

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
January 18 & 19, 2014  
Steph Spencer  
The Tension of Work  
Genesis 3:14-19; Ephesians 2:4-10**

Good morning! I'm Steph Spencer. I'm on staff with The Table so I'm usually here on Sunday nights, but it is great to be here with you in the morning today on this beautiful winter day in Minnesota. I want to start the morning with a question. The question is this so you can start thinking about it: How old were you when you got your first job and what was that job? I think this is a really great get-to-know-you question. I'm kind of a community person who likes interaction, so I'm going to ask that you ask each other that question right now. Turn to someone near you, if you feel like you need to stretch, move a little further away, and actually ask this question. Find out, how old were you when you got your first job and what was it? Go ahead and talk to each other.

All right! I'm going to try to pull it back together. I remember this from the last time I spoke here. I started with a question then too, and of all the services, you guys were the hardest to get to stop talking! I loved it. So I want to know who in here got their first job before the age of 16, raise your hand. The majority of the room! I was surprised last night when that that happened, too. Would anyone who had a particularly interesting first job be willing to shout it out and share with the whole room? You have to be kind of loud so we can hear. Did anyone have an interesting first job? "Milking the cows." Milking the cows, that was a job I'm guessing started really young if you grew up on a farm. Any other interesting first jobs? "Setting fireworks." Fireworks, okay, a dangerous first job. Any other ones? "Babysitting." Babysitting, yes, that is a very common first job. Last night we stopped having people answer that question because somebody said their first job was "Being a clown at a fundraiser at a car sales place," and we thought nobody could beat that. That is a *really* interesting first job.

Well, like many people in the room, my first job was babysitting. I started working at the age of 13 with some pretty regular babysitting gigs. Then I transitioned into the wonderful world of fast food and worked at McDonalds. I was one of those few people who worked at McDonald's for more than a couple of weeks. I actually worked at McDonalds for three years. As I grew older, I continued to work. After college, I became an autism therapist and then I transitioned into work as a full-time children's pastor. Then I became a stay-at-home mom for a while and I've ended up on staff here with The Table. Like many of us in the room, I have been working my whole life, well, it feels like my whole life, I guess, since I was 13.

Work is part of our shared experience as humans, however varied the form that work takes in our lives. Work is something we spend so much of our lives, so much of our time, doing. This month we are doing this series on work because want to ask, what kind of view does God have of our work? What does it look like to bring God into our workplace? Last week John Crosby set up the series, talking about how work has been part of God's plan from the beginning of

creation. Work is intrinsically good. It is part of God's design of humanity to partner with Him in creation. It says in Genesis 1:28,

**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."

Our Creator God could have filled the entire earth by Himself, but instead He created humans and invited us to participate with Him in the filling of the earth. He invites us to build cultures and societies and buildings and art. I love the way Matt Moberg said this at The Table last week. He said, "God created sound and invited humans to make music." He didn't put his name on this quote because he can't guarantee to me that he didn't steal it from somewhere so this quote is either from Matt Moberg or Tim Keller, we're not exactly sure. But that is the idea of how work was created in the beginning.

Today what we are going to dive into deeper is how work doesn't feel this way anymore. How often our work is filled with hardship and toil and frustration and doesn't feel like a good thing. To start us off thinking about how this is true, we're going to watch a video and listen to some people from within our congregation talking about the difficulties they face in their work. Let's take a look.

[Video begins.]

- I think probably one of the biggest things about being a stay-at-home parent is just getting used to the chaos. There are a lot of calm and beautiful moments and then there are just a lot of static ones, the toil caused by the people you work with who are not working well together, not communicating well together.
- Pride gets in the way. You see pride through insecurity about one's position, pride through comparing, "I want to have what they have." You find yourself in a situation where you have to tell yourself what is more important, right?
- It just hurts. It would be a lot easier if I decided it's just business.
- I feel that work is broken when it never stops. For me it is the preoccupation with it that feels really out of reach.
- When I've felt overworked, health suffered, relationships suffered.
- In 2008 when we went through the tremendous economic downturn, it was a very, very fearful time, and I was bringing that home with me. You're checking all the stuff. There were times when I didn't think we were going to make it.
- I feel that work is broken when I get so consumed with affirmation or confirmation as my work or value through achieving that I lose sight of my identity as a lovechild of God and some of my needs get stepped on.

- The work has become at times more of a personal, even selfish ambition than a mission, so I want it to be important. I don't want it to be that it's more about my way than about me working for God, for the Kingdom. What I've learned over time is, the more I desired that, the less I was ever able to feel that way. It didn't matter what my statistics were or what my title was, I could never find that certain sense of satisfaction or contentedness that, indeed, I am who I want to be in the workplace.

[Video ends.]

We are going to go back to Genesis again this week to look at the root of all these tensions and hardships. I am guessing that those of us in this room can relate to at least one story in that video about how our work has felt difficult and we ended up wondering what to do about it. Back in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, work was this beautiful thing. There was perfect harmony between humanity and God and nature, and everything was awesome. Then Adam and Eve became convinced God was holding out on them and they grasped for what they were told to leave be, hoping they would gain something God hadn't given them. They thought they knew better than God.

When they ate from the fruit, sin entered the world and the effects snowballed immediately. They fell into shame and blame and guilt, hiding and all sorts of other things. Before long God pronounced His judgment about what would happen to them and the world as a result of the choice they had made. One of the big consequences was the nature of work. Let's look at what God said to humankind in Genesis 3:16-19.

**16** To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." **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."

I want to look at this whole section because I think it is important that the Hebrew word used in verse 16 for *pains in childbearing* and the Hebrew word used in verse 17 for *toil* is the same. It's the word *itstsabown* which means pain, labor, hardship, or toil.

From the beginning, tending to creation, childrearing, and other forms of work were meant to be these beautiful, joy-filled outflows of our identity as humans, of our identity as image-bearers of God. Now, though work still often contains purpose and happiness, many of the in-and-out moments of the day do not feel that way. Just as often they are filled with pain and struggle. I want to say from the beginning of this message, when I refer to work, I am talking about work inside the home, including raising children, and work outside the home. All kinds of work are on an equal playing field in God's eyes.

Now as for that part of verse 16 about a husband ruling over his wife, I'm going to skim right over the top of that one today. That is a sermon in and of itself. For the sake of this message, let me summarize it to say that this verse indicates a shift. Once sin entered the picture, there was a struggle between husband and wife where there wasn't any struggle before. They were

created in *shalom*, God's perfect peace, and now there is disunity. Before this point, Adam and Eve were true co-laborers. They would have been in harmony as they worked together and raised children together, but now something has happened that has caused a shift. Now their work will affect their relationship and their relationship will affect their work.

Keep in mind that Adam and Eve are the only people on earth right now so this is a break not just in marriage relationships but in all interpersonal relationships from now on having difficulty in them. I think how this break affects work is what we have heard several people say in the video. Our broken interpersonal relationships are often a huge factor in making work feel like toil. A lot of people experience struggle in their workplace because of difficulty with coworkers.

God continues speaking and talks about several ways work will now be difficult. I want to say up front, this is not going to feel like news to you. We know that work is difficult. That's why complaining about it is one of the most common topics of conversation between friends. There is an entire Web site on line called Someecards devoted to workplace humor. Do you know the Someecards site? It has cards with pithy little sayings along with drawings. Here are some of my favorites.

[Slides shown.]

I just wanted to read a few of these to get us started thinking about toil. The first one says this.

*The first five days after the weekend are always the hardest.*

The next one says,

*The mountain of paperwork on my desk makes me envy the trees that died to produce it.*

The next one,

*We will continue having lots of meetings until we find out why no one is getting any work done.*

And the last one,

*My résumé is basically a list of things I hate to do.*

We know that work is hard and we joke about it, but I think it's important to talk about because a lot of us in this room need to know we are not alone. If you are struggling with the work you have to do, know that other people are struggling as well. You are not alone. God also knows that it is a struggle. He has known that from the beginning. The toil we experience has existed since sin first entered the world. The Bible doesn't pretend things are easier than they are. From the beginning, the Bible has talked about the life we experience as we experience it and it gives us purpose and hope in the midst of that. Let's go back to Genesis 3:18 where God is speaking about the ground.

**18** It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

The first way that God says that work will feel like toil is because of thorns and thistles. To me this paints a picture of a worker who has done everything that should be done on the front end. He has tilled the land, planted the seeds and watered them, only to have the plants choked out when it is time for the harvest. Our work often feels hindered, choked, blocked. The work put in on the front end is not matched with fulfillment on the back end. It feels like there is a barrier to work turning out. I think a lot of us have experienced that. How many of us have worked hard on a project proposal, researching, doing cost analysis, talking to clients only to have the funding denied? We put in the work but are left feeling unfulfilled by the results. Maybe you are someone whose work is finding a job. You have done your due diligence to get training, go to school, check job postings, apply for jobs and everything else one does in preparation, only to get beaten out by other candidates or pushed toward something not in your field of interest. Things outside your control choke out your work. You keep coming up to a barrier and don't know why you can't find work. I think about people who live in circumstances where they are hard-pressed and in poverty. They are working and working and working and their paychecks do not match the effort they are putting in on the front end. Often our work ends up hindered and choked and we feel unfulfilled.

To me the way that I experience this is actually more in my thought life than in anything else. I'm a working mom, but Fridays are days I am home with my 3 year old. I have a 3 year old and a 7 year old. This past Friday when I was home with my youngest, I was trying to prep for this weekend's message and I got caught in thought loops. I thought of how much better this message would be if I didn't have to watch my kid and if I didn't have a message to prep for, how much better my parenting would be and if I didn't have to worry about cooking or feeding anyone, how much better I would be at both. I was working hard but felt choked and hindered in all directions. Often these hindrances are just in my brain as I feel the toil of balancing the things that are a part of my life.

Genesis 3:19 gives another way that our work can feel difficult.

**19** By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food . . . .

What I think is important to know is that in both verses 18 and 19, God is saying we will eat our food. In Eden, the garden is symbolic of all of our work. We are going to have something come from our work, but it will be filled with toil. Our work will have results, but with much more difficulty than before sin entered the picture. What was once accomplished through a harmonious partnership between humans and humans and earth will now take tremendous effort.

For so many of us, our work never seems to stop. We are always connected to email. We always know what is left unchecked on our to-do list. Those things are always circling in our brains as we try to get this or that accomplished in what used to be the free moments of our days. Others of us have the physical hard work of demanding manual labor jobs that require long hours that wreak havoc on our bodies. For me, again, being a mom, when I think of *by sweat of your brow*, I think of the monotony and chaos of raising kids. My three year old exhausts me more than almost anything else in my life, which, by the way, makes me dream about childrearing in the world of Genesis 2 instead of the world of Genesis 3. There was a time when we would have had an opportunity to raise perfect children. Can you imagine what it would have been like to raise perfect children? To have children who put themselves to bed when they were tired, who never talked back or whined, who were completely understanding

and patient when you were working on something and couldn't give them 100 percent of your attention, who ate the food you put in front of them without complaining or arguing, maybe even with a word of thanks? I have to be careful not to daydream about that for too long or I'll get bitter. Think about how much less blood, sweat, and tears there would have been to balance work and family in a world when toil was not part of either of them. Verse 19 closes this section on painful toil by talking about how Adam will return to the ground.

**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."

Sin introduced death, which is not only a sad consequence in and of itself, but also a reality that brings a sense of fruitlessness to all we try to accomplish. Ecclesiastes 1 gets at that as it moans,

**2** "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." **3** What does anyone gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?

**11** There is no remembrance of people of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

Most of us have a desire to leave a legacy, to make a difference, to be remembered, but we carry a sense of hopelessness that what we have done won't mean anything. No matter how hard we work, we all end up in the grave eventually.

[Slide shown.]

I saw this headstone of Merv Griffin's grave. "I will not be right back after this message." I think it is an interesting way to think about how a day will come when we won't come back after a break. We all have to face the grave eventually and that puts a whole cloud over our work. We ask ourselves, does anyone know what I'm doing? Will anyone remember me when I'm gone? I felt this struggle acutely when we moved to Indiana from Wisconsin. I was a full-time children's pastor in Madison, Wisconsin and then when I moved to Indiana, I became a stay-at-home mom. I had this sense of anonymity that was kind of scary. No one there knew who I was. No one there knew what my gifts were. It wasn't very long before I found myself in a conversation with the children's pastor at our new church and I awkwardly blurted out, "You know, I used to be a children's pastor." I thought, oh, why did I just say that? I was struggling living in a place where no one knew me, and I was worried that my work in the past didn't matter. Maybe my old church wasn't even missing me now that I was gone.

Our work is filled with the toil that comes from broken relationships, lack of fulfillment, difficult work, and a sense of fruitlessness. Most of the examples I've given have been from my experiences or those of people I know. Can you imagine how much more these feelings would be true in places of poverty and oppression? Once sin entered the picture, the original goodness of work was fractured. Work is often just painful toil, and it is filled with that sense of hindrance, with that sense of never-ending work, and that question, does it really matter? Isn't this a feel-good sermon?

Yet there is hope, more hope than what can be provided by cracking jokes like the ones I showed on the slides earlier, funny as they were. Right at this point of hardship and toil is where Christ enters the picture and meets us with hope. These dark days of toil are exactly where we are met by Christ. Let's look at Ephesians 2:4-9.

**4** But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, **5** made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. **6** And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, **7** in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. **8** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **9** not by works, so that no one can boast.

We were dead in our sin, stuck in our toil, until Christ entered the mess and offered to pull us out by His grace. At the root of so much of the toil of our work is how much of ourselves we put into it. We think that in order to be worthy of His love, in order to be happy or accepted or important, we have to achieve certain things. We think we have to get that promotion, or have people in our lives who know our names, or have our homes in perfect order. But Christ says, "No, you are loved right now just as you are." We are not saved based on the work we do. We are loved unconditionally, just as we are right now, and saved by grace.

There is a bigger story going on. Christ's love and grace raise us above the reality of frustration, sweat, and fruitlessness. When those things happen, they don't need to affect us the way they used to because our work does not define us. Christ does. It is after we understand Christ's love and grace, after we understand that our worth is not based on what we do but on what has already been done for us, that we are ready to hear verse 2 of Ephesians 2.

**10** For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The result of that love and grace and knowing that we don't have to do anything isn't that we live in leisure the rest of our lives because none of it really matters. The result is that our work has purpose once again. We are precious creations of God, created to do work, good work, redemptive work. The innate goodness of work present at creation can be present once again through Christ. We have huge potential to create beauty, deliver grace, and share love through the work we do. Through Christ, we can approach work differently. Through Christ, we have a new calling to bring His way and His life into our work and relationships. Rich Phenow is going to talk about that next week.

Today I want to sit a little bit more in the idea of Christ's love and grace meeting us in the midst of the mess and of our purpose not being in our work. These are things that are really easy to talk about and easy to know but really hard to feel and live out in our lives. These are things I struggle with daily. Daily I struggle with putting my worth in my work instead of in Christ, in who He is and what He has done for me. I think my achievements are what it takes for others to love me or for me to be loved by God. When I consciously step back and look at Christ, it is not that these feelings go completely away, it is that I am aware they are not the final word. There is something deeper if only I can bring myself to reach for it.

In closing I am going to give a couple of **spiritual practices I would encourage you to put into your life** in order to remember that bigger story of who Christ is and what He has done for us and how that changes how we approach work. **The first suggestion is, put Sabbath practices into your life.** I wonder if when you've read Genesis you've noticed that God created human beings on Day 6 and that on Day 7 He rested, which means humanity's first day of existence was *not* working. The first day of existence was rest in God because it is there that we have the start of knowing who He is and how He loves us, knowing that He is God and the one who is really in charge, not us.

In a fallen world, in the frustration of work and never-ending battles day in and day out, God gives us Sabbath as a rest from all of that. Many of us have hardly even taken a break since age 13 when we started our first jobs. God says take a break. Take a rest. As we talked about work, it is also about seeking affirmation and validation in places other than God, and Sabbath says, "Take a break and know that you are worth something even if you are not working."

For most of us, myself included, taking a break of one day a week sounds overwhelming and daunting. How would you even go about that? What I want to encourage you to do is take just 5 minutes a day and do nothing. It could be at your desk at work. It could be in your car. If you're a mom, it could be locking yourself in the bathroom for 5 minutes, wherever you can find 5 minutes of space. Set a timer and just sit. Don't pray. Don't read a Bible. Don't journal because if you are like me, that could also be something where you are convincing yourself that you need to do something in that moment. Just sit and be. In that moment, recognize that the world keeps spinning even when you are not running on it because God is in control and God can be trusted to provide for us.

Another thing we can do with that 5 minutes is to just sit and notice how we feel. What is rising up within us that we feel like we can't leave behind for 5 minutes? It might be showing us the place where we are putting our identity and worth, something other than Christ. Just sit. Notice God at work. Notice what you feel and take 5 minutes of Sabbath rest. Believe me, 5 minutes will feel a lot longer than you think it will. It is harder than it seems. And also better. Then if you are up for it, let that increase. Maybe work your way up to a half-day or a whole day away at some point in the year to just *be*. I'm preaching to myself on this one because I am terrible at doing that, and I think it would be such a valuable practice for any of us to just recognize that it is okay to take a break and to just *be*.

**My other suggestion is the spiritual practice of developing a prayer life that consciously hands things over to Christ.** This is based on the verse that Deb Kielsmeier mentioned in her children's sermon, Matthew 11:28-30.

**28** "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. **29** Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. **30** For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

I have this habit of praying vaguely about things. I pray, "Oh, God, life is hard. Help it to be better." Or "God, please use me in my days." But I think having a really specific prayer is saying, "God, this burden, this specific burden, is wearing me down. Would You take it from me? Would You give me Your yoke and Your burden instead? Would You give me Your perspective on this situation?" Our burdens stack up quite a bit in a day. I think we often feel like the sky . . . . We need to consciously hand these things over to God. If you are a boss who has had to fire an

employee, God cares about that. If you are a mom whose toddler has had a blowout and the other kids are screaming, God cares about that. If you are stuck in a dead-end job and don't know what to do anymore, God cares about that. When you can't find a job after months and months of searching, God cares about that. It is powerful to develop a practice of not just vaguely offering those things up as prayers but consciously and specifically acknowledging, "This is heavy, God. I can't carry it. Christ, I hand it to You because I know You care."

I think what we tend to do is we tend to make those burdens stack up even further. We are always seeking this idea of balance but often that just puts more weight on those things as we try to spend more time *here* because we've spent so much time *there*. It's burden, burden, burden. Consciously, let's hand those things over to Christ and know that He cares. It doesn't mean that those things will suddenly be resolved, will suddenly get easier or suddenly go away, but it can shift how we approach them, knowing we are valued and loved and have a God who cares. It is amazing how much remembering He cares, remembering He wants to hear it, gives us a new frame of reference for making it through that difficulty. Let's end by going to Him in prayer right now and giving Him our burdens.

Jesus, I thank You for Your love and grace. I thank You that right in the midst of our toil and frustration, You came and met us there and You pulled us out with Your love. Thank You that we are loved no matter what our work does or does not accomplish. Help us to rest in the knowledge of our worth in Your eyes. Help us give our burdens that are so heavy over to You. Help us to see how our work can be redeemed and have purpose again in You and give us rest for our souls. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.

*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.*