouraging word? If you were in her shoes would you feel the same way?

If our health and strength decline to the point we can't do anything anymore, what then? What does it mean to be useful?

Actually the age at which one can feel useless is getting younger and younger. There are people in the technology industry who are 45 and can't get a job because they are too old.

Labor Day weekend seems like a good time to reflect on what God's Word says about work and usefulness and about our work at the end of life.

We are created and enabled to work by God.

The first time the Bible mentions the Spirit of God filling someone is in Exodus 31:3. Notice the kind of work the Spirit-filled person is called to do.

Many of us think a person filled with the Holy Spirit will do something like preaching or teaching in a seminary or going overseas to be a missionary. But notice here they don't prophecy or preach or write a letter of theology or a hymn of praise. Those are good things and the Spirit does enable them but here they are building and crafting, designing and creating.

Do you think the Spirit empowers and enables someone to do agriculture or give a sales presentation or manage an office or build or repair something or care for children? Do you think the work you do is empowered and enabled by God Himself?

God creates us and enables us to be useful, to do good work. God has a very high view of work, in fact it was His idea in the first place.

Work was given to Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall, it will be given to all of us in heaven. In fact, we will be *more* useful in heaven, not less useful. Our usefulness here on earth is tainted by sin and selfishness and a host of other evils. In heaven just as our bodies will be transformed, so will our work. You want to see truly useful, meaningful work. Just wait, you ain't seen anything yet.

When God created the world He filled it with natural resources and materials and energy He commanded us to subdue and take dominion over and to make useful and beneficial to all life. It is a good thing from a good God. *God dignifies work.*

We harness the wind and water to help our labors. We take the metals and ores, the iron, carbon, copper to make tools and machines, pipes and wire. We take petroleum and subdue it for energy or an incredible myriad of plastics products. We take sand and turn it into an unbelievable variety of glass products. We take the radioactive materials and harness their power for energy and science and medicine. We take the seeds and produce great harvests of crops. We take the grains and grind them into foods, we take the wool and silk and twist them into thread for fabric and make clothes from skins.

Labor Day is a day to give thank for the resources and the labor that means we don't have to pump our water or fill kerosene lamps or use an outhouse or hitch horses to a wagon or milk by hand or grind wheat for our bread or spin yarn or thread to make our clothes.

God created all the raw resources and then He commanded us to subdue the earth, to take from the earth and turn it into useful and beneficial things. *Then God went the next step* and gave us the skill and intellect to make from His resources all we make.

Exodus 31:6, 11 I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you. 11 According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do.

All the resources, and all the skill to do useful things with those resources, come from the hand of God. From God comes the ability and the improvement of the ability.

There can be no pride, for what do we have that we haven't been given, and what can we do that God has not first enabled?

Are you good at farming or business or numbers or teaching or managing? How can you boast, when it wasn't you, but God who made you good at it? And why do we envy others when it is God who wills and works in us and them? He gives and He takes away.

It is all grace, it is all blessing. Receive what you have and can do with gratitude and contentment. Honor God, let it be *cause for worship* and gratitude.

Work is a form of worship when we take what God has given us and use it to do what He has called us to do and acknowledge our dependence on Him in the doing of it.

Do you appreciate what God has given you, do you appreciate that God has enabled you to do what you do? Can you stop comparing yourself to others long enough to give humble thanks that God in His mercy and grace and love and care has given you anything at all?

Giving God the credit for our ability, and understanding that whatever we do is for his glory, helps us find real meaning in our vocations.

Every person who faithfully seeks to obey God's will never lack His enabling grace. Whatever God wants us to do, He will enable us to do it, His grace is sufficient. Even the most humble or menial work which God enables can be done as unto the Lord.

Jesus dignified all work when He worked some 18 years with His hands in manual labor. He spent the majority of His life on earth in obscurity doing a job many of us could have done. And if He had come in our day He might have done any job we are doing.

In the church world we talk about callings, someone is called by God into ministry or to missions. We have this idea that there are the normal jobs and then there are callings.

The word to call is from the Latin "vocare" from which we get our word vocation. In other words, every vocation is a calling, whether you are a minister or a mechanic or a mother.

We need a more God-centered view of our work, that it is from the Lord and we work as unto the Lord. We don't just work to pay the bills, we don't work for the weekends, we don't work for retirement, or even for just personal fulfillment or satisfaction.

We are all created and called to work and whatever we do, we do it for the glory of God, with God in mind, with God at the center.

This understanding of calling is a reminder to all of us that we must not take anything in this life for granted and in fact we must receive everything with gratitude (Os Guinness).

So our usefulness is from God and for God, when and how and how much and where He wills.

But what about when we can no longer work?

What about when we are no longer useful or productive or contributing? What about when we feel more like a burden than a blessing? What about when we are no longer full of good works and acts of charity?

The prayer in the Psalms comes to mind:

Psalm 71:9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent.

God is faithful, He does not forsake. When one usefulness ends another takes its place. Take what you do have and use it for God and His glory. Use whatever strength and hearing and eyesight and resources God does give for Him, to enjoy Christ, to make much of Him, to worship and praise and pray. If breath is the only thing you have left, you have something to do.

A dear older friend of ours was in a terrible car accident that left her in ICU for weeks with many broken bones and internal injuries, unable to do anything for herself. Every time a nurse moved her or changed dressings or cleaned her it was very painful, but as each one left she would whisper, thank you. They knew they had hurt her and she was still thanking them. She was ministering to the staff in her pain. We can minister to our dying day in the smallest kindness and words.

I visited a senior saint this week who has her Bible and her Today next to her, she has her Bible Reading checked off each day, she has her memory cards and she has our bulletin announcement as her prayer list, praying for each person and each missionary listed. She doesn't leave her house but she is doing a great work as a prayer warrior.

What was Jesus greatest work? Was it not His death? He accomplished more in dying than in living. And is God not able to take our final act on earth, our death, and make even that useful? It was my mother's death that woke my brother up from his cynicism and turned him back to God just four months before his own death.

And is not our weakness more glorifying of God than our strengths. In our strength we often forget God, but in our weakness we glorify God by calling out to Him and depending on Him.

All of life is preparation for the next life, and the end of life is when *the greatest preparation* takes place. When our earthly energy and work are taken away we turn to our eternal work, to worship and glorify God.

When we are done working, God is still working, still transforming, still refining, still "bringing to completion the good work He has begun" (Philippians 1:6). Don't complain that you aren't able to do all you used to do. God is preparing you for something new and better.

God takes away our earthly work to prepare us for our Sabbath rest.

It is very interesting that Exodus 31 begins with the great work of making everything for the tabernacle and it ends with teaching on Sabbath rest. Six days the Lord made everything and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.

When the day is done, to what end is our labor? The end of all things is worship, not work. The end of all things is rest, not labor. The end of all things is the seventh day, not the six days.

How we view the end of life says something about us and what we put value in and how influenced we have been by the world's ideas.

Illustration.

My dear friend Von Golder, the missionary in Albania who has preached here, grew up on a big ranch in eastern Montana, out near Colstrip. Their land is rough and horses work better than four-wheelers. So they have had a lot of horses over the years. They have a pasture where they keep the pensioners. The "pensioners" are usually from about 25-33 years of age.

Some people ask them why do they bother feeding and keeping those old horses, they're useless, just costing money. Do you hear the value statement there, the worldview?

Von's answer is those horses served us well, they gave the best years of their lives to us, we will treat them well to the end. Do you hear the value statement there?

That's beautiful. Not a burden, a privilege. May our senior saints always feel that way, never a burden, never useless, their gray hair a crown of glory, the number of their days all part of God's perfect sovereign plan.

Life is never useless or worthless in God's eyes, He created us, He numbered our days and every one of them has meaning and purpose in His eyes even if we can't see it.

How we treat the weak and frail reveals our souls. We grow in our understanding of the true Gospel when we see our weaknesses and understand them in the light of God's grace and strength. So like Paul, boast in your weakness. Boast in God. With the prophet Isaiah acknowledge the words spoken by God:

Isaiah 46:3b-4 [You] have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb;

4 even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you.

I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

Prayer:

Holy Father, thank you for all the crowns of glory in our midst, thank you for your steadfast love that has endured all the days of all our lives, even to the very end. Father, be with us as we face our fears and our losses, and help us to see your hand in that as you bring us through the changing seasons and prepare us for glory. Grant grace to those who are caring for spouses and loved ones and give them glimpses of your Spirit's on-going work. You seek worshipers and pray-ers, make us both for as long as we live for your glory.