

"GO TO THE ANT! CONSIDER THE LILIES!"

Proverbs 6:6-11
Matthew 6:25-34

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I have chosen my texts and sermon this morning with an eye to the fact that this is the Labor Day weekend. Nothing else in our culture so clearly marks the end of summer, the season of vacations, and the beginning of what remains for most of us the working year. There was a time when school did not start until after Labor Day. I grew up in such a time and place. There must still be places where that practice prevails. But folks around here cannot seem to wait that long for football season to begin.

It is less clear that people are eager to get back to school and to work. The truth is, most of us are very ambivalent about work. We can hardly live without it, but learning how to live with it is an unending struggle. Some wag named Jerome K. Jerome once wrote, "I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours. I love to keep it by me: the idea of getting rid of it nearly breaks my heart" [THREE MEN IN A BOAT (J. W. Arrowsmith, 1889)].

It is reported that during the 1960 U.S. Presidential campaign, candidate John Kennedy visited a coal mine in West Virginia. "Is it true you're the son of one of our wealthiest men?" asked one of the miners. Kennedy admitted that it was true.

"Is it true that you've never wanted for anything and had everything you wanted?"

"I guess so.

"Is it true you've never done a day's work with your hands all your life?"

Kennedy nodded.

"Well, let me tell you this," said the miner. "You haven't missed a thing." [THE LITTLE, BROWN BOOK OF ANECDOTES, 327].

Most of us are quite ambivalent about work. Work is noble, or it is drudgery. It gives us dignity, or it crushes the human spirit. It provides meaning and purpose to human activity, or it is sheer necessity. It offers creative freedom, or it imposes oppressive burden. We alternately envy and resent those who can get by without it.

Henry Ward Beecher, nineteenth century liberal American Protestant (and for ten years a pastor in Indiana), believed human beings were made to work: "When God wanted sponges and oysters, He made them, and put one on a rock and the other in the mud. When He made man, He did not make him to be a sponge or an oyster; He made him with feet and hands, and head, and heart, and vital blood, and a place to use them, and said to him, "Go to work!" [ROYAL TRUTHS (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866)]. English essayist Charles Lamb, on the other hand, could ask, "Who first invented work, and bound the free/ And holyday-rejoicing spirit down . . . ?" and answer, "Sabbathless Satan!" [WORK].

The biblical witness also seems to be of at least two minds about work. Our text from Proverbs offers a word to the wise regarding the importance of work: "Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise." Today's provision will not see you through tomorrow. Throughout my life I've taken this admonition seriously. Now that I'm retired, I still do some work, but not much for money, and my wife and I should be able to get by easily on what we have stored up in pensions and savings and such. And, just to underline this concern I have about being prepared, let me add that I've spent a number of hours in the last two weeks cleaning gutters and downspouts and making sure that there is adequate drainage on our property so that when the rains come, we won't have basement flooding and ruined treasures.

The ant knows this elemental rule of life without even being told. You must be prepared. You must

have regard for your future, gathering food in summer in order to have store for the winter. Don't just lie there! "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed warrior." This is ancient wisdom, also to be found among Aesop's fables, where the industry of the ant is contrasted with the frivolity of the grasshopper, who makes no provision for the future, and thus flourishes only for a season.

But then there is our text from Matthew, where Jesus seems to offer diametrically opposite instruction. Having warned not to lay up treasures on earth, he says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. So do not worry about tomorrow" Who has not envied the seemingly effortless freedom of the birds, or reveled in the untrammelled beauty of the lilies? Poet Emily Dickinson once wrote to a friend that the only commandment she never broke was to "consider the lilies of the field"--not to use them to decorate her yard or pick them for her table, but simply to consider them [cited by Sallie McFague, "Should a Christian Love Nature," in *THE SPIRE*, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Spring/Summer 1993), p. 1]. Perhaps a poet can so regard the world, but what about us prosaic mortals?

I have never encountered an interpretation of Jesus' teaching here in juxtaposition with our text from Proverbs. I suspect, however, that Jesus knew what Proverbs had to say, and that the contrast is intentional. Jesus' teaching clearly runs counter to the conventional wisdom about making provision for the future. The question is, Why? Did Jesus not believe in work? In another place he supposedly said that the laborer is worthy of his hire [Luke 10:7]. Yet we have no report that Jesus ever worked for pay. The Gospels tell us a variety of interesting details about Jesus, but never once mention something so substantial as whether, or how, he earned a living. At the very least, Jesus leaves the impression that whatever we are to do in this life is quite different from what most people think and do.

I think I understand the poetry of what Jesus says, the invitation to imagine life in terms of the carefree birds and the toil-less lilies, but it is hard to know just how literally to take him at his word. Travelling this summer in the American Southwest I was again reminded of the existence of cultures that are not nearly so achievement-oriented as my own. In the small Hispanic villages of northern New Mexico, and among the Pueblo Indians, life appears to proceed at a much less hurried, much less anxious pace. The houses, the yards, the streets, seem to exist with little or no attention to their possibilities for greater order, functional repair, and general middle class improvement. The appearances are partly deceiving; some of the inhabitants have high-tech jobs in places like Los Alamos. Nonetheless, there is little evidence of a Protestant or bourgeois work ethic.

In part because I am on vacation I am aware of how much time is spent on the elementals of daily existence – eating, drinking, sleeping – and on the prerequisites of procuring and preparing food and shelter. For some people these would appear to be the primary activities of life. Their work is almost entirely for such purposes, not for the accumulation of goods, not for the amassing of savings, not for the accomplishment of greater and more abstract ends. I imagine, rightly or wrongly, that some of these people live as though they were created simply to be. They make few demands on their environment, they do little to change it, they are not striving toward tomorrow. Whether their lives are better or happier for being so, I do not know, but I see that there are alternative ways of being and doing in the world. And I see living, concrete proof of Jesus' teaching that human life does not consist in the abundance of possessions, and that perhaps it is possible to live without anxious toil.

Returning to the teaching of Jesus, it becomes clearer that he does not object to work so much as to

worry, he is not against labor so much as he is against unnecessary and self-consuming striving. From Jesus' perspective, it is one thing to meet the demands of the day, it is quite another to borrow worry and toil and trouble from tomorrow. An anxious preoccupation with meeting our material needs betrays a lack of confidence in the providence of God.

Some time back the headline on the editorial page of the Bloomington HERALD-TIMES read, "Strong leisure ethic can improve quality of life, lower health costs." The article, by the Dean of IU's School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, told us mostly what we already know – that too much work is not good for us, that leisure-time activities can improve our health and well-being, and thereby also enhance our capacity for productive work [Sept. 4, 1993]. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis was once criticized for taking a brief vacation before the start of an important trial. "I need the rest," Brandeis explained. "I find that I can do a year's work in eleven months, but I can't do it in twelve" [THE LITTLE, BROWN BOOK OF ANECDOTES, 76].

This is a message we clearly need to hear. Despite a great host of labor-saving devices, or perhaps because we all feel we need to own them and therefore must pay for them, the average work week for upper income professionals is now greater than it was 45 years ago [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_time]. When it comes to vacations, Americans are among the most deprived in the civilized world. There is no legally required vacation period in the United States. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, over 5 ½ weeks of vacation are legally required. Even the supposedly industrious Germans, whose average work weeks are several hours shorter than ours, are given 4 working weeks of vacation plus 9-13 holidays [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_statutory_minimum_employment_leave_by_country]. Every society has its laggards and lazybones, but among us, the work ethic is still alive and well.

Here is the rational, utilitarian case for taking time off from our work. We can often work better, and accomplish even more, if we do not work all the time. But this does not yet get at what Jesus was getting at when he invited us to look at the birds and consider the lilies. It is not just that we can work too much for our own good, but that work can occupy too great a place of importance in our estimation of what is valuable and good. Work can become a compulsion, an addiction, an all-consuming passion. William Sloane Coffin preached that "ambition is a poor master, but a useful servant." The same made be said of work. When work starts to control us, when it becomes the object of our total devotion, we know that something has gotten out of hand. When work becomes the usurper of human energies and creativity and imagination, when we live to work instead of working to live, work becomes a form of idolatry.

Philosopher Frithjof Bergmann observed that "A job not only provides income. It gives you dignity, self-respect, identity, the respect of other people . . . it actually gives you a world" ["Making a saner world of work," KALAMAZOO GAZETTE, 2-24-85]. But it is worth asking, does it give you the kind of world in which you want to live? A lot of people are more interested in being successful rather than useful. A lot of people want a world of status and privilege. Work that aims toward this kind of success is a hard master. It is a Faustian bargain, a trading of one's soul and substance for the perquisites of passing acclaim. In the perceptive words of Ecclesiastes, one of my favorite biblical writings, it is ultimately "a striving after wind."

If it is important to our physical and emotional health that we temper our work ethic with a leisure ethic, it is important to our spiritual health that we acknowledge our ambivalence about work itself. Work is often a necessity, simply to provide for our material and bodily needs, and often it is not any fun. Erma Bombeck once wrote a column in which she declared:

"We have an entire generation of young people growing up who honestly have been told that work must be 'fun, relevant and meaningful.' If they get one out of three, they're lucky.

"It's time we stopped kidding ourselves and our children. Work is discipline, sacrifice, competition, endurance, repetition, concentration, dedication, and principle" [5-14-84].

Work is all that, and sometimes it is sheer effort and mindless, boring drudgery as well. We still have a lot of jobs that need to be done that are plain hard labor. They may be honorable, but it is hard to make them enjoyable. Sometimes the best one can do is to have someone with whom to share the tasks and pass the time of one's work. We are kidding ourselves if we think the ant has nothing to teach us about the tasks essential to our survival.

On the other hand, most of the work that most of us do is not entirely a matter of necessity. It is an exercise of human choice and freedom. Except that work ceases to be an expression of freedom whenever we invest it with greater significance that it can bear. Work that aims to secure our future becomes anxious toil. Work that aims to establish our status and success becomes relentless ambition. Human freedom is lost when we capitulate to work's endless demands, no less than when are subject to its material necessity. Work is a harsh master, though it remains a needed and valuable servant.

Malcolm McQueen, currently a Presbyterian pastor in San Antonio, tells the story of two women who were walking down the street when they spotted a frog. The frog croaked, "Help me, please." The two women were, of course, astounded by this talking frog, so they leaned closer and one of them said, "Please repeat what you said."

The frog answered, "Help me, please. I used to be a Presbyterian preacher. If you kiss me, I'll once again become who I really should be."

One of the women reached down and picked up the frog. Then she turned around to see if anyone was watching and quickly stuffed the frog in her purse and walked off. The other woman hurried along after and asked, "Why did you put the frog in your purse? Aren't you going to kiss it?"

"Heavens, no, " replied the first woman. "A talking frog is much more valuable than a Presbyterian preacher."

The question of what work we are to do is tied up with the question of what makes us valuable. It is also tied up with the question of becoming who we really should be. Christianity has understood this question in terms of vocation or calling, not in terms of what our labors might bring on the market. It is a matter of employing the gifts of human energy and freedom in creativity and service and simple usefulness, rather than exploiting these gifts for the sake of security, ambition, and success. It may seem to be a tough choice, but it comes down to whether we wish to be responsible and free in our labors or the slave of our compulsions and ambition.

In our society a sharp distinction is made between work and leisure or play. This tends to make work both more onerous – because it is contrasted with leisure – and more morally serious – because it is not a matter of play. The result is not only that we take work very seriously, but that we tend also to be compulsive in our play. Work that is expressive of human freedom, that is creative and useful and of service to others, is work that will also be more playful--sometimes even fun. It will be more playful because it will be less compulsive, less driven, less needing to prove or establish itself. It will be more trusting in the providence in nature and society and the world.

It is asking far too much for work always to be fun, or even creative, but if it is never enjoyable there is something wrong. If it affords us no opportunity to share life with others, there is something missing. If it yields no sense of celebration or appreciation of existence, then it is time for us to stop what we are doing: Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. AMEN.

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