

Life Worth Living 6: Work as Holy Responsibility

Genesis 2:1-3, Proverbs 31:10-31, Mark 9:33-37 by Patty Friesen (Sept 22/24)

In the beginning of Genesis, God works - creates, forms, breathes and even performs surgery on Adam. And then God rests after God works. Work was never meant to be a curse or punishment, or drudgery. Work is a holy responsibility. The image of Adam and Eve joining God in gardening is of a priestly nature, as if the garden itself was a sanctuary and they tend it as priests. It is a peaceable kingdom where the return was equal to the investment, the joy of the labour matched the joy of the harvest and everything was in balance and harmony. What happened to modern work as joy like in the Garden of Eden?

Spiritual writer Amanda Held Opelt in *Holy Unhappiness* says: As a young child, I dreamed of growing up and becoming a cowgirl. Then I considered more practical occupations such as rock band lead singer or professional dog walker. My indecision didn't improve with age. I changed my major three times in college. My employment history could be described as erratic at worst, nomadic at best. I suppose I'm simply a product of my culture, an archetype of the meandering millennial, born in 2000. The average tenure for workers of my generation is 2.8 years. And there's nothing millennials hate more than being accused of being a millennial.

Amanda continues; I always had the impression that the perfect job was out there for me, something that was suited specifically to fit my own unique gifts and interest. Finding that job, I was told, would forge the path to a happy life. Through that work, I could experience fulfillment, satisfaction and a prosperity not only of provision but of purpose. Find that perfect job, I was told, and you will never work a day in your

life. When I was hired for my first dream job, serving the poor for a Christian nonprofit in downtown Nashville, there were mounds of paper work and demoralizing fundraising and difficult volunteers. My dream job just felt like a drag. So I quit my first dream job and then quit my second dream job and a third.

In spite of having an unprecedented freedom of choice and unparalleled opportunities - I cannot seem to find my dream job and calling to happiness. The freedom to choose comes with enormous pressure. When the choices I've made do not satisfy, there is no one to blame but myself and self-blame leads to shame and then I'm totally hooped. Choice anxiety. Decision fatigue. The pressure to perform as individuals, to prove ourselves to ourselves, to prove ourselves to others is all-consuming.

The vast majority of people throughout history have had few options when it came to work. Unless you were part of the upper echelon of society, your lot in life was to work your fingers to the bone, day after day, merely to survive. If your father was a fisherman, you were a fisherman. If he was a farmer, you were a farmer. Many were born into slavery or serf hood, the fruit of their labour exploited by a lord or master. A person's station in life was determined by a fixed economic stratum. There was no such thing as upward mobility or a career move or finding your calling or happiness in work.

North Americans have come to associate happiness with a sense of deep psychological fulfillment and self-actualization. We believe we are entitled to it and dedicate ourselves to achieve it through work. If you were from European descent, it means your ancestors initially came to this continent for the very purpose of escaping hardship and fleeing persecution, poverty and oppression. The North American Dream became part of the North American religious landscape: upward mobility, accumulation,

hard work and moral fiber. Righteous individuals working hard enough can make a good life for themselves in the New World.

The dominant cultural religious origin story of our continent has no room for other histories. If you were from Indigenous descent, the arrival of Europeans created hardship, poverty and oppression. If you were from African descent, you were brought to this continent in hardship, persecution and poverty to build the American Dream. The American Dream cannot admit the historical suffering of Indigenous peoples and African Americans in the pursuit of it because their ongoing modern-day suffering challenges the very notion of a Dream and its God-given right to exist.

After the perfect work environment of the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 1, in Genesis chapter 3, we humans wrecked it by trying to be God and run the show ourselves and then we got kicked out of Eden to a place where weeds and pests ruled and by the sweat of our brow we had to work for our food. God said, The ground of your labour is cursed and there will be pain in the labour of work and pain in the labour of childbirth. Thanks a lot Adam and Eve!

Our work is not cursed but the setting of our work may be inhospitable to bounty, satisfaction and fulfillment. If it is the human environment that is cursed and not our work itself, there must still be dignity and even joy and seeing God to be found in our labour if we pay attention, even if it is washing the windows on a beautiful fall day. I wish that all those people who told me I needed to do something grand and adventurous with my life had told me that so much of life is simply doing the needful - doing the shopping and the sweeping and the dishes and the diapers. And that's okay.

Our gospel reading in Mark is a reminder that all work is worth doing. Jesus reminds the disciples that their call isn't for who can be the great, or who gets paid the most or gets the most recognition or the best retirement package. The least shall be the greatest. The humblest and lowest paid will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

When it comes to work, no one can outwork the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31. My mom loves this passage and has lived up to this model and has desperately tried to help me to do the same. The virtuous woman and my mom worked not for personal glory or financial gain but for the sheer love of work and for bettering other people. While I don't have the work ethic of either the virtuous woman or my mother, my work for the Mennonite Church these last 35+ years has brought me great joy and meaning and I've wanted to get up and go to work most days of the week. I feel very fortunate in that – not everyone gets that in their work life. Joe Guenther always said he was lucky that he got to do his hobby in dairy farming every day. I feel the same way about my work life as I'm on the homestretch to retirement.

In retirement, we get the same questions and pressure that we got when we graduated from high school. What are you going to do now? How am I going to spend my time in worthwhile pursuits if I'm not making the bucks? I've been telling people that I am going to lie fallow for a while – watch birds, play my ukulele and accordion. And blessedly do nothing. Will people still value me if I do nothing?

Disability advocate Julia Watts Belser challenges the notion that what defines us is our capacity to *produce*. Ableism is the social system of stigma and accessibility barriers that turns our ability to work into an assessment of our worth. It sets up accomplishment as a litmus test for human worth. This logic hits hardest against

disabled folks who cannot press their body-minds into the narrow confines of the capitalist workday or hustle their way through the economy. Julia continues - some of us could work if we could bust through ableist stigma and land an interview or secure the right accommodations or find an employer who's willing to be flexible. But some of our bodies and minds aren't built for work, aren't made to labour. Some of us need rest to contend with pain. What's the first thing most of us ask each other when we're first introduced? What do you do? The script is a kind of default setting, one that keeps social interactions smooth. But for those who don't have an answer, we get scapegoated as slackers. Ableism is a lie that is coming for all of us as we age and our bodies and minds begin to crumble. All of us deserves a world that savours our diversity - that praises our particularity; not that values us for our economic contribution. (Loving Our Own Bodies, p. 52)

God's calling in scripture is not for our individual worth through work, but a calling into a community. We are called to give blessings to others. Work in the truly biblical sense, is more about character - patience, hope, fellowship rather than personal fulfillment. (Opelt, P. 86). Work, it seems, is doing whatever is in front of you. It is an invitation to be present, to be at peace. It is a challenge to simply be rather than to be significant. A calling is not to be discerned, but to be lived. We do hard things, because they are necessary. Because they were the right thing to do. We do them because of love for ourselves and our families and community. God calls us to a higher way of humanity. When God calls us beloved, God gives us a purpose and a dignity by virtue of that relationship alone. Our value is not earned, but is freely given. We have nothing to prove in our work.