

“Meaningful Work”

Last Sunday of the Church Year

Matthew 25:31-46

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” Matthew 25:40

Sometimes a simple picture can truly express how we feel. I admit that I saw a picture the other day that very accurately expressed how I sometimes feel. I imagine this picture even expresses how you might feel at times.

The image was actually a poster with a picture in the center and three words underneath it. The picture presented a boy in the midst of his backyard, standing underneath a tree full of leaves, armed with a rake, and attempting to rake a yard full of leaves. Underneath the picture in large capital letters was the word, “FUTILITY.” Apparently, the creator of the poster thought that the picture and that one word said it all. For, underneath the word FUTILITY are just two words in small print, “Enough Said.”

Does that poster not express how we often feel about the work and effort we put forth from day to day? If you are like me, you can often feel like it is an exercise in futility. You can feel as though it is pointless and meaningless. And so the thoughts and questions enter our minds. What is the point of waking up yet again on a Monday morning to drive to the same old job or continue yet another week of school? What good am I doing in retirement? What is the point of paying one bill after another? For new parents you might question the purpose and meaning behind changing yet another diaper. What difference does it make? What is the point? Does anyone even notice?

For God’s people who faithfully attend Divine Service on Sunday morning we might question the point of it all. For those of us who volunteer our time here at Church we might struggle to find meaning and purpose in singing yet another choir anthem, playing yet another bell choir piece, attending yet another work party, serving on a board one more term, or planning and setting up for yet one more Church event. Even Pastors can struggle with questions of futility when they set out to do their work of preparing and teaching Bible Studies, preparing and preaching Sermons, preparing and leading Worship services, and meeting, visiting, and counseling parishioners. Sometimes a picture can truly express how we feel. Sometimes we can struggle with feelings of futility. What is the purpose of all this work? Does it even matter?

Our Gospel reading that was read this morning gives us the purpose of our daily work. This is a difficult parable that Jesus speaks to us. It is not difficult to understand. The message of the parable is rather easy to understand. And that is what makes these words of Jesus so difficult. If these were the only words that we have from Jesus then we would be left to the conclusion that we are saved by our works and human efforts. Sheep do acts of kindness and get eternal, heavenly rewards. Goats do not and get Hell, eternal separation from God. It is a tough parable.

We thank God that this is not the only teaching of Jesus. We can compare other teachings of Jesus and other passages of the Bible and clearly see that we do not earn our way into a right relationship with God. We do not buy our way into heaven. Even this parable and these words of Jesus agree with that message. The King says to the sheep, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:34). The Sheep are sheep. The Sheep are who they are even before God's judgment. God made them sheep. They are righteous because God declared them to be. They are not sheep because they made a choice to be a sheep. They are not sheep because they did acts of kindness. They are not sheep because they worked hard to become sheep. They are sheep because God has done it.

Then the sheep simply act like sheep. They go out into their ordinary lives where God has placed them and they take care of those around them. They help the sick, they feed the hungry, they visit the imprisoned, and they clothe the naked (Mt 25:35-36). Sheep act like sheep. As Luther once put it, "Faith does not have to stop and ask what good works need to be done but before it asks, that faith has already done them.

The goats, though, choose what God had never planned. They choose to ignore the call of God. They reject grace and, perhaps even unknowingly, choose eternal death and separation from God. In return, God gives them what they choose. As Jesus says in vs. 41, they share the unintended fate of Satan and his fellow workers. And this should cause concern and give us a sense of urgency for those who do not know the Gospel, who seem to be ignoring the call of God.

Not you, though. You are a sheep. At the font he made his claim. He gave you his name. You belong to him. Now you live like his sheep and do what God has given you to do in the world. You meet needs. When sheep do what God has given us to do, futility is gone. It is wiped out.

That is the point of the parable. The parable is not exhorting us to become sheep or goats. Those who are the sheep and those who are the goats has already been declared at the time of judgment of which Jesus is speaking. God declared it. The point of the parable is to show that the daily work and effort in our vocations always matters and is never wasted and lost. It is not futile.

Your daily work is transformed by God. The work you do in the place where God has placed you is exactly what he has given you to do and it matters. God transforms it and redeems it for the sake of his Kingdom and the mission of the Gospel. It is never wasted or lost. Your work is not valuable because it

makes a big splash or earns you accolades. What counts is doing what God has given you to do in service of your neighbor. So you pay those bills, change those diapers, get up at seven in the morning for another day of work or school. It is holy work.

As a parishioner you continue to gather here on Sunday morning for the Divine Service to receive the grace of God in Christ. You also come because your fellow parishioners need you to come. We need each other. We encourage one another by our presence. And as a sheep you support the work of God in this place by giving a portion of your time in volunteer service. You sing choir anthems and make beautiful music with bells that give praise to God and share the message of a Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep and longs to increase his fold. And you give it your best. You support the work of the Church in this place by giving a portion of your time to serve on boards, help out at work parties, plan and serve at events. And yes, you tithe a portion of the financial blessings God has given to you because it is not futile, meaningless, or pointless work. It is holy work. And it is what God has given us to do.

We don't need work that is more meaningful or a vocation that has more prestige. You just do what God has given you to do. This is what sheep do. You are righteous. You are a sheep. You see the need that those around you have and you meet it. God has transformed your work because you have been transformed. You are righteous before God in your election by God's grace and righteous before God in all your vocations. You don't live in futility. You have meaningful work to do because God has done his meaningful work in and through you. Amen.