

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**January 11 & 12, 2014**  
**John Crosby**  
**God at Work: The Meaning of Work**  
**Genesis 1-2**

I went outside to greet many of you as you came, in part just to get outside. Many of you came without coats, without gloves, without scarves. It feels a little better than last week, doesn't it? Folks, only in Minnesota is this a heat wave! If I were to think of the best, it would not be walking through the snow without my hat on. I'd be in Hawaii on a beach with no access to phone or anybody who could get ahold of me, watching the whales jump, feeling the water, and feeling close to God. Is that as close to God as we can ever feel, when we're just going *ahhhhhhh*? Well, maybe but I'm not sure that when everything started, God had lying on a beach in Hawaii in mind. There is nothing wrong with that. Love it. If you gave me the tickets, I wouldn't tear them up, but at the very beginning it wasn't on a beach in Hawaii. It sounded like this.

**26** Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." **27** So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. **28** God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." . . . And it was so. **31** God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. [Genesis 1:26-31]

It doesn't begin on a beach. It begins by watching someone at work. God is a creator, a worker, and you and I are made in the image of God, a worker. God, it seems, created all that we see for the sheer joy of it. God makes a raindrop and causes it to fall and watches it fall all the way to the earth and goes, "Let's do it again." God loves to create, to work. Work could not have a more exalted introduction! The Bible starts talking about work as soon as it starts talking about anything. That's how important it is, but I've got to tell you, I don't think heaven is going to be like a beach in Hawaii. It's going to be a lot better. I don't think heaven, as great as the choir sounds, is going to be like an eternal choir festival. It's going to be a lot better. Heaven is going to be like being there on the first day of creation and God turning to you, "Okay, *you* give it a shot," and we get to try with God on our side.

In the beginning we learn, not just that work is good, but that all kinds of work have dignity. God's work in Genesis 1 and 2 is manual labor. It says, "He took the dust and formed human beings." "God created a garden and planted it for them to live in." Academic and author Phillip Jensen said,

If God came into the world, what would he be like? For the ancient Greeks, he might have been a philosopher-king. The ancient Romans might have looked noble statesman. But how does the God of the Hebrews come into the world? As a carpenter.

One who works with His hands. In Genesis, God tells humankind to fill the earth, we're doing that part okay, and subdue it. The word *subdue* indicates that even though everything God made was good, it was still to a great degree undeveloped, unfinished. He wants us to finish the good work. So whether you are at work splicing a gene or repairing a ripped sweater, whether you are painting a picture or doing brain surgery or taking out the trash, our work subdues and develops and finishes the world. It repairs the very fabric of the world. That's what work is supposed to do. Martin Luther once said that God could easily have given humankind grain and fruit without the need to plow and plant, but He didn't want to. He said that parents want to give their children everything they need, but they also want their children to become diligent and conscientious and responsible so they give their children chores like Dan Anderson was talking about. And the kids come alive when they get to do their chores *with* their parents.

That's work, doing the chores of the King *with* the King. How many of you have seen in real life or in commercials those pictures of the dad mowing the lawn with the kid with his little toy lawnmower going along right behind him? That's what work is supposed to look like. Work is when we come alive, doing what we were created to do. It's when an artist is putting together a sculpture. It's when a firefighter is rescuing somebody. Real work comes when you and I stretch out like an athlete doing what few can do or when a doctor repairs a human face. There may be no better way to love God, no better way to love your neighbor, whether you are writing parking tickets or software or writing books. Just doing your work is a gift from God.

That's not the way we think of work today, is it? Work in the world today is described as a rat race, a dogfight, a grind. You and I are often described as wage slaves. Work in the world is filled with economics, uncertainty, so that there is no job on Planet Earth that is safe. As Paul Tshihamba prayed, many struggle just to find work. In this world, there are bad bosses. There is change so fast that everybody feels out of date. There are people who work two or three jobs and do not make a living wage. I think the work environment is not so much hostile to faith, "Hey, God. Hey God," it's not that; it's more like "This is the real world. Leave your faith on your desk. We don't have to talk about that here." It's not good; it's bad. It's set to the side. Work is filled with deadlines and boredom and impossible colleagues, and I think for many people, work is filled with fear, even if you are very successful, the fear that it can be taken away. There is fear of not measuring up, fear that you could make a mistake that would expose you and others. Many of you have a knot in your stomach when you get up on Monday morning. One of the ways you know that something has gone wrong with work is that you feel bad about feeling bad about the success of other people. You ought to be happy for them, but there is a part of you that struggles with that.

I want to offer you two stories about work today. I heard the first one 43 years ago. I was just starting college and one of our literature professors forced us, I mean encouraged us, to go to a play. So I went to my first play, *Death of a Salesman*, written in 1949 by American playwright Arthur Miller. Forty-three years later, that's how I saw my father. I saw my father there in Willy Loman, the salesman, talking to his boss, who is actually now the son of his original boss. Willy leans across the desk and he says,

I'm talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see—I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!

I went back to my dorm and I wrote my father a note. How does work turn into that? It wasn't like that at the beginning. How did that happen? Let's go back to the beginning and look at work. In Genesis 3, God speaks to Adam.

**17** To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. **18** It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. **19** By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Because of humankind's choice to turn from God, God allowed the world to be broken. God allowed work to be broken. You and I struggle to love God. We struggle even more to love other people, but we also struggle to work because work is broken. I want to suggest this month that **we are going to look at work through two different eyes**. Followers of Christ need two eyes to see work the way that God intended it to be. **With the first eye you and I rediscover that work is a calling**. Hope in a fallen world comes from God, when we work as a calling. When your work is a calling and not a paycheck, you work differently. That word *calling* comes from the Latin word *vocare*, to call or to sing. It's at the root of the word *vocation*. Today vocation often just means a job, but a job is a vocation only if someone calls you to do it, if someone calls you and says, "You were meant to do this." It is a vocation only if somebody calls you and only if you do it in response to the call instead of just for yourself. Work can be a calling but only if it is service to something beyond just you and your interests. We're supposed to meet our needs, that's absolutely part of what work is, but it is supposed to be so much more than that. We are supposed to see our work as a call from God to which we respond.

One of my friends from out of town is here today. We were talking one time about this idea of work. I said, "What is the best part about work for you? What do you like best about your work?" He goes, "You know what? I love work because I get to create jobs. Nothing in my life makes me happier than seeing somebody get a job." What is God calling you to do at work? What's God calling you to *be* at your place of work? The first eye gets hope this month from realizing that you have been called by God to work.

We only see with one eye at a time because the world is broken. **With the second eye we view the nature of work in a distorted way**. The same evil that broke our connection with God, that breaks your relationships with other people and makes work the hardest thing that you do, that evil also changes the nature of work. You and I will spend our entire lives in the land of distorted, distressed work. I talk about the distortion of work. When it's blatant, we all see it, right? When a child is forced to work in a factory and paid one dollar a week, that is not what God intended. That is slavery. That is not work. When somebody has to work all week at McDonald's and then go to a second job as a maid and still has to choose between food and medicine, something has gone wrong. Something is just as wrong as when another person on Planet Earth wakes up and gets 7 million dollars just for breathing through the whole week. I'm a capitalist. I believe in the ethic of work, but work is broken.

I think that work is also distorted when you look at how old you are. Different ones of you have different views of work. Many of you who grew up through the depression, whose parents had to struggle through the depression, see work as security. "Take the job. Keep your head down. Do a good job. Don't leave until you've got a better job, and if you're smart, don't leave. Period. I don't understand why you kids can't just work." Work is security for many. For many boomers, work is a way to get your ambitions fulfilled, to get ahead in the world, to do better for your kids, and you work hard and you save hard. For you, work is about you. Not so much for many of our kids. For many of the emerging generation, they do not live to work. They work so that they can live and when they think about work, they want work that is filled with meaning. They want to do the good stuff and you have to pay them extra to do the bad stuff.

So on the one hand, frankly, you have people who have become very cynical about work, it's just a paycheck. But that's a distortion. Work is not meaningless. It's more than a paycheck. On the other hand, you've got people who have become idealists and say, "Work has to be perfect or I won't do it." Work is not and will never be perfect on Planet Earth. I believe that work can be redeemed. I believe that's part of what you and I are called to do in the month after Christmas. We just sang about work. You may not have realized it but we sang about work this Christmas, that great carol that says,

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found . . . . [*Joy to the World*, verse 3]

The curse of thorns and thistles in the ground is broken by Jesus, and you and I are called to help break the curse at work. How you and I work either affirms our faith or denies that we trust in Jesus. How do you bring healthy faith to unhealthy work? Next week Steph Spencer is going to talk about some of the challenges in our workplace today, but today I want to give every one of you a vision of how to be faithful in your work. Whether or not you get a paycheck at the end of the day, whether you have not had a paycheck for 15 years and are trying to figure out what to do with the rest of your life, whether you are a student in school, if you are a follower of Jesus trying to be faithful in the work that God has called you to, you can find many different ways to express your faith.

- The way to serve God at work is to be a source of joy and grace. Some of you will do that.
- For others of you, the way to serve God at work is to further social justice in this world.
- For others of you, the way to serve God at work is to be personally honest and to see the people that you work with as people Jesus wants to love, so evangelism and prayer become a reason for you to go to work.
- For some of you the way to best serve God at work is just to do skillful, excellent work so that the caliber of your work supports your faith.
- For others, the way to serve God at work is to create beauty. For you, it's just picking up the trash on the chancel and making it look beautiful again.
- Others of you can serve God at work by engaging and influencing the culture that you find yourself in. If it is filled with gossip, it does not need to be as gossip-full when you leave.

- For many of you, the way to serve God at work is to find something and do it with joy and passion, using the gifts that God has given you. You won't always be able to do that. Sometimes you just get the paycheck, but God has given you gifts. Can you use them?
- I think for many of you, the way that you serve God is to make as much money as you can so that you can be as generous for the King as you possibly can be.

Which of these are you not doing and because you are not doing it, for you work is a curse? That isn't a fulfillment of whom God has made you to be. Which of these do you need to bring to work tomorrow? Whether that's changing a diaper or visiting an old people's home, how do you work for the King? Martin Luther once said, "When we work, we are the fingers of God." I love that image. "When we work, we are the fingers of God."

I had a second story that I was going to close with, but then I exchanged sermon outlines with Matt Moberg. Matt is speaking tonight at The Table. Matt's closing illustration was so much better than mine, I decided to borrow it." It's not so much a story as it is a picture, about three minutes long, of somebody at work. Let's watch it together.

[Video begins.]

The first coffin I ever built was for my child when my wife had a miscarriage. I had to figure out how to make the handles wide and make them pretty. It is such a personal thing to have your hands on there, to really be working with it.

Coffinmaking it seems has really been begotten by way of furniture makers. Metal is a pretty recent innovation and apparently now, we use enough metal every year in our coffins that are buried in the ground to rebuild the Golden Gate Bridge.

Building an entire casket takes me around 25 hours. Mostly what I do is sand. I feel like I sand and I sand and I sand. I never feel like it's finished, mainly because that's probably how we feel at the end of our lives, too.

I think one of the most important aspects of the coffin is that it can be carried. I think that we are meant to carry each other, and I think carrying someone you love and committing them is very important for us when we deal with that. We want to know that we have played a part and that we have shouldered our burden, so if we make it too convenient, then we are depriving ourselves of how to get stronger so that we can carry on.

When I'm out here by myself early in the morning or in the middle of the night or something like that, I can get a sense of how work is love made visible. The Benedictine monks say, "We work and pray," and I guess those things kind of bleed together for me. So it's not that I have some words in my head, it's more just a state of love and becoming a small part of a bigger picture that I don't fully understand.

I'm building something for someone that people tend to think is a destination. People think of the grave as just the end and I'm trying to eliminate that [viewpoint] now in this particular way.

[Video ends.]

“What do you do for a job while I have to go to work every day and make boxes they put dead people in? What do you do for work? God has given me the privilege of work that is love made visible.” When we know why God has put us here, we hear again,

**31** God saw all that he had made,

God saw all the work He had done

and it was very good.

Let's pray.

Lord God, I struggle with believing this on days when my work is letting somebody go. My friends struggle to believe that work is a blessing when they get a bad review or they're bored out of their minds. We struggle because work in our day too often brings out the worst in us instead of the child. I pray that even this afternoon, even this evening, even tomorrow morning, you will give every homemaker, and every retiree, and every person here who works for a paycheck a sense that You call them to the development and the repair of the world and You call it work. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, we ask for those eyes. Amen.

**Attribution**

I wish to acknowledge my debt/theft from Tim Keller's wonderful book, *Every Good Endeavor*.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*