

Sacred Work

Mary Koon, September 1, 2019
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The scripture this morning comes from the gospel of John, chapter 6. Jesus is speaking to crowds of people who, the day before, witnessed the feeding of thousands of people on the hillside across the lake. And then, that very night, the disciples see Jesus walking on the water.

After waiting at the site of the miraculous feeding, the crowd realizes Jesus is gone and follow him to Capernaum, across the Sea of Galilee...hungry for more of him.

When they finally find Jesus, they want to know how he got across the lake – they only saw the disciples leaving. Jesus must think this is a meaningless question, because he ignores it. He accuses them of following him for the material gain – of missing the point of big feast, which points to God as sustenance. The people still can't seem to make the connection of spirit and matter. Bread and God. And he says this...

John 6:27 – 35

²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³²Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴They said to him, “Sir,

give us this bread always.”³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Summer has disappeared in the blink of an eye. And here we are on the Labor Day weekend. Originally started in the late 1800’s the Labor Day holiday was designed as a rest for those who labor, a day to honor and celebrate the achievement of the American workers.

Created in the image of God, human beings are designed for work. In the 2nd creation story in Genesis, God places Adam – humanity -- in the garden to till and tend it. In all work there is an element of shaping the universe that God gifted to us. Honest work has value.

In our text, Jesus talks to the people about the work of creating meaningful lives – not about their earned livings, but the work of being human, of following Jesus. And we’ll look at that in a moment.

First, since we honor labor this weekend, I want to ask you to think of a time in your life when you engaged in meaningful work. Think all kinds of work– part of your career, something you engaged in at school or church or in the community or in your home, your family, with friends. So maybe it was when you learned to tile your bathroom, or you ran a successful marketing campaign, or organized a PW Tea at Oak Grove, or were part of a work group on a mission trip. Please get in groups of 2 or 3 and share that story and why it was meaningful. Facebook viewers are welcome to share on line in the comments section, too. I’m going to give you about 2 – 3 minutes.

PAUSE – anyone want to share? And what makes work meaningful? If I were to guess, meaningful work had a sense of purpose, connection to others, a feeling that what you were doing contributed to the greater good.

Back in 1961, President John F. Kennedy was visiting NASA headquarters for the first time. While touring the facility, he introduced

himself to a janitor who was mopping the floor and asked him what he did at NASA. The Janitor replied, “I’m helping put a man on the moon.”

That janitor understood his work to be a vital part of a greater vision. He found greater meaning in the larger whole.

I think that this is what Jesus is trying to get at.

The people in Jesus day were poor and living in oppressive circumstances. They worked just to be fed, to stay alive.

And Jesus breaks into this life, performing miracles that result in physical wonders – food, wine, healing. These miracles, Jesus says, are more than just physical, they point to God’s presence and on-going work in the world. Jesus invites them and us, to be part of that work. To catch that vision. Jesus reminds them that believing God, and Jesus, is our main work, giving everything else we do meaning and purpose.

I think that Jesus’ answer is confusing, even today. How could belief be work?

The late author, Marcus Borg, talks about this language of believing. He says that while it’s been around since the first century, it didn’t primarily refer to right theological beliefs – the intellectual assent to propositions. The meaning is something more like “beloving.”

(<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/11/what-is-a-christian/>) Jesus wants us to follow him, to learn from him. To love God is to love what God loves, to let our hearts break for that which breaks God’s heart.

Beloving God involves a commitment to a relationship (with God, earth, self and others) commitment of attentiveness (what God is doing) and faithfulness (following) that infuses all our work and gives it meaning. It is nothing less than seeing our life work as co-creators with God in the transformation of the world. In small ways and large.

Practicing this can shift our attitude.

It happened to me while caring for our grandchildren this week. Preaching involves living into a particular scripture for a while, using it as the lens through which you see the world. Jesus words hit me full on. I was feeling a little impatient one morning as I encouraged our grands to get dressed -- for what seemed like the hundredth time. I took a deep breath and it occurred to me that I'm not just babysitting, but am part of raising the next generation of creators, thinkers, activists and world-transformers.

All of us, from the tiniest, new person to the oldest, engage in the sacred work of becoming fully human. We will have chores, jobs, and labor throughout life. Jesus shows us the way in word and deed. Everyone has something to contribute and has value in the economy of God.

As the school year begins, as regular ministry programming resumes here at church and life just seems to get busy after the summer, may we honor and celebrate the work to which we are all called, the work of loving. Paying attention to God's presence in the world, recognizing ourselves here for God's purpose, and growing in the image of Christ. We practice this work together each Sunday morning in worship, in service, study and fellowship. We will practice it in a few moments when we share a sacred meal at the table where Jesus is host and all are welcome. And then we take what we practice together here into the world, to preserve the beauty and honor the dignity of God's earth and God's people, wherever we go and whomever we meet.

What a wonderful gift it is to be called to this sacred work together. Thanks be to God. AMEN