

Sweating the Small Stuff: Life as A Series of Tasks – Go to Work

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Colossians 3:23-24; Genesis 11:2-4; Exodus 20:8-11

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. Colossians 3:23-24 (NRSV)

And as they migrated from the east they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Genesis 11:2-4 (NRSV)

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Exodus 20:8-11 (NRSV)

Let's join in prayer. *Gracious God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, open our ears that we might hear, open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I want to start with a word of encouragement. I Thessalonians 5 says this: "So encourage one another and build one another up just as indeed you are ready doing." (I Thessalonians 5:11)

I want to challenge you to find three people today and encourage them. Maybe someone you're living with or someone you can text or call and just encourage one another. This is a time when we need so much encouragement. So much of building one another up.

This week I sent an email to the whole congregation just to tell how St. Luke's was doing and some of the things that were going on. I got so many wonderful words of encouragement back. It will just build us up as we try to do God's work. And we need to keep doing that for one another.

Today we're continuing our series on small things, small tasks. Today we're going to be talking about work.

So, friends, I've got a confession, and that's that sometimes life feels like a grind. Life sometimes presents itself as a series of tasks that come before us. I look at my computer, and I see all these tasks that are there. Some are in red, which means they're overdue, some are still to be done, and there are always what are just daily tasks. Just getting out of bed, getting dressed, combing your hair, brushing your teeth, you eat breakfast, you take out the trash, you walk the dogs. You have a whole series of things that are always there to do. The car needs to be fixed, the dryer doesn't work, and you need to call about the package that didn't get delivered. There are just these series of tasks that are always before us, and sometimes it feels like a grind.

The point of our series of sermons is to say that somehow in the midst of all the small pieces of life, the small experiences, and the small tasks that there is the presence of God. And the shift we need to make is a mental and a spiritual change to see and understand God's presence in all of those. One of the main shifts we need to make is to focus on, to re-understand, or to re-frame the "why" and the "how" that we're doing what we do. And that as we change those things, what we find is that our mental picture and our spiritual sense transform things, and we begin to see God's presence in the midst of all of those.

So, as I said, we're going to talk today about work. And I want to begin by just lifting up two statistics that are in front of us right now. The first is our unemployment rate. It was 8.2% last week; Morgan Stanley predicts that it may go up to 16.4%, which would be up to 44 million Americans who don't have jobs. That will be the highest rate since the Great Depression. It can be so debilitating as we find ourselves looking for work.

I had a conversation this week with a member of our church who had lost his job; his whole team was laid off. He talked about the grief he felt, the sense of loss, and about the people that he cared so much about. A sense of feeling like it's unfair, and there's a sense of betrayal. Not so much fear about the future but the unknown, and trying to grapple with the fact that there are so many others looking for work at the same time. It reminded me that this isn't just about money;

it's about who we are and how we experience life. And what we think our value is. We even say, "What do you do?" And we answer, "Well, I'm a pastor.... or a teacher...or a plumber... or an accountant..." And even when we're retired, we'll say, "I'm a retired teacher." It becomes so much a part of our identity, and we have to remember that we're children of God regardless of what we do for a living. And that work is not just something we get paid for.

I was asked this week to fix a piece of fence in the back yard. That was work. When we choose to be productive, regardless of whether we get paid, that's work. And that's what can be such a part of our spiritual lives.

Here's the second statistic, and it may be even more troubling, though it's certainly less urgent than the first. There's a concept called "employee engagement" that you're probably familiar with. It has to do with whether people who are working feel like what they do matters, like their opinion matters, like they think they're a part of things. And 70% of American workers don't feel fully engaged in their jobs. There's a part of them that is just going through the motions. They're going to work, they're getting paid, they're doing what they're supposed to do, but they're not really leaning in, not really feeling like the work they're doing really matters.

So, this notion of changing our mental picture can make such an impact on employee engagement.

What I want to do today is to lift up five practices, yes, five. You're going to have to hang in there with me. And these are things that I feel can make a change in understanding ourselves as part of God's work, of the work God is doing in the world.

Here's the first one. Go to work with gratitude. The passage that we read first, from Colossians 3, is one of two "whatever" passages. Just a few verses before in verse 17, we read: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Col. 3:17). So, the one we read was "Whatever your task..." and this one says, "Whatever you do..." do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Be thankful for your job. Be grateful. If you have a job, be grateful for it. When you go to work, be grateful for your teammates. If you're a manager or a business owner, be grateful for those who come to work. You're not doing them some great favor; they're not a commodity that could just be eliminated. I have never been more grateful for the people I work with, for the team I work with, at St. Luke's than I am right now. Not just because they're competent and committed

to our mission of living and loving like Jesus, and our vision of a city transformed by the love of Jesus, but because they're awesome people. And they're full of the love of God, and it's such a wonderful experience to be able to be with them and to work together side by side.

The year 2019 was the "Year of Gratitude" for St. Luke's. We tried to learn this practice of practicing gratitude at all times, and it just strikes me that that prepares us for this time. This time of crisis of being hunkered down at home, of trying to get through the difficulties that came with Covid-19, the loss of people we love. That practicing gratitude in all places and at all times, including work or no work, that going to work with gratitude can change everything. That spirit of gratitude changes the way we experience work no matter what. So that's the first one - go to work with gratitude.

The second thing is to go to work with God's purpose. The Scripture in Colossians 3:23: "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters." This idea that God is at work in the world and is working through us. It's like God is our employer and is moving us around, deploying us to do things that matter in God's world.

Now let's think for a minute about the purposes that are a part of you going to work. Why do you go to work? Maybe it's just to make a living. It's to feed your family and take care of your own needs. Sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night, and my head is spinning, and I can't go back to sleep. That happens sometimes, and I suspect it happens to you. Old reruns will come on television, and one of the ones that shows up is "Kings of Queens." It's a comedy about a UPS driver whose wife is an administrative assistant, and they're trying to negotiate life together. There's no question that being a UPS driver makes an impact on the world around us and has a service to society. But that's not really his picture here. I love the song that kicks off the show. It's called "Baby, all my life will be driving home to you," by Billy Vera and the Beaters. The words go this way: "My eyes are getting weary, my back is getting tight, I'm sitting here in traffic on the Queensborough Bridge tonight. But I don't care because all I want to do is cash my check and drive right home to you. All my life, I'll be driving right home to you."

This idea that I want to cash my check and be with my people and support them, pay the bills, and all those things that go into life. Part of our work, it's a job, and we're doing it to help support our families. And God gives us that as an opportunity.

Now there's more to it there, I think. We do the work we do because we believe that somehow it contributes to the society around us. That it offers a service or a product that people need, and we want to be in the business of doing that.

We've had this conversation lately about what's essential and what are non-essential services. I find it so funny. Apparently, liquor stores are essential services; haircuts are not essential services, so I'm not sure. I'm looking out through the camera at some of you and for some of you it might be an essential service. I know I'm feeling a little like my haircut is like Jesus's style. It's time for me, for sure, and I'll be anxious to get back to it.

Everything we do is contributing in some way to the things that God has purposed us for in the world. It may be that you're just helping others to thrive. You're a financial manager or advisor. Or you're an accountant, or you're a physician. All these things are just helping others to thrive.

One of the things I realize as a leader of an organization is that part of our job is to accomplish our mission, to equip you to live and love like Jesus, to transform our city with the love of Jesus. But a part of my responsibility is to help provide employment for all these other folks. And to help them to thrive and to grow and to become everything each one of those employees can become. That's part of the responsibility of being a leader of an organization. Maybe you're an attorney or a social worker, and part of your job is to help people solve problems, to manage conflict. To begin to put into place, so what is it that God is doing that is using you to do God's work?

Martin Luther wrote a lot about work and why it was important and how we viewed it. This is from a book by Gene Veith, that is about work, and he's quoting Martin Luther, summarizing it because the words are easier to understand. Let me read to you what he says: "When I go into a restaurant the waitress who brings me my meal, the cook in the back who prepared it, the delivery men, the wholesalers, the workers in the food processing factories, the butchers, the farmers, the ranchers, everyone else in the economic food chain are all being used by God to give me this day my daily bread. This is the doctrine of vocation. God works through people in their ordinary stations of life to which he has called them to care for his creation. In this way, he cares for everyone, Christian and non-Christian, whom he has given life." Luther puts it this way: "Vocations are masks of God. On the surface, we see an ordinary human face, a mother, a doctor, a teacher, a waitress, a pastor, but beneath those appearances, God is ministering to us

through them. God is hidden in human vocation. When we live out our calling as spouses, parents, children, employers, employees, citizens, and the rest, God is working through us even when we do not realize it, and we are fulfilling our callings. We, too, are masks of God."

Maybe for you, God is using you to be an encourager in your workplace. To lift up those people who are struggling every day and encouraging them to see God at work in their world. Maybe you're just trying to stay busy, and you don't need the money, but you don't want to spend all your life playing golf. You want to go out and do something to make a difference. But through all of that, God is at work. What I want to encourage you to do is go home and write down what it is that you believe God is doing through your employment through your vocation. How you are wearing one of the masks of God.

Now let me just stop here and say that sometimes that purpose gets distorted, and we are working for the wrong purpose. You heard a Scripture read a few minutes ago from Genesis, where the author is telling a story of the building the Tower of Babel. Let me just read the one line that is so powerful. It says, "And they said let us build ourselves a city, with a tower in the clouds, and make a name for ourselves..." (Gen. 11:4)

Sometimes the work we do is driven by the wrong reasons, maybe by greed, or by this basic sin of pride. We want to make a name for ourselves. Now, look, I'm a competitive guy. I want St. Luke's to be the best church in town. I want us to be better than the church down the road. I want us to be well thought of - everybody does. But that has such an allure for us, such a siren's call to continue to build ourselves up rather than to have others see us and point to the goodness of God. That sin of pride. I'll have to say it's one of the good things about having to work from home when you have a spouse who continues to remind you. You'll say, "But I'm doing God's work!" And she says, "Do God's work, but would you use a coaster for your coffee cup, please? Could you pick up your shoes instead of leaving them everywhere?" It reminds you that you're just not all that important!

We don't want to work to just make a name for ourselves. We want to find our purpose and how God is working through our vocation to accomplish God's purposes.

Here's the third thing. Go to work with God's power. In Matthew, it says: "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30).

A yoke was a piece of wood that would strap two oxen or two horses together, and they would use that to magnify, to multiply their power as they worked together side by side. Dallas Willard was asked what it meant when it was said that Jesus' yoke was easy. A yoke was a very familiar term that was used to describe a rabbi's teaching about what it meant how to live life. So, if your rabbi was really intense and demanding and put a lot of burden on your shoulders, that would be a rabbi with a heavy yoke.

What does it mean to say Jesus' yoke is easy, and his burden is light? Dallas Willard said that if you imagine getting yourself into the yoke and Jesus getting into the other side of the yoke, so you're yoked together, and you're pulling in the same direction. But you realize that Jesus is doing most of the work. That it's Jesus power - the power of the Holy Spirit that is pushing you forward. And you're doing your best, but you're going along for the ride.

So much of the time, we just pile it on ourselves. We say, "I gotta do this, I gotta do this!" When the truth is that we want to ride along with the current with what God is doing. We'll talk more about this when we come to our last practice.

This third practice is to go to work with God's power, not just your own but God's power.

Now the fourth practice is to go to work with God's excellence. We always hear people say, "Well, it's the thought that counts" when they're talking about giving a gift or making an offering. If my four-year-old grandson takes my wife a flower that he's picked outside as he was walking along, and he gives it to her - he's beaming with pride, and she receives that as a beautiful offering. But if on Valentine's Day, I who am grown up just pick up a flower on the way home and I bring it home on Valentine's Day and say, "Here, honey, I brought you this," it doesn't quite have the same punch. It's because I can do so much better if I can really put my heart into it.

The Scripture from Colossians says, "Put yourself into it as working for the Lord."

Dorothy Sayres wrote during World War II, and she wrote a lot about work. Let me read to you what she says, "The church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him to not be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours and to come to church on

Sundays. What the church should be telling him is that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. Church by all good means and decent forms of amusement certainly, but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation, he is insulting God with bad carpentry. No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever I claim came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor if they did could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself. For any work that is untrue to its own technique is living a lie."

Go to work with excellence.

Here's the last practice: take a break, for God's sake! For God's sake. Not just for your sake, but for God's sake. I heard a pastor named Matt Stefan, and he was preaching about our passage today, which is "remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." He said that there are two problems that he finds in himself that make it hard to practice Sabbath. The first one is that his mental picture, his framework is to pray like God is handling it but work like you're handling it. That his mental picture is that "I'm going to pray that God handles it, but I'm going to work like it's up to me." Pray like it's up to God but work like it's up to me.

I think sometimes we do that. And then the other thing that keeps us from practicing the Sabbath is what my kids call FOMO - Fear of Missing Out. That there are so many opportunities that we need to do, that can be done, and that should be done, that we want to do, that we want more and more experiences. And that there are great things out there that other people are doing that we should be doing. So, we watch our phones and say, "Oh, see what they're doing! I need to be doing something too." And we just get all caught up in that.

The practice of Sabbath, of saying, "I'm going to keep a day and not work but experience God's delight" is an antidote to both of those. Because as we stop, we realize that the sun came up in the morning, the sun went down at night, and the world went on when we weren't working. The other thing it reminds us is, "Hey, I don't need all that other stuff. What if I have the presence of God in my life that's all I need. That experience of taking the Sabbath, of stopping, of giving up for just a moment."

The Bible mentions love 300 times. That's a major theme in Scripture. In fact, it's 310 times. The Bible mentions the Kingdom of God 162 times. That's a major theme of Jesus' teaching - the Kingdom of God. The Bible mentions rest 496 times, and it mentions Sabbath 172 times.

The keeping of Sabbath is the only spiritual discipline that's mentioned in the Ten Commandments. So, we have to remember that the rhythm of God is six days you work, you work hard, and you work as working for God. And then you rest, you stop. You don't work for God.

As United Methodists, we say a prayer every year at the beginning of the year. It's called the Wesley Covenant Prayer. I've always found it to be a little disconcerting because it implies that God doesn't need us sometimes. You know, God doesn't need us sometimes.

We pray, "Let me be employed by thee, or laid aside for thee. Let me be full. Let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield in all things for their pleasure and disposal."

The practice of Sabbath is a practice to say that God loves working beside us, but God goes on without us, too.

Let me close with one other thought. And that's that where we work is where our heart is. I quoted from Martin Luther earlier so let me read to you from what he says one more time: "If you ask an insignificant maid servant why she scours a dish or milks the cow, she can say, 'I know that the thing I do pleases God for I have God's word and commandment.' God does not look at the insignificance of acts but at the heart that serves him in such little things."

Let's pray together. *God, we pray today for those who work, for those who want to work, and for those for whom work feels like a grind. And for those who love getting up and going to work every day. We ask that you purify our motivations so that all we do, working or resting, would be for your glory. In the name of the one to whom we are yoked, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*