

## Joyful Work

8<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 07/31/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26 Pastor Keith Besel

2:24, [King Solomon says,] **“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God”.**

### **Introduction**

✘ If you stand in the courtyard of the *Detroit Institute of Arts* (Detroit’s Art Museum), you are surrounded by 27 beautiful frescos (murals painted while the wall plaster is still wet so that the paint permeates and becomes a permanent part of the wall). These large frescos, painted by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera in 1933, celebrate the beauty of human work and ingenuity at a time – during the Great Depression – when so many people struggled to find work. The two largest murals capture scenes inspired by the newest technology used by workers at that time in the Ford Motor Company’s River Rouge Plant. (Pictures and story at: <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/michigan/articles/the-untold-story-behind-diego-riveras-murals-in-detroit/> )

→ 80 years later, in 2013, when the city of Detroit declared bankruptcy, the murals’ irony again came to attention as the beauty of labor captured in those paintings was contrasted with another extreme loss of labor and the hardships of life in the city.

✘ The truth is though; you and I don’t need a museum and an entire city to heighten our awareness to that tension. It’s a tension that is present in all of our daily labor. Work is both a beauty and a burden.

→ Before the fall into sin, when God created the world, Genesis 2:15 tells us that He put Adam “in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it”. Remember there was no sin at this point and everything was perfect! So God built an inherent beauty into mankind’s work – caring for the world and serving our Creator as His representatives to all of Creation.

→ After the fall, however, God cursed the earth, so that Adam’s work would be a burden. Genesis 3:17, 19 has God’s declaration, “In pain you shall eat of [the ground] all the days of your life,” and “by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”.

✘ We Christians find it difficult to live in this tension. On the one hand, there’s a beauty to our labor. Our vocation; our work, is a gift from God for service to Him and service to others. Yet on the other hand, the same labor is not easy. It is difficult and painful. It demands the sweat of our brow and our perseverance through pain.

→ So this Bible passage for us from Ecclesiastes this morning is a great blessing indeed. God offers us here a short, but encouraging word, that helps us find a double joy in His gift of the daily labor that we pursue.

### **I. Nothing Better than to find Joy in Daily Work**

✘ In this text, we have what the first verse of Ecclesiastes tells us are “the words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Although this preacher was king (Solomon), he still struggled with the idea of work. “Vanity of vanities,” he begins. “All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Eccl. 1:2–3).

→ The Old Testament Hebrew uses many different words for work. “Toil” is one of them, which stresses the pain of our daily labor. In Psalm 90, Moses contemplates the shortness of life and says, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (Ps. 90:10). The problem with our

labor in these cases is not so much its difficulty but its disappearance. Ultimately; in the end, it passes away.

- ✘ And this is the point Solomon is highlighting here in our text. He says that he hates his toil precisely because he cannot control what happens to the fruit; to the outcome of his labor. He can't gather the fruit or reward of his labor and trust that it will last. In the end, he needs to leave it to other people. As the man in our Gospel Reading finds out, he could build barns and then build bigger barns and use them to store all of his wealth, only to find that one night he dies and all that he has accumulated is left to someone else (Lk 12:13–21).

→ That is why it is so important to listen closely as the Preacher closes this text. At the very end of 2:24, he opens our eyes to see what comes “from the hand of God”. God is the one who is source of our labor and especially the only way that we are able to receive joy in our labor. Verse 24 begins, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil” (2:24a).

## II. Joy in serving God and Others

- ✘ I know this is not seen by most people in the world – even by the majority of Christian believers, but here Solomon redirects our eyes in faith to see that God has given us the gift of daily labor. And he calls us to find satisfaction in that labor, day-by-day. Whatever your vocation might be, whatever type of work it is that you have before you today, because we belong to Christ in His saving work for the salvation of our souls, you and I work, not to build a kingdom for ourselves in this world but rather to give service to God and to others.

→ As Solomon describes it in verses 18-23, too often, we turn our work in this world into an idol. Though we may deny it, or more often not even are we able to recognize our own motivations because of the tricks of Satan and the deceptions of our sinful nature, our work actually ends up as the means to how we hope to build for ourselves our own individual kingdom.

- ✘ Advertising invites us to think that the true enjoyment of life; all that you've ever dreamed of becoming and accomplishing lies just on the horizon, with that one more purchase. So what do we do? We work to earn money to buy that car; to build that house; to take that vacation; to find a joy in life that will fill all of our hopes and dreams, and mean that we have finally “made it”! This is where the world and our sin-contaminated way of thinking tells us we should put our trust and dependence.

→ But work was never meant to accomplish that. And such efforts will ultimately fail us, because it will never be quite enough – never truly satisfy our deepest desires.

- ✘ Instead Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest”. Jesus is the One who came to bring us into God's kingdom. And His work for us will never fail. He bore the punishment of God's wrath for our sins on the cross, and He opened the kingdom of heaven to us, His creatures.

→ And He shows us that it is not only the fruit or reward that brings joy, but even more it is the work itself when it is God for whom we are laboring. Hebrews 12:2 says that in all things we should be, “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”. That's mind-boggling; Jesus found joy in the most difficult and painful work ever, because He did that work for His Father and for us!

- ✘ Now saved by Christ, you and I are freed from having our work as our master. Now, work is a joyful place for service: service to God and service to others. And friends, when we see our work this way, then God gives us a double joy.

- He gives us the joy – whether we are young or old, retired or just starting out in doing our chores as a child – He gives us the joy of serving Him in our daily labor. Because Christ’s work of salvation has claimed our lives, now, all that we do is done for Him.
- There is joy to be found in raising children, in preparing food, in cleaning house, in serving clients at our place of business. In the beginning God called Adam and Eve to care for creation, and now, as God’s redeemed, the world is wide open for service to God. No work in this world is too small for God to find pleasure in our service.
- ✘ And as we serve God, He also gives us joy in serving others. In the early editions of the Small Catechism, the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread” was accompanied by a woodcut. That’s a print that is made from the picture that an artist carves into a piece of wood. In that Catechism-woodcut, you don’t see a loaf of bread on a table, but you see Jesus feeding the five thousand with the bread of a small child. (<https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/4/63/htm>)
  - That image captures the second joy we receive in our daily labor; the joy of serving others through the fruits of our labor. Just as the child’s small loaves in the hands of Jesus end up feeding 5,000, so, too, our acts of service in the hands of God can raise a family, care for the dying, contribute to the welfare of a community even care for the world.
- ✘ Driving to worship here at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church from my home in Broomfield can provoke some interesting thought. As I leave Broomfield and drive north on I-25 to highway 7, I drive by a large King Soopers, a WalMart and numerous other shops and restaurants. It would be easy to turn off at one of the many entrances and go shopping or catch a bite to eat.
  - Then as I drive east from I-25 on County Road 6, through Wattenburg and come into Ft. Lupton on Denver Ave. I see workers maintaining numerous oil and gas wells and fertile fields of hay and corn and other types of crops being planted or irrigated or harvested for livestock or you and me to eat.
  - And approaching town I can see the roof of our sanctuary and sometimes the cross on top of our bell tower, etched against the sky. I’m sure your own drive into worship has similar sights. Well, that short drive brings a person face to face with the tension of Christian vocation in America.
- ✘ We Americans often associate work with earning a living; having money, not only for necessary expenses, but also for the joys of consumption. Going shopping; satisfying your desires; finding those things you can buy to make yourself happy – that’s the joy that comes from work for so many people. That’s the reason given for why many people “can’t” make it in for worship on a regular basis.
  - But we Christians live differently. For us, work is not a way to fulfill our consumerist desires. No, work is an opportunity for us to faithfully live for our Savior and God. Christ has forgiven us our sins and called us to faithful service in the world. In our work then, we have a chance to give the world a small, but very important glimpse of God’s good design.
  - And when we keep our life-priorities in the right place and right order – “Remembering the Sabbath Day to keep it holy” by placing God’s gift of worship at the top of the list and then serving God in the work He has gifted us to do, as well as serving others around us not for recognition or reward but for the joy of sharing God’s blessings and provisions with them in humble service, then, as verse 26 says, God gives His gifts of “wisdom and knowledge and joy”.

## Conclusion

- ✘ Yes, God has given us vocations; places for faithful service. He has given us people with all kinds of needs as opportunities to serve and witness to our Lord.

→ For some, this vocation involves employment in the workforce. If you are not employed, however, that does not mean you are not working. Work can include raising a family, serving the local community, caring for God's Creation in countless ways. To his faithful people, God showers us with the double joy in doing our daily work. We rejoice in 1) serving God through daily labor, and we find joy 2) in serving others through our work. Thank You, Lord for Your gift of joyful work. Amen.