



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

Work Hard Enough?

A sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton in the “Still Haven’t Found What We Are Looking For” series
Delivered on September 18, 2022 on Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 NRSV.

4 Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person’s envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

5 Fools fold their hands
and consume their own flesh.

6 Better is a handful with quiet
than two handfuls with toil
and a chasing after wind.

7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 8 the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. “For whom am I toiling,” they ask, “and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

Prelude

Hi! I’m Rob Hamilton, Senior Pastor at UMCG and last week we started a series on how we sometimes try on countless filters for our personalities to win the approval of others. And how we try all the stuff marketed to us to make us feel like we are enough. Or sometimes even exaggerate our hardships to justify ourselves. If we are honest, no matter how hard we try, none of it is enough. So we struggle to find true, lasting happiness because -as it turns out we still haven't found what it is we are looking for.

I spoke about how when we stuff our lives with busy-ness it is in an effort to seem important or worthy, but all it does is stress us out and strain our relationships. While I didn’t offer a quick fix, I did share in how Jesus teaches us to be present in the moment. That message is on our UMCGeneva Youtube page if you want to review it.

A similar filter to busy-ness we put on is ‘work’ and today I am going to be speaking about how we’ve gone from working-to-live to living-to-work and how that endless pursuit of productivity probably still means we haven’t found what we are looking for - that’s partly what has field the great resignation of last year and I think the Bible offers us some wisdom to help us recenter work in our lives. Let’s get ready to dig in with some prayer



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Prayer of Illumination

Jesus,

If we're honest the mere mention of work has stolen our attention from our worship. We might be thinking about what we need to do next or we think back upon our days before retirement and perhaps now our collective pulse has risen. Let us not be defensive, but rather may we be open to how your Holy Spirit might speak through me into all of ourselves, especially mine. Amen.

Sermon

I'm going to start today by asking for some congregational participation. I want to invite a few of you to describe yourselves in 40 characters or less - like you might on Twitter- or just a sentence. I'll go first: I'm not on Twitter much -at all- but my Twitter profile reads: "He/Him. Husband, Dad, United Methodist Pastor, Wesleyan, Runner and I am still figuring out the rest."

Who might be willing to give this a shot? (Asks for volunteers: speculating that most people will include their vocation, job or retirement status in their self-description).

I have sat with over 100 families to plan a funeral. A nearly universal experience I have had is that when I ask the loved ones of the deceased to describe their loved one, if the deceased is a male/father, the first biographical sentence makes mention of their career or vocation and if its a female/mother the first biographical sentence is an adjective or emotion and the second sentence is about their career or stay-at-home parent. Work, in our culture is so foundational to our identity. In fact, when recent retirees ask to meet with me for some pastoral care, it's often about finding a new identity now that work has ended.

Now don't get me wrong there is nothing inherently wrong with working. Work is important to helping us live... but **when we shift from working-to-live to living-to-work then maybe something in our internal and spiritual lives are askew.** But work wasn't always intended to define or consume us. Back in 1965, Congress held length hearings to discuss the looming 20-hour work week. According to Congress' estimations, the rapidly expanding automation of the day meant that by the year 2000, Americans would have more free time than they'd know what to do with. Summer camps would have to stay open year-round. People would take so many vacation trips that our national infrastructure would need to be completely overhauled to accommodate the traffic. But despite our technological



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advances we have not increased our downtime. Instead, we've actually managed to squeeze downtime out of our lives in dramatic ways.¹

Now I know I'm one to speak after all pastor's only work one day a week, so what do I know... right? Well if you've been around me long enough, you might know my schedule has considerable flexibility, but a 40-hour work week is a light week for me. At the risk of over sharing, I've been so committed to working I'm sure a surprising number of you have received a reply to an email from me while I was on the toilet. For a lot of working folks, especially working parents, I am confident I am not alone that our bathrooms have on occasion been an annex of the office.



The United States leads the developed world in unused paid vacation days. We average 1788 work-hours a year, that's 120 more than the Brits, 200 more than the French and 400 more than our German counterparts. The question this leads to is not so much as to why we work such insane hours, but why have we come to prefer it? Could it be that our careers provide us with much more than a paycheck?²

John, our liturgist, read some wisdom from the Old Testament about this lack of work life balance.

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¹ Summary and quotes from pgs. 88-89 of "Seculosity: How career, parenting, technology food, politics and romance became our new religion and what to do about it" by David Zahl.

² That pointed question comes from "Seculosity: How career, parenting, technology food, politics and romance became our new religion and what to do about it" by David Zahl - page 88.



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7 Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 8 the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. "For whom am I toiling," they ask, "and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business. (Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 NRSV).

The wisdom of Scripture says, work that steals our happiness is just vanity. None of it is satiating or satisfying. In fact, I suspect most of us my intuit that one reason for shifting from working-to-live to living-to-work could be that work is the perfect socially acceptable, if not rewarding, means to distract us from deeper, less manageable realities.

Take parenting for example, is a completely confusing process when what we put in as a parent does not always correlate to what we get out. Not so with work. We put in the hours, we get a check. Knock a project at work out of the park, we get some praise or advancement. And we've learned that if our employers doesn't reward our efforts at work, we either scale back or go find another employer who will match our pay to our skill and effort. It is no surprise, then, that the constant grinding at **work can create the perfect diversion from our conscience, loneliness, grief or vulnerability.** Work can be a way of imposing order on the chaos of relating to another person or ourselves. This might not be true for all of us, but it's true for enough of us. We work hard enough and we still haven't found what we're looking for, which are things like: peace, acceptance, worth, contentment, love, even dignity.

Paul when writing to his church in Colossi was speaking to those who need to work for a living when he said: ***"23 Whatever task you must do, work as if your soul depends on it, as for the Lord and not for humans, 24 since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. (Col. 3:23-24 NRSVUE).***" Paul commends hard work, but he says work not for humans but for the Lord.

What does that mean? How does that help us? Take Jesus for example. His job was to be the incarnate son of God. He offered himself to the world to break the chains of sin and death., which is hard work. When Jesus was on the cross he didn't ask the soldiers for the time and say: 'great just a few more hours and I can log out and stop checking Slack.' Jesus did the hard work because he loved us so much.

Now let me stop everyone who just thought: "I gotta work myself to death to show people I love them." No, Jesus was able to work his job despite being



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destroyed by it. Jesus knew he had already earned his father's favor, pride, approval. Jesus did his job for love of people, the love of his unique job, not to hide from whatever he couldn't control. **Jesus died on the job but it wasn't because he was living-to-work, it was because he was working so that we could live.** In fact, Jesus' work required vulnerability and knowing himself and his limits and Jesus did it and on Good Friday his human reward for work was a brutal, undignified death. I don't think we'd call that success as Americans today - nor would working people in Jesus' day.

Now, none of us are called to the same work Jesus did for us, but Jesus' approach to his work, points to the change we might need in our relationship work -even for those of us who are not classified as a workaholic or chronic procrastinator, but because we all breathe the air of a culture intoxicates with productivity and success.

I'm thinking of a parable Jesus told - it's probably his most un-American parable- in Matthew 20 that of the workers in the vineyard. I think this parable is a scriptural inoculation against our ability to fill our lives and define ourselves with work, productivity and success that never really satisfies and leaves us still not finding what we're looking for.

The parable Jesus told is that of a landowner who hires day labors to work in his vineyard. The landowner starts the day at Home Depot and picks up a hardworking group to harvest his vineyard. But it's a big harvest and he needs more help so by 10 am, the landowner is back at Home Depot hiring more day-



laborers. Everyone is working hard in his vineyard, but he just needs more help. So the landowner gets more help every few hours until he bring his last batch of works from a temp agency just before the end of the day.

At sundown the laborers line up for their pay. Those who worked the least amount of time got paid first with a whole day's wage. This got those who were first hired excited thinking they'd get so much more than the typical day's wage since they worked harder and longer. But instead the landowner paid everyone a day's wage. As you can imagine those who worked all day were not happy. They voice their displeasure at their pay, but



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the landowner doesn't change his mind. The landowner doesn't penalize anyone involved, least of all those who are most clearly (and disrespectfully) hampered by an excessive devotion to what they feel their productivity has brought them. They all get the same check - the same each agreed to upon hiring.

In this parable Jesus paints a portrait of grace, where reward is not a matter of output or merit, but of grace. **For in God, we are valued according to our presence rather than our accomplishments.** This is unfair and offensive to the early risers, but of deep comfort to those who arrive late or to the inefficient and unproductive. The parable shows us that all our hope: where our love and esteem - that which we are truly looking for - is not distributed on the basis of output, where we are all are evaluated by how we stack up against each other, but by the largeness of divine generosity.

We are enough. To God we are enough because we exist. To our children we are enough because we love them. To our parents... well some might not have the best example there. To our neighbors and peers... that sense worth can be fickle too. But to God, we're enough - so let's work to live a life of abundant grace. To Jesus we're already worth it. Amen.