
WHY WORK?
ROMANS 4:1-5, 13-17
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2020
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Prayer.

The internet can be delightful. I first discovered that somewhere back in the early 90's when I mentioned to a church member that I was looking for the story behind our beloved hymn "Silent Night." She led me into the church office, had me type in "What is the story of Silent Night?" and there it was! Magic! The story of a young priest, a damaged organ, guitar accompaniment, and Christmas Eve. I was delighted and said something profound like, "How cool!" For those of you who have always known that "google" was a verb, you may not appreciate how surprising it was to find an answer as a result of some keystrokes.

While there is still much to appreciate about the internet, we know that what we read on our screens is not always true or accurate. Sometimes mistakes are innocent enough and sometimes not. For instance, in the more innocuous category, there is a familiar proverb which has been variously attributed to Augustine, Ignatius, Wesley, and several modern day preachers. The proverb is this: "Pray as if it all depends on God. Work as if it all depends on you." The truth is that probably no one really knows who first said it.

In light of our scripture reading for today from Romans, do you think proverb is good theology? "Pray as if it all depends on God. Work as if it all depends on you."

In writing to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul addresses faith, justification, righteousness, and reckoning while pointing to Abraham as an example. Paul's focus on Abraham is intriguing.¹ Oftentimes, we admire Abraham's actions, his obedience, the steps he takes. After all, Abram is the one who picked up and left home to head out for some unknown destination that God promised. (Gen. 12). He undergoes circumcision (Gen 17) and later prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac. (Gen 22) Abraham does these things in response to God's instructions, so we see him as obedient. Appropriately so. Paul, it seems, has asked the question "Why?" Why in the world would Abraham do things? Don't they seem a bit extreme? Leaving home, circumcision, drawing a knife on your son? Why? For Paul, the answer is faith. It is faith that came first. Faith in God's promises. Faith that indeed God would provide land and descendants.

Paul digs deeper still and seems to ask, "why faith?" The apostle asserts that Abraham's faith was not his initiative, but God's. It is God who "justifies the ungodly." (Romans 4:5) It is God who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." (Rom 4:17) It is God who shows up in Abram's life, taps him on the shoulder and says "You." Karl Barth calls Abraham's faith a miracle, specifically a "miracle of perception"² Abraham's conviction that God's promises are trustworthy cannot be based in what is seen in the physical world, and yet Abraham perceived them to be true. He believed. And this faith is the "hidden source of all of [Abraham's] well-known works."³

Faith, not work, is the key. Faith as a response to God's initiative, faith as a miraculous gift, this comes first and is the source of righteousness. It's not about what we do; not about our work.

That seems like a strange thing to say on a university campus, particularly our campus. We like work. We have a culture here of hard work, high achievement, significant scholarship, and ambitious goals. We are surrounded

¹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans*. P. 55

² Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 121

³ Ibid

by and are people who invent, discover, write, and lead. This is what makes the Duke culture so exciting and stimulating. At times the culture is driven and demanding, and for that reason attracts people who thrive in this environment. And there are many who thrive here, perhaps even accomplishing more than they thought possible. At Duke, work is good, and good work is rewarded.

Now we know that the work we do -- medicine, science, the arts -- is not the same kind of work that is discussed in our Romans passage. We know that we are not working to earn God's favor. Our efforts Monday through Friday (and beyond) are not spiritual disciplines in which we are trying to build up our credit with the Almighty. Right? We know that. After all, there are different parts of our lives; work and church, so one shouldn't impact the other. Right? Maybe?

An article in *The Atlantic* last year, claims that our work lives and spiritual lives are already deeply intertwined, and in a way that is not helpful. The article speaks of "workism" as a potent new religion competing for congregants. Workism "is the belief that work is the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose."⁴ And yet, "To make [work or success] the centerpiece of one's life is to place one's esteem in the mercurial hands of the market. To be a workist is to worship a god with firing power."⁵ The author writes that he is describing himself as he is devoted to and fulfilled by his work, and yet, raises serious concerns.

He is not the only one. In reflecting on an earlier period in his life, Henri Nouwen said "I had so many classes to prepare, lectures to give, articles to finish, people to meet that I had come quite close to believing myself indispensable."⁶ Parker Palmer warned of "functional atheism", "the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us."⁷

Does our work turn us into "functional atheists"? Do we resonate too easily with the proverb "Work as if it all depends on you?"

Returning to Romans we see that who we are in our deepest selves is ultimately not defined by our actions, our obedience, or our work. Our deepest selves are defined by God and God's initiative. Just prior to the portion of Romans we heard today, Paul wrote "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works." (Romans 3:28) It is God's grace and love that always comes first.

Unfortunately, for those of you who would like to sleep in tomorrow morning, I don't think this passage is telling us to quit our jobs, drop out of school, or stop working, despite how tempting that may seem as we enter spring break. If we look at Paul's example, we can see that his conviction on the primacy of faith did not slow him down. He traveled widely and preached extensively, and was sometimes beaten and imprisoned. In Paul's letters, if you search for the words "sabbath" or "rest" you will not find them. (The cool internet helped with that fun fact.) And his references to prayer do not point to rest and solitude, but rather are injunctions to "persevere in prayer" (Rom 12:12) and to be "earnest in prayer." (Rom 15:30). There is energy and demand in his call to prayer.

What Paul helps us to see is that faith and works are not opposites. I know here that I am blurring the way Paul understands law and works with the ways that we understand work. Nonetheless, what Paul shows us is that faith helps us see the true basis of our work.⁸

Faith places our work lives in perspective, which is freeing for us. God is the one who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, not us. It is God who promises a realm of justice and peace, not us. It is our Savior who will wipe away every tear, not you or me. We can be freed from excessive anxiety and worry, when we trust God more than

⁴ Derek Thompson, "Workism is Making Americans Miserable," *The Atlantic*, Feb. 24, 2019

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Henri Nouwen, *Discernment*, p. 5

⁷ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p. 88

⁸ Paul Achtemeier, *Interpretation: Romans*, p. 77

ourselves. If we are honest with ourselves we can rarely finish what we start. There is always another book to read, another vote to cast, another neighbor to serve. One of the popes is said to have prayed nightly, "I've done the best I could in your service this day, Oh Lord. I'm going to bed. It's your church. Take care of it!"⁹ Whatever our work is, whether volunteer or paid, we do our best and trust God with the rest.

While faith gives our work perspective, it also gives it energy. In addition to praying "Thy kingdom come," God invites us to work towards the kingdom of God. God chooses to use all of us, individually and collectively, to participate in the divine work of love and justice. The conviction that God invites us into the holy work of creating a new heaven and new earth is a conviction borne of trust in God's promises. There is work to do, plenty of it; ultimately, it is not our work, but a participation in God's work. Seeing our work in this way, from the perspective of faith, can drive us to put forth our best efforts no matter what we are doing.

So, do you think we should rewrite the proverb about praying and working? Since it doesn't seem to belong to anyone in particular, so I think we have freedom to edit it. Perhaps the concept of "gift" would be helpful here. When a true gift is given, it is offered with no strings attached. Chocolate on Valentine's Day may be a necessity for some people, but if so, it is not a real gift. Gifts don't have requirements or obligations. They are simply freely offered.

So maybe we should say, "Pray knowing it is all a gift from God." If our prayers focus on God's gifts, we will first humbly remember the divine grace which is given to us. God comes to us offering grace and mercy beyond what we could ever expect or imagine, welcoming us as beloved children. God's grace does not come to us out of any divine need or insufficiency, but rather out of God's goodness and love. We can see this at the communion table this morning. Here at the table, we are offered the body and blood of Christ, not because of anything we have done. The table is a gift and an invitation. Most people walk forward to receive, but you don't even need to do that. If you wish, servers can come to you. It is a reminder that God's grace is right in front of us, comes to us, not because of what we have done but rather because of everything God has done in Jesus Christ. Gift.

Could the second part of the proverb be "Work knowing it is a gift to God?" Our actions and efforts are not an attempt to curry God's favor nor are they responsible for bringing about the kingdom of God. Yet at this table, as we are joined to Christ and each other, we are also sent out. Sent to be people the people of God, working to bring the hope and new life of Christ out into the world. This is not where we stay; this is where we are fed and given energy for the journey. At their best, our efforts, small and large, are a participation in God's ongoing work in this world. And if our work is a participation in the will of God, then we will naturally want to give our best, and give abundantly. Seeing our work as a gift to God allows us to hold it lightly, give it to God, and let it go.

Yes, we will continue to work for the good of others and invest ourselves deeply in the betterment of our world. As we do so, we can rejoice, that ultimately, we are not defined by our actions. We are defined by the the grace of Jesus Christ, love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ Pope John, <https://www.catholicvoiceoakland.org/2014/04-21/forum1.htm>