

## “The Joy of...Work?!”

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

Isaiah 65:17-19, 21-25

The Summer after my Junior year of college, I was a counselor at a Girl Scout camp outside Williamsburg, Virginia. Given my great maturity and advanced age of 20 whole years old, they made me a unit leader – directly responsible for 25-30 girls who were 9-11 years old with maybe 2 counselors working under me who were around 16 years old. This meant keeping track of the paperwork, being the ultimate resolver of sometimes endless disputes, and being responsible for the epi-pen (while praying it would never be needed). When I say “camp,” I mean that we actually camped in tents, outside in the heat, humidity, and mosquito swarms that rival what you have here in Oklahoma. We did eat most of our meals in a, mercifully, air conditioned dining hall except for one night of every week when we would cook out at a campfire at our own campsites.

The girls usually loved that night. Each of them had jobs mixing, chopping, preparing their meals, getting the fire ready, eagerly awaiting dessert. This went off without a hitch every week – every week except one when the sky was just a shade grayer than we’d hoped. Not to be deterred, I and the other counselors urged the girls to keep chopping – keep prepping – even as the rain began to come down. It started slowly at first, giving me ample room to hold out hope for our special treat, but before too long it was pouring down. One by one, the girls and the other counselors retreated to our shelter to wait out the storm.

I don’t know why, but I refused to give up on our campfire meal. No matter how much it rained, I was determined to feed my girls – to follow through and do whatever it took to get them what they needed. As it happened, the dinner menu for that evening called for a cherry cobbler made in a dutch oven – an enormous cast iron pot. This pot covered enough of the fire that I

could actually slide the foil dinners the girls had made underneath it and cook them over the sheltered flame and the coals. So there I was, soaking wet, turning over the dinners while 30ish girls looked at me like I was nuts. Before too long, the meals were cooked. I got them out of the fire and we ate together.

Just as we started to eat, the Assistant Camp Director came by in a golf cart offering us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner. “We don’t need that!” I proclaimed proudly, dripping on the ground. No other campsite had been able to finish their dinner – just us.

That was a really good day at work. I was beaming, I felt powerful – I provided for my people when no one else could. But, if I’m being totally honest, I can hear Qoheleth looking over my shoulder and laughing, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the hard work that they work so hard at under the sun?” I busted my tail, got filthy from tending the fire, was smeared with ash and sweat and rain...and after all that, the Assistant Camp Director was bringing food anyway. Did that work really matter? Does anyone else even remember it except crazy, weirdly proud me? Did it matter at all?

We don’t usually talk about work at church. If we do, we tend to talk more about vocation and calling, about the works of service that are part and parcel of the Christian life. But our jobs are a huge part of our lives. We spend, on average, 90,000 hours at work over our lifetimes. And, according to a study from 2010, 80% of people are dissatisfied with their jobs – 80%! In another survey that came out last year, only 6% of the adults polled said that they had achieved their dream job.

Work takes up a huge portion of our lives, our identities, so I think Qoheleth’s question is important for us still today, “What do workers gain from all their hard work?” As we read Ecclesiastes, we follow the moral, spiritual, philosophical journey of one who is called Qoheleth.

“Qoheleth” means a “person who speaks before the assembly,” which is often shortened to “Preacher” or “Teacher” in English. Qoheleth has seen people working themselves to the bone. Qoheleth has, it seems, indulged in every pleasure, built buildings, planted vineyards, chased after wisdom, each time wondering – did any of it matter?

The passage we have from Ecclesiastes this morning is a response of faith to that question of meaninglessness. It comes right after the much more often cited verses, “For everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven.” Having considered all of this, Qoheleth marvels that, “everything is beautiful in its time, but [G-d] has also placed eternity in [our] hearts.” We work hard, we succeed, we fail, we dream of better lives, better days, better work – but through it all, G-d has placed eternity in our hearts. And we don’t get to know how it all began and how it will end, but G-d does. And that means that our work can carry a hope of impact and purpose, our failures and missteps will not destroy the possibility of goodness moving forward. Whatever G-d does lasts forever and as we live and as we work, we are a part of what G-d does.

And so, Qoheleth tells us, “I know that there’s nothing better for [workers] than to enjoy themselves and do what’s good while they live. This is the gift of G-d: that all people should eat, drink, and enjoy the results of their hard work.” “Enjoy yourself” is not a message we’re used to hearing from scripture (or, I suppose, in many churches). Enjoy yourself and do what’s good. This includes work, too! Qoheleth encourages us to look for joy in the work that we’re doing, to see that work is connected to the gift of G-d and to our communities and our world. In the ancient world, they didn’t have as many choices: the work of the farm, the garden, the metal worker, the mason, the chef. They apprenticed and usually worked within the household or at a

particular trade. We have more choice in what we do and the way we fill our days. Our work, paid and unpaid, can feed our spirit, too, and remind us of G-d's glory.

As I mentioned earlier, many are in jobs they don't like. Most of us have had jobs that just felt like torture. So we look forward to rest, vacation, retirement. But according to the Bible, we were made to work. In Genesis 2, when G-d creates the world and then creates Adam, scripture says that G-d, "put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Adam – the world's first professional gardener.

In our Isaiah passage, we hear a prophecy about G-d creating new heavens and a new earth – a phrase that puts us in mind of the kingdom of heaven come to earth, the final restoration, the paradise of heaven. Isaiah 65 is a beautiful vision of peace, joy, gladness, and rejoicing. But it has some unexpected details – it says that the people will build houses and inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit. It says that we shall, "long enjoy the work of [our] hands." As far as descriptions of heaven go, this is a far cry from sleepy saints, dressed in white, floating by on cloud-shaped La-z-boys, harp in hand. In this paradise even the wolf and the lamb go out to eat together (and they both make it home safe!). Isaiah tells us that in heaven, we will work, too. But there won't be an impatient, unpleasable, yelling boss. There won't be drought and famine and small critters nibbling away at the fields. There won't be wars and hatred and violence. The vision of heaven that Isaiah has received is one where we take on the projects that we love without our health and energy slowing us down. This vision is one where we can build and enjoy, create and marvel, explore and uncover without fear of danger or things coming unraveled before our eyes.

On a long enough timeline, it's hard for most of us to sit still, to be unengaged. It's hard for most of us to run up against earthly limitations that restrict the ways we can follow what we

are passionate about. Qoheleth wondered: Does our work matter? The Lord answers every time, “yes!” Who we are, what we love, what we can imagine does not come to nothing. Indeed, it’s one of the ways we are made in G-d’s image, part of G-d’s own creative spark. So, keep your campfire burning in the rain, know that your gifts and efforts are blessed by G-d, and share what you’ve been given wherever you can, knowing that heaven will be full of life. Amen.