

Labors of Love

sermon digest

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Ecclesiastes 2:3-6, 10-11, 20-26; Luke 10:38-42

larry dipboye

How would you like to be remembered for adding a word to the dictionary? Around Labor Day every year someone rediscovers the origin of the word *workaholic*. This year the current issue of *The Atlantic* rightly attributes the word to one of my seminary professors Wayne Oates. When Oates coined the word in his book *Confessions of a Workaholic*, he genuinely offered a public confession of what he judged to be a personal problem. However, most of Oates' colleagues, the professors I knew in seminary, were also workaholics and expected the same from their students. The work problem was generally viewed as an asset by the seminary community. Oates swept into his confession a community of work-obsessed people I knew and respected. The sin confessed was generally venerated as the highest virtue for seminary professors and pastors.

As noted in his book, we came by our obsession with work honestly. Along with many other Protestant groups, Baptists inherited their attitude toward the value of work and disdain for leisure from their Calvinist-Puritan forebears. At the turn of the last century, Max Weber attributed the work ethic of economic capitalism to Calvin's theology, which he claimed raised hard work to the level of the highest virtue and viewed laziness as the worst vice. Not only the priests who worked for God in the church but the ordinary workers in the fields and factories were servants of God fulfilling their calling to service as stewards of God's world. Thus, every farmer and mechanic could view the work of his/her hands as a valid contribution to the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, I suspect that the tendency to judge the poor as lazy and unmotivated was also a product of our Puritan roots along with our obsession with work.

The world is changing. In 1970, about the time of Oates' book, sociologists and economists were envisioning a very different future than we have experienced. As I was leaving seminary, a conversation was being generated by futurists about the availability and use of leisure time for American workers. The economic vision for America was rosy and to a large extent naive. Increased industrial productivity would lead to a thirty-hour work week and more vacation time for workers. The wider distribution of jobs among the growing population would be necessary to maintain a healthy economy. Our paradise island was so independent from the developing world around us that we did not have to consider the Third World poor or take into account the possibility of significant global competition. Our Puritan vision could only see a nation destined by God to dominate the world economy. We deserved what we controlled and possessed because we had worked for it. Competition was rising, but almost no one expected the shift of industry from America to Asia in what has become known as the global economy. The steel mill where my father worked for thirty-five years was closed by foreign competition within five years of his retirement in 1976. Suddenly Toyota and "made in Japan" was no longer the brunt of jokes.

The word *workaholic*, intended as the description of a personality defect, is more likely to be worn as a badge of honor in the competitive world of today. In the global marketplace for jobs, workaholicism is a virtue, not a vice. Employers want more for less. They are looking for workers who will come early and stay late, work sick, and donate their vacation time to the company, all because they love work (i.e. the company) more than their families, church, God, or life itself. For the workaholic, life is about work, little else and nothing more.

Job security has become a pipe dream of past generations. The unprecedented decision of city leaders in Detroit to file for bankruptcy is not just about mismanagement of city resources. Detroit is a victim of a changing world economy in which the U.S. auto industry is no longer king. Simple, secular economics suggests that high unemployment and low wages, in spite of high productivity, will eventually result in an empty marketplace where fewer workers are financially able to consume the goods produced in the factories. Eventually everyone loses to the more-for-less work ethic, including the company. "Take care of the company, and the company will take care of you" has been replaced by the new standard, "Everyone, including the company, for one's self."

What is the value of work? The author of Ecclesiastes, *Qoheleth* "The Preacher," is famous for his cynical view of almost everything. The characteristic line repeated throughout the book is "all is vanity." He seems to be from an aristocratic class. He had a work ethic that would be the envy of any modern entrepreneur. He constructed houses, planted vineyards and fruit trees and developed an irrigation system. He gave himself every pleasure that his heart could desire and finally reached the conclusion that "all was vanity and a chasing after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." Qoheleth

wrote his own *Confessions of a Workaholic* long before Calvin or capitalism or anyone thought of a work ethic.

Old Testament scholar William P. Brown (*Interpretation*, July, 2001, p. 272) writes, “this embittered sage would be an ill-advised guide for developing a salutary work ethic for the contemporary marketplace.” He dared to ask with a cynical tone, what is the value of work? Both the material world of houses and lands, the things money can buy, and the intellectual world of ideas and words are destined to be terminated by death and worn down by the sands of time. Whether you are building castles of stone or ideas, all is vanity, says Qoheleth. The fact is, you cannot take it with you.

Brown observes that unlike the pagan neighbors, who viewed labor as a punitive act of the gods, the Jews viewed work as a blessing, a reflection of the image of God, and a means to please God through the offering of the fruit of one’s labor. But work becomes meaningless toil apart from faith in the Creator and the necessity of scheduled periods of rest. The Jewish work ethic is derived from the Sabbath rest ethic. According to Brown, “Six days shall you labor” is not focused on work but on the Sabbath rest. The God of creation is our example. After six days of crafting the creation, the Creator set the Sabbath as a day of rest. Since life is lived out between set boundaries of birth and death, work has to be about more than the accomplishments of a few decades on earth. Work is one piece of the rhythm of life that finds its meaning in the Sabbath rest that ties our lives to God.

Brown concludes, “Qoheleth does not, at the end of the day, despise work.” He takes work out of the marketplace of the world where the drive to possess and control consumes one’s days; he centers work in the labor of joy. In the end, joy is a gift of God, not something earned through one’s toil. The value of work is measured in service to God and neighbor.

In Louisville, I served a church near enough to the seminary to have several students and faculty in the congregation. In addition to being pastor and mentor to students, I acted as supervisor in ministry experience. One of the young men in my congregation took as his assignment a ministry to several elderly members in a local nursing home. He noted in his report a distinct difference in the attitude of women and men. Elderly men, who had worked with their hands, often came to the end of their days with a sense of despair. One gentleman sighed, “I am not worth much any more,” meaning that he could no longer contribute to the production line in the factory in which he had spent his work years. The student noted that men are what they do. The women he visited seemed to find their worth in the larger community of home and church. I was too young at the time to fully grasp the significant connection of work to life, but I am getting there. Our lives have to mean something more than the paycheck stubs we leave in a file, the stuff we have produced that eventually ends up rusting in some junkyard, or even the wealth we have accumulated to leave to our children.

Worthy labor must be wrapped in love. I grew up in an industrial community that tended to measure work by production. Doctors, lawyers, and teachers were necessary and appreciated; but they really did not produce anything. Service industries maintained the population, while the work lines at the local factory produced commodities for the economic marketplace. I commented at my father’s funeral that Dad struggled with what I was doing with my time. To Dad, the ministry was no job for a real man. My university professor brother was no better. I resented his resistance to my calling in my younger days and later came to realize that he helped me to find balance. I never escaped from the importance of the kind of work that leaves a sore back and blistered hands, but I eventually came to realize that our work needs to contribute to something besides financial gain. To put it in perspective, both the surgeon who cuts out the diseased organ and the Christian friend who prays are performing a labor of love. My father’s production of steel beams to construct hospitals, schools, and churches served the same people who formed my congregation.

The story is found only in Luke. Typical of Luke, it is about women, two sisters named Mary and Martha. Who knows? They may be the same Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus in John. Jesus visited Martha’s home, thus, Martha had the responsibility of hostess for the gathering. She soon became resentful of Mary’s choice to sit and listen, we assume with the men, so Martha complained to Jesus, “Tell her [Mary] to help me.” Jesus admonished Martha’s distraction from the important work of spiritual growth and astounded every subsequent generation that dared to read: “Mary has chosen the better part.” Jesus commended a woman for sitting with the men, learning over menial housework, mental-spiritual effort over physical labor.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus refers to his mission as work assigned by the Father. Folks back home often noted that Jesus was a carpenter who worked with his hands, but what we did not catch was the greater work for which he left the carpenter shop behind. I don't really think that we have a foundation here for a hierarchy of labor that classifies some jobs as menial and others as vital, but I do believe that real work ought to be a labor of love. We need to love what we do, do what we love, and measure our work by our love. Let the economists do their thing, measuring our lives by the multiplication and distribution of wealth on the planet. Let the Christian learn to measure our lives by the love we extend to the community around us. I suspect that was the measure Jesus was applying to the issue between two sisters.

It is certainly the question we need to carry to the global economy of our day. The building collapse in Bangladesh killing 1127 people is not irrelevant to my choice of where I buy clothing and not unrelated to my world of work. If our work is to be a labor of love, Christians are compelled to follow the love of God to the bounds of the whole created universe.