

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

"No, not by might"

March 22, 2009

Texts:

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

1When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,*
we were like those who dream.

2Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
'The Lord has done great things for them.'

3The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

6Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of
joy, carrying their sheaves with them.

Psalm 127

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

¹Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.

Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.

²It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.*

³Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

⁴Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.

⁵Happy is the man who has
his quiver full of them.

He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Psalm 128

A Song of Ascents.

¹Happy is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways.

²You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

³Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

⁴Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.

⁵The LORD bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

⁶May you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!

.....

The title for this morning's sermon is taken from the Song we just sang. It in turn is a verse of scripture taken from the Prophet Zechariah. In this book of the Old Testament, there is a passage that is very appropriate given the subject matter of Psalm 127. Zechariah was written sometime after the return from Babylonian Exile, a seventy year experience in Israel's history that lasted from 586 BC to 516 BC. As the people were establishing themselves in Jerusalem after the year 516 BC, Zechariah wrote his prophecy. In chapter four he is addressing a man named Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was one the men responsible for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, which had been decimated seventy years earlier. Now he is entrusted with overseeing the task of rebuilding the Temple.

In the fourth chapter of Zechariah (page 906 (red), 881 (Blue) 685 (black) the Lord speaks to Zurubbabel through the Prophet, and this is what he says:

*Not by might, nor by power, **but by my Spirit**, says the LORD of hosts. ⁷Who are you, **O great mountain**? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward **the top stone** amid shouts of '**Grace, grace to it!**'"*

*⁸Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁹ "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. ¹⁰ For whoever has despised the day **of small things** shall rejoice, and shall see **the plumb line** in the hand of Zerubbabel.*

The great mountain is a metaphor for the task of rebuilding that is happening in Jerusalem. It is such hard work and seemingly an obstacle that is like moving a mountain. The Lord is encouraging Zerubbabel to continue his work and to know that he is working **with the Lord**, who has purposed the rebuilding of the Temple. The word is spoken that it is not by might or power that this work will be done, but by the Spirit of God.

The Lord will equip Zerubbabel and motivate him in this work of building. As he works he is to be encouraged by small accomplishments. While there are those who perhaps wanted to see things happen more quickly and thus despised the "day of small things", the Lord says they will one day rejoice at what they see accomplished here. The plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel will be used as a measure to ensure

that everything is straight and the angles in the temple are perpendicular. On that day the top stone will be placed on the Temple and there will be shout of jubilation expressed in the phrase “grace, grace to it”. The object of this grace is the completed Temple.

Zechariah is a helpful place from where to enter into our study of Psalm 127. For just as the Zechariah passage concentrates on the theme of building, so too does the psalm.

Here is a prayer that celebrates work. In 515 BC Zerubbabel was given the task of rebuilding the Temple, to King Solomon was entrusted the responsibility of building the first Temple, which was completed some time around 976 BC.

King Solomon wrote psalm 127.

Solomon expressed hundreds of years before the Lord spoke through Zechariah that it is not by might, nor by power but by the Spirit of God that we do our work.

Work done in the power of the Spirit of God will be:

1. Measured
2. Meaningful
3. Ministry

1. Psalm 127 teaches us that work can be measured:

When I say that our work can be measured, I mean by this that it can be placed in its rightful perspective. For the pilgrim learning to pray these psalms, work is never to be all consuming passion. Rather it will be measured because there is a recognition that work is not at the centre of our lives. Rather God is.

Although work is **not what is most important** about who we are, it is **integral to who we are**. Think of how the Bible begins with a chapter that describes in detail that work of Yahweh as he creates the universe. We are made in the image of God and so we reflect this image by engaging in work as well.

However the Christian understands that the work he or she does is never done apart from God. The structure of the Psalm helps us to articulate this. It is divided into two parts. Part 1 is made up of verses 1 and 2 and the second part takes in verses 3-5.

The necessity of naming God at the centre of all work is expressed in the two-fold preposition “unless”.

¹Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD guards the city,

the guard keeps watch in vain.

The same thing is then said as a direct address in the negative.

²It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

The word governing this first section of the psalm is “vain”. When we live as self-sufficient agents we will suffer from experiences of vanity. The words “in vain” are given particular expression with the phrase “eating the bread of anxious toil”. This is a vivid image of what characterizes the life of many. Bread is symbolic of daily sustenance. When bread is aligned with anxious toil it depicts the daily grind of work that is not only unfulfilling but anxiety laden.

The twentieth century French political and social scientist, theologian, and philosopher Jacques Ellul in commenting on contemporary attitudes towards work once wrote:

The first great fact which emerges from our civilization is that today everything has become “means”. There is no longer an “end”, we do not know whither we are going. We have forgotten our collective ends, and we possess great means: we set huge machines in motion in order to arrive nowhere.¹

How different this is from what we read in Zechariah. The building there had an end in view as the Temple was renewed. The Apostle Paul teaches us that in view of the death and resurrection of Jesus our work finds meaning. We are to live daily in the light of the Resurrection of the dead, not only the Resurrection of Jesus but of our resurrection as well. This helps to infuse all work with meaning. It is interesting to note that at the end of his great chapter on the Resurrection, Paul writes about work. 1 Corinthians 15:58 (Red 169) (Blue 177) (Black 136)

*Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your **labour** is not in vain.*

¹ Eugene Peterson. A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. (IVP 2000), page 104

Did you get that? Paul is saying the same thing we read in the psalm. He says in a positive way what the psalm expressed in the negative. In the Lord our labour is not in vain because we do it “in the Lord”.

For St. Paul the use of the preposition “in” is found repeatedly in his letters. His most common use of the phrase is “in Christ”. Here rather than using the title Christ, he uses the noun “Lord”. For Paul “Lord” is synonymous with Christ. Therefore Paul is saying that “in Christ” our labour is not in vain.

This is because that which seemed to be the act of futility, the crucifixion, when viewed from a human perspective, was in fact the most significant event imaginable, when seen in the light of the Resurrection. Paul seems to be implying that for the Christian, we can hold on to this on those days especially when our work does seem to be in vain. This is because “in Christ” our labour is not in vain.

Here is the great end of all our work. We do our work “in Christ: When we do this we come to understand something that is integral to how God operates in the world. When we place our trust and commitment in Jesus Christ, we understand that he uses our hands, minds, feet, creative energy to continue his work and presence in the world. When this happens, not only can our work be measured, it is also meaningful.

2. Psalm 127 teaches us that our work is meaningful.

In the courtyard of a quaint little church in a French village stood a beautiful marble statue of Jesus with outstretched hands. One day during World War II, a bomb struck near the statue and mutilated it. After the battle was over and the enemy had passed through, the citizens of the village decided to find the pieces of their beloved statue and reconstruct it. Though the statue was no work of art by Michelangelo or Bernini, it was a part of their lives and they cherished it. Even the scars on the body added to its beauty. But there was one problem. They were unable to find the hands of the statue. “A Christ without hands is not Christ at all,” someone expressed in sorrow. “Hands with scars, yes. But what’s a Lord without hands? We need a new statue.”

Then someone else came along with another idea, and it prevailed. A brass plaque was attached at the base of the statue that read, “I have no hands but your hands.”

Some years later someone saw that inscription and wrote the

following lines:

*I have no hands but your hands to do my work today.
I have no feet but your feet to lead folk on the way.
I have no tongue but your tongue to tell all how I died.
I have no help but your help to bring others to God's side.*

When we live as those who name Jesus as the one who is at the centre of all our work, not only is it going to be measured because we understand its end, it will also be meaningful.

Here is the thing about understanding work in this light. It takes on a new perspective when we realize that all of our work is to be a way to make visible the hands of Jesus. There is unfortunately the use of two words that can confuse us. These words are sacred and secular. When we think of these words in relation to work, we could see sacred work as the kind of thing I do. And secular work the kind of thing you do when you go to the factory, work at the school as a parental assistant, go to the office and so on. However such a distinction is nowhere to be found in the New Testament. All work is sacred. Washing dishes is as sacred as driving a bus, studying for an exam, or writing a sermon.

For you see the word sacred means that which is set apart for a holy purpose. For the Christian, all work is to be seen as sacred, set apart and holy. This is because when we labour in the Lord, all we do is for him.

Think of the following. Many would have chafed under the assignment of "kitchen duty." Their ideas and aspirations of doing great things for God would definitely not include waiting tables or distributing food to some complaining, jealous women. Can you hear their protests? "I was made for better things!" "What am I doing in this hot, smelly kitchen?"

But not Stephen. Acts describes Stephen as a man "full of God's grace and power" (Acts 6:8). The new church in Antioch had chosen some men who had the touch of God on their lives to minister to the widows of their church. Their appointed duties would free the apostles to accomplish their work of preaching and teaching of the Word. Stephen was one of those men assigned to "kitchen duty."

The sixteenth-century Brother Lawrence, who called himself "the lord of all pots and pans," initially fought against his kitchen duty, but God soon changed his heart. He realized the power of submitting to God's Spirit: "The time of business," he said, "does not differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen,

while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.”²

There is a process of conversion that happens in our soul when we understand our work as sacred. We are then able to find meaning in the most menial of tasks and in our most taxing work. In the New Testament it is clear that all work is deemed of equal worth and importance. This is why in Colossians 3 Paul instructs us with these words:

*And **whatever** you do, in word or deed, **do everything** in the name of the Lord Jesus*

Did you catch the adjective “whatever”? All of our words and all of our deeds, everything is to be done in Christ. This is the same idea Paul made in 1 Corinthians 15.

It is because of this everything that Paul in Romans 12 says the following:

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour

What I want you to realize in this text is that every area of work and gifting matters to God. We are to understand that all the work we do to be a genuine expression of love as we live in harmony and mutual service. This is the thing about work done in union with God, it is to be measured, meaningful and a way we exercise ministry.

3. Psalm 127 teaches us that our work is a form of ministry.

When I use the word ministry in this sense, I mean it is a way we serve others. Remember that Jesus chose to wash feet on the night of his arrest and trial. He then went on to say that he has left this as an example for us. We are to serve as he serves. This does not mean that we all have to literally take a towel and wash the feet of others. But it does mean that just as Jesus came to serve, we understand that our work will be most meaningful when we bring this kind of attitude to what we do.

The Psalm ends with a section that states this same idea when at verse 3-5 we read:

² Rebecca Barlow Jordan. **The God of Kitchen Duty.**
(www.cbn.com/entertainment/Books/KitchenDuty.aspx) March 21, 2009

*³Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
⁴Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.
⁵Happy is the man who has
his quiver full of them.
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.*

Now think about this example. What work is more of a partnership between people and God than then the work of pro-creation. There is work involved in the gestation as the mother cooperates with God in the growing life within her womb. There is definite labour at the time of birth and years of labour as children are raised. But notice that this work is relational. It is a working together with God, a working together of mothers and fathers, as sons and daughters are raised. Then as the children grow, parents are to let them fly like the arrows in the hand or a warrior.

This is work that exists for the other. Children are to be given the opportunity to become adults so they in turn can be about the work God has given them to do. Here is a clear example of work that is ministry. Work the enables the parents to serve the children so that in turn the children can serve the parents.

When a man had to appear before his adversaries because of some kind of conflict it was of great benefit to be able to do so with a bunch of strapping boys by your side. They would be there to serve and support the father.

So again, while the specific example of contending with enemies in the gate does not apply to all of us, the principle does. When parents go through times of conflict and difficulty this psalm suggests that they are to be able to turn to the people they ministered to most closely for encouragement and support in their time of need.

But unless we are left with a sense that for the Christian all work will be rewarding and meaning-ful we have psalm 126 to remind us that there are times when the work we do will involve much sowing with tears.

Is this not most true of the work of parenting? How often there are times when in the challenge of child rearing the experience is one of exasperation and deep sorrow. This can also be true of others areas where we work.

And yet as Christians we are to know that those who sow in tears will reap in songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves with them.

But when we are in that place where the bread of anxious toil seems to be the only remuneration for our work, when the ground is hard and the sowing taxing, we are invited into a place of surrender. Did not our Lord do this at the time of his most taxing work, The Cross?

Do you remember how taxing it was in the Garden of Gethsemane? There he prayed to have the cup of judgement removed from him. But then he surrendered and said “not my will but your will be done.”

At times this is all we can do and it is also the most important thing that we do, for it brings God back to the centre of our work.

Do you see here is an image of work that like the rebuilding of the Temple, the shooting of an arrow has a goal, it has a target. As we learn to do all of our work, from the taking out of the garbage to the completion of a challenging task at the office, by the Spirit of God, than we will see that unless the Lord is in our work we work in vain. But when the Lord is able to work with us our work will be measured, meaningful and an expression of ministry. Then in turn we will better understand what it means to pray:

5 May those who sow in tears

reap with shouts of joy.
6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of
joy, carrying their sheaves with them.

Amen