

**A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Work
Seventh in a Series of Ten Sermons**

August 2, 2020

8th Sunday after Pentecost

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(Eugene Peterson translation of Psalm 127) **“If God doesn’t build the house, the builders only build shacks. If God doesn’t guard the city, the night watchman might as well nap.....Don’t you see that children are God’s best gift? The fruit of the womb is his generous legacy.”**

Isaiah 55:2 - Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

II Thessalonians 3:12 - Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Matthew 12:50 - For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

Dear Friends in Christ.

In the previous six sermons of this series based on a book with the title “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction,” we have focused on 1) Pilgrimage, 2) Repentance, 3) Providence, 4) Worship, 5) Servanthood, and 6) Joy that is distinctively Christian.

Just this past Tuesday, I was on my way to a meeting in Mayer, MN when I had a close call at the junction of County Road 51 and a busy two lane highway #212 in Bongard, MN, near Norwood and Young America. I came to a complete stop, I peeked to my right and then to my left, and as I nosed into the highway, I saw a fast approaching vehicle, at which time I hit the brake, I heard an ominous clunk, and my car would move no more. If I had been another four or five feet into Highway #212, I am certain a bad accident may well have happened. It seems as though my CV drive shaft on my left front axle, whatever that is, chose in that moment to fail. On my way back to Janesville in the tow truck, my new friend Mr. Smith, told me that that intersection has been the site of several bad accidents over the years.

Once again we learn that although most road trips go just fine, they can go ugly in a hurry. So also as we travel the straight and narrow road of salvation, our faith journeys can take a turn into danger in a hurry. Today, we focus on the subject of work, and we find that there are two ditches to avoid. On the one hand, there is the ditch of workaholism, and on the other hand, there is the ditch of laziness. One ditch is where possessions matter more than people, and the second is where we do as little as possible.

Ditch #1 is Where possessions matter more than people and people matter more than Christ.

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Solomon says it this way in Psalm 127, **“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”**

You may remember the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. These folks had approved a building project to end all building projects, and they were building without first consulting with the one true God. They were set on building a city and a tower that would reach to the heavens. They were set on making a name for themselves. They wanted to make sure that they would be successful and famous and immune to failure. Do you remember how that story ended? God saw to it that their language was confused, their project never saw completion, their labors were in vain, they were dispersed to the far corners of the earth.

Eugene Peterson suggests that Western culture has taken up where Babel left off. In so many ways, we have veered into the ditch of workaholism. We have worked long and hard hours at the expense of marriage and family. We have been successful at getting ahead in terms of paying our bills, in terms of accumulating possessions and in terms of retiring comfortably, and yet have fallen behind in terms of caring for one another, we’ve fallen behind in terms of caring for one another, we’ve fallen behind in terms of being rich with the things of God.

Peterson translates Psalm 127, **“It’s useless to rise early and go to bed late, and work your worried fingers to the bone. Don’t you know he enjoys giving rest to those he loves.”** Dear friends in Christ, I invite you to imagine Jesus Christ watching us working hard, playing hard, stressed out, running on empty, and there He is with that kind look on His face, arms outstretched, inviting us to calm down and to be still and to know that He is God, yearning for us to rest in His promises to be gracious, to be strong, and to work everything out.

And Isaiah asks those who are chasing after all these other things in life instead of seeking first the kingdom of God, **“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”** Dear friends, Jesus is the Bread of Life, He is the One Who satisfies, true contentment is as close as the words of absolution, it is as close as the preaching and teaching and remembering of His Word, it is as close as the eating of the bread and drinking of the wine at our Lord’s Table.

The kingdom of God is like a pastor who many days is a better pastor than he is a husband and father, but at the end of every day, He rests in the forgiveness of sins. It’s like a woman whose house is cleaned in immaculate detail, but her devotional time is less than what it ought to be. And yet when she sits still and thinks life through, she rests in the blood of Jesus which cleanses her from every sin. It’s like a retired couple whose pension plan is in

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great shape, but their marriage - not so much. And yet God loves them, and when they are thinking clearly, that is enough.

Ditch #2 is Where we work as little as possible, and when work loses its meaning.

Thessalonian Christians were so convinced that the Lord was going to return any day now that they quit their jobs, they went up on their rooftops. They poured themselves a glass of lemonade, and they waited. Paul had received the report that they were walking in idleness, they were not busy working, instead they were busybodies. He responded by reminding them **“if anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat.”** And by teaching, **“Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”**

Peterson suggests that Eastern culture has taken up where the Thessalonians left off. He points to Buddhism as the symbol of this ideology that one should withdraw from all activity into navel gazing. He describes Buddha as *“an enormous fat person sitting cross legged, looking at his own navel...motionless, inert, quiet.”*

The mindset of withdrawal is that all trouble comes from doing too much, therefore step out of the rat race and do as little as possible, say as little as possible, and at the point of perfection, you will have retreated away from action, from thought, and from passion. Nirvana, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, is defined as a transcendent state in which there is no suffering, there is no desire to get ahead, there is no real caring about anything that matters, total relaxation.

The kingdom of God is like a man who is just sort of coasting into retirement, he really doesn't care all that much about the place where he works, and he lives for his weekends. It's like a young woman who is living the carefree life, her relationships are shallow, her work is boring, she doesn't really care about getting ahead, she's just sort of existing without any particular purposes in life.

Psalm 127 shows us a better way with regard to work. Work is neither sheer activity nor pure passivity. It neither glorifies nor condemns working hard. It doesn't say, “God has a great work for us to do, let's get busy.” Nor does it say, “God has done everything, let's go fishing.” *Rather it's an attitude that takes God seriously. Paul urges, So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* It pays attention to who he is, what he has done, and what he is doing. It is a journey that avoids the two ditches of workaholism and laziness, and travels on what I am calling the Road of Contentment.

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Two truths about this Road of Contentment, we find in our lessons for today. Truth #1 about this road is that it is *where work has dignity and purpose, and truth #2 is that it is where we realize that God has invited us to be co-creators.*

Truth #1 about this Road of Contentment is that it is *where work has dignity and purpose.*

Paul wrote to Timothy that if we have food and clothing, we should be contented. Both the ninth and tenth commandments warn us against the opposite of contentment, which is a coveting, a sinful desire for that which our neighbors have but we don't.

Psalm 127 takes a surprising turn when it points us in the direction of marriage and children as a work that has great dignity and purpose. Solomon points to children as a heritage from the Lord, which reminds me of Pastor Schauland in Sioux City Iowa visiting in the hospital on the occasion of Debi giving birth to our second child, Nathan. He quoted this verse and reminded us that children are the only possessions we will ever have that we can take into heaven with us.

Solomon compares the man who has his quiver full of children as blessed, much as arrows in the hand of a warrior. As I write this sermon, our daughter Michelle, is scheduled to give birth to their eighth child, which will be Grandchild #16 for us. We are learning again this week what many of you have learned well - that what truly makes a difference in this world is the personal relationships that we create and develop. Our parents did what our grandparents did, they bear children, they name those children, they spent the best part of their lives raising us and teaching us how to be good and decent citizens, and as they carried out their vocations as parents, they did so with dignity and purpose.

The Road of Contentment is where we believe that God is the central reality of all existence. We confess that we live in a universe and in a history where God is working. We realize that our work goes wrong when we lose touch with the God who works his salvation in our midst. Our work goes wrong when we become frantic and compulsive in our work instead of calm and steady. Our work goes wrong when we become lazy and indifferent instead of industrious and motivated. The Road of Contentment is where work is good. It's where we believe that we can do all things that Christ is asking us to do, through Christ who strengthens us. It has dignity and is not at all degrading because God at work through us living out our various vocations. On this road, work has purpose because Christ has already traveled this road, and He did so perfectly. Even more than that, He is the Way, He is the truth, and He is the life. To have Jesus Christ is to have it all, it is to be in the Father's hands, and nobody is going to pluck us out of our Father's hands.

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Truth #2 about this Road of Contentment is that it is where we realize that God has invited us to be co-creators.

In today's Gospel lesson, we find Jesus taking yet another twist and turn on this subject by saying that his real brothers and sisters and mother weren't so much his earthly siblings and mom, but rather those who did the will of His Father in heaven. Even more important than the work our moms did of giving us life and nurturing that life is the work of the Church of making disciples for Christ. In Holy Baptism, the Triune God has claimed us as His very own sons and daughters. In the preaching and teaching and listening to and treasuring of God's Word, we are strengthened in our bonds as brothers and sisters of Jesus Himself.

In our Lord's Supper, we have one family reunion after another, at the Supper, there is no division, there is neither rich nor poor, there are no democrats or republicans, at the Lord's Supper there are no supporters of Donald Trump nor Joe Biden, there are simply sorry sinners crying out for mercy, messed up people receiving the forgiveness of their sins, there are brothers and sisters coming to the waters, they have no money, but they are buying and they are eating. They have no way of paying their way at this meal, they rejoice the price has already been paid.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks who on their best days are traveling together on the straight and the narrow road, and are doing so with grace and with class. On their less than honorable days, some of them veer off into workaholicism and others into laziness. Some stumble into "we've got to take the bull by the horns and get this done" mentality and others into the Doris Day philosophy of "que sarah sarah, whatever will be will be." As they go about joining Jesus and His Spirit on God's mission to share the love of God with all people, what they have in common is that they travel light. They know that the blessed life isn't so much about finishing projects, it's about God being at the center of all that we are doing. And as they keep this perspective on life, they are able to practice a long obedience in the same direction. In Jesus' Name. Amen.