

Catherine Brewer

Sermon “In God’s Kingdom, There is Good Work”

Once again, good morning! For those of you who may not know me yet, my name is Catherine Brewer; I usually go by “Catie” for short. Around church, you will find me in choir, at Salt & Light, and in the video discussion Sunday school class. My family includes Brent Brewer, back at the sound board today, 8th-grader Alonzo, and 6th-grader Lillian. My weekday occupation is as a professor in Chemical & Materials Engineering at NMSU.

Both of our scripture readings for today are connected to work. My first inclination upon reading the Thessalonians text about Paul’s tent ministry was to dive into the process of tent making in the ancient world. Beth reminded me that this Sunday was also the In-Gathering and so I might want to restrain the length of my sermon. I will, therefore, spare you the details...this time. Since Paul was making a case for work, I decided instead to think about God’s intentions for the nature of work.

To my children, work is what their parents, grandparents, teachers, and coaches make them do—in direct contrast with their much-preferred activities. Requests for completion of tasks that they think are work are met with sighs, groans, and dragging of feet. Many adults have the same experience of toil in their day-to-day jobs to support themselves and their families.

When I was younger, one of the tasks I dreaded was the inevitable result of my parents’ love of cooking: dishes. The meal would be wonderful and then would come the clean-up. Since then, I have had a change of heart about washing dishes. You see, most of the work that happens in education and research is long-term. On the education side, my students are good engineers and leaders and citizens...after they leave. I only get to catch glimpses of the professionals that they are developing into before they graduate. On the research side, most projects last for years, and success on the first try is rare. When you submit a new manuscript for publication or a grant proposal, you hear nothing for several months as the reviewers do their work. Whenever I receive notification that a research proposal is being funded, the first thing I have to do is re-read the proposal to remember what we said we would do. Many of my days are spent drafting, revising, teaching, grading, filling out paperwork, brainstorming, coaching...without seeing any clear results from that day’s effort.

Now contrast that with washing dishes. In my kitchen, the counter on the right side of the sink is for the dirty dishes. Over the course of the day, dishes are rinsed and stacked. After multiple meals, this collection of stacks can be quite large. First, I confirm that everything has been rinsed and load the dishes that can be put in the dishwasher. For those who know me, you can imagine that I have strong opinions about how a dishwasher should be optimally packed. Then it’s time for the hot, soapy water portion of the program. I frequently have cold hands, so hot water is a bonus. The hand-wash dishes are, of course, handled in a particular sequence: glasses, knives, cutting board, plates, serving ware, utensils, and finally, pots and pans. Cleaned dishes are set out to dry on the drying rack or towel of the left side of the sink. At the end of the task, I wipe down the various kitchen surfaces and empty the tub of dishwater.

While the process of washing dishes is repetitive and occasionally unpleasant, the view around the kitchen afterwards is immensely satisfying. I have moved things from right to left. I have made order from chaos, cleanliness from uncleanness, utility from hinderance. The fruits of my labor are right there: instant gratification. No matter how frustrating or slow to progress the rest of my day has been, I have visible proof that I have accomplished something useful.

This made me think about what is “good work” compared to what is just “work”. One way to understand good work is to look at what was lost by Adam and Eve in the fall into sin. Let’s start from the “before, from Genesis 2, verses 8-9 and 15-17:

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Then from the “after” in Chapter 3, verses 17-19:

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

The description of the “after” condition tells us something about what work had been like in the Garden of Eden. Having helped take care of an orchard as a child, I can tell you that pruning trees, clearing ground underneath the trees, and harvesting fruit do take effort. Adam and Eve would have experienced exertion and been tired at the end of the day. That tiredness is the good kind, like after a long walk in the fresh air or a full day of running around as a kid. That tiredness is different from the weariness that comes from discouraging “painful toil”. Those that have gardened and farmed know the frustration of “thorns and thistles”—so much work to produce something that cannot be eaten or sold.

Our reading from Isaiah was written to a people in and returning from captivity in Babylon who were well acquainted with frustration, weariness, and despair. They would have recognized Isaiah’s words as the reverse of something that Moses had said. Before the people entered into the Promised Land, Moses had preached one final sermon and warned them about the consequences of disobeying God. We read from Deuteronomy 28, starting with verse 30:

You will build a house, but you will not live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will not even begin to enjoy its fruit. A people that you do not know will eat what your land and labor produce...You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it. You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. You will have olive trees throughout your country but you will not use the oil, because the olives will drop off. You will have sons and daughters but you

will not keep them, because they will go into captivity. Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land.

Life for the children of Israel at Isaiah's time was uncertain, difficult, and short. Their labors, to build things, to grow things, and to raise families, were often not successful. Progress was slow and hard-won gains could be lost in moments. Like many of Isaiah's prophecies, his words address two time periods. In the first time period, God's chosen people would return to the Promised Land; they would rebuild their houses, fields and vineyards; there would be a new temple in Jerusalem. Those visions, however, are less than the vision of the second time period, the future Kingdom of God, which is meant to speak to us as well as to the children of Israel. Isaiah is speaking of what it looks like when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We read again from Isaiah:

"Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years...They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit...For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands."

As there was in the Garden of Eden, there will be work in the Kingdom of God. That work, however, will be the beneficial kind: building up instead of destroying, collaborating to take care of people instead of competing for one's own gain, using creativity and skill instead of brute force, requiring exertion but not to the point of injury or exhaustion. Workers will experience the results of their efforts. Progress made will stay made.

Let's take a look now at Paul's discussion of work. At first, the admonition of Paul in the second letter to the church in Thessalonica does not seem odd. Paul's letters to the early churches are full of similar statements. Paul's words in our reading become much more noticeable when we learn that this is not the first time Paul had written about this topic to the Thessalonians. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, which may have been written just a few months before the second letter, we read this in Chapter 4, verses 9-12:

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Starting from the ancient gymnasiums where Greek boys learned music, athletics, history, mathematics, public speaking, and philosophy, there was a tradition in Greek cities that men of social standing would not do manual labor. Working with one's hands was expected of the women, men of lower social standing, and the household slaves. This subset of Greek men spent their time in the marketplace demonstrating their wit with oratory exchanges. They prided themselves on knowing what everyone else was up to and on sharing their opinions about what everyone else was doing.

At that time, the church in Thessalonica was experiencing much persecution, mostly from the Jewish population. In the book of Acts, we're told about the persecutions in other churches in Macedonia: Philippi and Berea. Christians were losing family members to killings and imprisonments. Professionals were losing jobs and reputations. Land owners were losing

property. The Christians were struggling to hold their livelihoods and businesses together. The new church had its hands full with keeping people safe, housed, clothed, and fed, on top of feeding their own faith and trying to sharing the Gospel with others. The situation called for “all hands on deck”. It’s easy to imagine why Paul was frustrated with the group of Greek men who were preoccupied with being heard and seen. The last thing this congregation needed was a contest of egos that caused drama and division, not to mention another group of people to financially support, when that group should have been contributing.

On his missionary journeys, Paul and his companions, in this case Timothy and Silas, had the habit of working at a trade while preaching. For Paul, this was tentmaking. We’re not sure if Timothy and Silas helped Paul with this work or if they had other trades. It was common that Jewish rabbis would often learn a trade even if most of their professional lives would be spent preaching and teaching. Paul’s “tent ministry” gave him some advantages for evangelism. First, he could go to places that were not prepared to support a teacher. Second, he had a group of people that he could reach out to upon arrival in a new city; fellow tradespeople were likely to welcome the help, as was seen with fellow tentmakers, Priscilla and Aquilla, in Corinth. Third, by working a trade, Paul and his companions would have a lifestyle recognizable to the people they were trying to reach.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul had spoken out about idleness and tried to teach by example. Yet, between the first and second letters, Paul was still receiving reports from Thessalonica that this group of Greek men have not changed their ways. So, Paul tells the congregation that it is time to use a stronger approach to get the message across:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

In other words, Paul is saying that this group of idle believers has been warned. This group has been given an example to follow. They are unrepentant about their behavior, so now there will be consequences.

As with many of the teachings of Bible, there are opportunities to take Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonians out of context. It is very important that we consider these words of Paul in combination with Paul’s instructions in other letters, and all of those with what is written in Jesus’ teachings and other parts of the Bible.

For example, Paul is not saying that anyone who does not do physical labor should not eat. Paul is not saying that the only work that matters is that which earns money. The Bible is very clear that there are many roles for believers in God’s church. The disciples appointed deacons to serve the physical needs of the church in the book of Acts. From Ephesians Chapter 4 (verses 11-12), we read, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the

body of Christ may be built up". From 1 Corinthians 12 (verses 27-28), "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues."

Likewise, the roles of believers in the church do and should change over their lifetimes. Children are not expected to do the work of adults; children's work is to watch and imitate, to ask questions and follow instructions. Youth and young adults gradually take on more responsibility as they identify and learn to apply their talents and interests. Experienced adults support with training and guidance. As physical ability and energy wain in later years, believers assist in other ways: companionship, comfort, encouragement, financial resources, and wisdom in relationships. All of us have witnessed how much our outlook can change when someone who has "been there, done that" reassures us that things will work out. We have experienced the boost from knowing that someone is cheering us on. And as we read in Ephesians 6 verse 18, we all have work to do in prayer: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."

The issue with the group of Thessalonians that Paul is admonishing is not that they lack the ability for a certain kind of work, or that they do not have opportunities to work. The idle believers have skills and talents that they could use to serve the needs of their community. They have been given opportunities to serve, undoubtedly with offers of training and encouragement. What makes their actions wrong is that they are unwilling. They have chosen to disregard the call to service that Jesus showed for His Disciples. They have adapted their own version of the Kingdom of God.

From the Garden of Eden to the new earth described in the prophecy from Isaiah, God intends for us to work. The work in the Kingdom of God in service to God's people is good work: useful, varied, producing good things, including needed rest, combining the gifts of people to create something greater than the individual parts, and demonstrating the love of God through actions as well as the words of the Gospel. May God help us know what work he wants us to do at each stage of life. May God forgive us for the times when we have the capabilities and opportunities but are unwilling; when we neglect the need for "good work" for those under our supervision; when we take credit for work that is not ours; or when we belittle the work of others rather than seeing the value of their efforts through God's eyes. May God bless the work of his people, for in the Kingdom of God, there is much to do. Amen.

Let us pray.