



CELEBRATION OF VOCATIONS (LABOR DAY)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 6, 2009

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Lection - 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 6) Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. (v. 7) For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, (v. 8) and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. (v. 9) This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. (v. 10) For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. (v. 11) For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. (v. 12) Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (v. 13) Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

I. Description of the Liturgical Movement

It's Sunday Morning!

Janitors and judges, secretaries and sergeants, clerks and corporate presidents enter the arms of mother church! And what we have in common is what we *seek* --- rest from our labor, new definition for our faceless contributions, and assurance that we – and our work – matter to God. Labor, whether forced, paid, bartered or creative and celebrated, has been the staple of black American life. Our introduction to these shores in 1619 at Jamestown Colony, Virginia, has defined our *raison d'être* in *this nation's* psyche, and in some sense, in *our own* weary consciousness. We came as slaves. And slaves, by definition, *work*.

As the offspring of an historically laboring class, we have been the purveyors of their craftsmanship, domestic skill, organizational prowess, agricultural acumen, and sheer creative cunning at making something wonderful out of nothing much.

It was the very *nature of this work* --- exploited, coerced, perilous, degraded or celebrated --- that created within the African American personality a visceral need for respite *from* work. The soul needed a framework of meaning, a matrix to define *personhood as more than the sum of their toil*. For many, it was the weariness *from* labor that tuned the ears of our ancestors *toward* the invitation "...come unto me and rest." Impulse kissed inspiration. Work, and its psychological aftermath, created and swelled church meetings in brush arbors and tents, storefronts and cathedrals. Sunday morning! Here we found value in our named talents. Here our work was honored and honorable. Here in Christ and the church we found rest.

Message for the Marketplace

Labor Day was first celebrated in 1882, and one of the purported founders defined the day as such: "To honor those who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold."¹

As the offspring of those who "died working," and in some respects "worked themselves to death" carving out the grandeur of America, we now face a need for radical reflection and redefinition of "work" as a worthwhile practice and as an honorable ethic.

A pendulum has swung from *despair* (under the slave system), to *dignity* (through reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights struggle), and now to modern *disengagement*. A certain shame and resignation about manual labor and its rewards has settled into the souls of a segment of our community. Our youth embrace a culture with a blind spot about the *worth of the gradual climb*, or the *character built through enduring* hard work. Industrial, manufacturing or agricultural opportunities sustained and stabilized our communities just a few generations ago. Now some have disengaged, because there is no work they find meaningful. Or, they impose meaning on "work" that distances them from the mainstream of respectable culture (drugs, pole dancing, hustling, misogynist rapping, etc.).

The disappearance of meaningful work has "identity and worth" implications for a host of black Americans who fill our pews and populate our communities.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I entered history looking upstream at a host of hard working women. My mother worked as a bartender, factory worker, and, after a hard-won education, a church secretary. Her mother, Claudia, was an entrepreneur, though she probably had never heard the term. She made and sold “white lightning” (moonshine) to support her nine children in Georgia in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Her mother before her, Laura, worked. It is said she left her four daughters to live on a plantation as the house-keeper and alleged concubine of a white dairy farmer and, when granted options, chose to stay with him until he died.

My introduction to Christianity was decorated with strong, sassy, so-called “submitted” Pentecostal women who did all the work at home, on jobs and in the churches, with little of the authority and none of the pay. But they worked with meaning, self-determination and celebration of their own results.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Dodge the Idle

A celebration of “vocations” anchors itself in the first activity of God, in Genesis (1:1). We open the book on a God who is intentionally and joyfully at work. The story continues with a God whose first gift to the first man and first woman was *a job* (Gen. 1:27-28). The first consequences of man’s life leave him wrestling for productivity in his toil (Gen. 3:17-19). Every “call” story in scripture is a call to a *job*.

Work is at the center of the first redemption stories, as Noah the boat builder is told to make an ark with specifications and a promise (6:13-18). In Exodus, Moses is called to the *job* of leader and liberator. In Leviticus, God’s people fulfill the *work* of priesthood and prescribed worship. Numbers describes the disruption of work. Esther’s work is political. Deborah is called for governance and military strategy. Ruth fulfills destiny by laboring in Boaz’ fields. Those Jesus calls, are called to some work.

We must again revive the ethic and celebration of work! We need to have consequences for those who will not work and can work.

Scholars are not certain who authored 2 Thessalonians. However, if it was not Paul, it was someone who followed his example; the writer knew that there was value in work. So, the writer speaks authoritatively to this new church at Thessalonica admonishing them in light of what he believed would be the Lord’s soon return.

This writer indicates that he is not just talking the talk but also walking the walk. He exemplified a healthy respect for work by his lifestyle; (avoid offense, by a leadership lifestyle) (3:8-9) “...nor did we eat any man’s bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil day and night that we might not be a burden to any...”

So, he offers a command to believers to “keep away” from those who were idle and not working. Dodge these idle people the author exhorts. They are not an example you should follow.

Avoid Disorder

Disorder is used three times in this pericope (3:6 –7 and 11); “but we command you ...that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly” (*atakteo* = out of one’s place; breaking rank).

Work is tied to worth. This is why a man cannot feel good about himself when he is without a meaningful job. A woman cannot be content when she is contained to fractionalize her whole functioning. The author knew that work was tied to worth, and that it also helped avoid the disorder that occurred when people did not feel good about themselves, because they were not engaged in meaningful work and were idle and being busybodies. *Work is tied to a sense of eschatological purpose.* We are loved because we *are*. We are rewarded because we *do*. We need to “unearth the grandeur” in something. And in the end, it must matter and be rewarded (Revelation 22:12).

Work produces *vision*. How can I do this thing better? Smarter? How can I improve my lot by this work...or so I will no longer be bound *to* this work? How will others celebrate the results? Buy my products? Use my service?

And vision reinforces work.

Work is my ladder into the life I see just ahead. When a community is not tied to meaningful work, that community has ceased to envision a future. Without vision, people throw off restraint. It begins corporate slumber. And when vision, hope for a better future or new possibilities die, those people discard discipline and stop deferring gratification. The worker’s gift to us is communal order and a model of discipline.

But what about those who want to work and cannot find it? We have met these people. They are not slackers. They are not above any type of legal paying job. What about them? Well, if the Church agrees with the author of 2 Thessalonians that idleness is not a good thing, we must do more to help people be less idle. Groups of churches can start job training programs in conjunction with city and government programs. Churches can provide computers to help people job search, provide resume writing tips, do interview coaching and raise money for people who want to enter community colleges and vocational training programs. If we believe that idleness only creates disorder, the Church must take a much more active role in helping people gain work; we did it in the past and we can do it again. To do less is to support idleness and disorder.

Celebration

We celebrate work and all of those who daily strive to legally earn a living and contribute to their families and communities. They know that Galatians 6:7 is true; labor leads to reward. We also celebrate those rare men and women who have taken on the monumental task of helping those who want to work find dignified work. These people are not weary of doing what is right.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Idle believers; the writer toiling and laboring day and night; bread, busybodies; and

Sounds: Imagine some of the many sounds of work: bulldozers pushing earth; computer keyboards clicking, Blackberries being tapped; trucks rolling down the highway; the voices of teachers; mothers scurrying in kitchens; customer service operators communicating; the popping cloth of shoe-shiners, etc.

Note

1. “September: Labor Day.” [USHolidaysOnline.com](http://www.usholidaysonline.com). Online location:
<http://www.usholidaysonline.com/taxonomy/term/21> accessed 1 April 2009