

The Positive Beginnings of Work: Genesis 1 & 2

by Joy Banks; January 9, 2017

Work, work, work...

We all do it. Yes, even those of us without paying jobs. We all work. Sometimes it feels like drudgery, sometimes it can be incredibly satisfying. Work can kill you or work can give you and many others life.

We all work, but how does work relate to our faith? Where is God on Monday when we punch the time clock, slave over the sink of dishes, avoid that annoying co-worker or swear at the photocopy machine? Whether we are paid for it or not, a good chunk of our week is spent in work. And yet when it comes right down to it we sometimes have confused notions about work especially when it comes to the ways that our work and our faith connect. Let me give you a few examples.

- 1) "I can't do the dishes because I'm late for work." Isn't doing the dishes work?
- 2) "If you really want to do God's work, you should become a _____." [In different circles, the type of work that goes in the blank vary. What kind of work do you think we implicitly value as "God's work" at GCBC?]
- 3) "I've never worked a day in my life because I always do what I love." Jerry Seinfeld to Trevor Noah (relayed by Noah on CBC radio "The Current". Dec 5). Is drudgery the defining feature of work?
- 4) "I wish I was independently wealthy so I didn't have to work." Is money the reason we work? If money weren't part of the picture would we still be called to work?
- 5) "I know I'm not gifted in that area, but it's a real need in the organization. Do you think God may be calling me to accept the job?" Here we have questions relating to work and calling. Does God call us to specific jobs? How does need drive our work?

For the season of Epiphany, we want to explore together questions about work, calling and vocation as they relate to our faith and the Kingdom of God. These are a few questions that come to my mind when I consider work and faith. What about you? What questions come to your mind when you think about work and faith? You'll find a yellow slip of paper in your bulletin (there are also extras in cups in

your pews). Throughout the sermon or during the song after the sermon and before communion I want to invite you to write a question or two that arises in you as you think about work and faith. You'll bring these up during Communion and the preachers will try to address some of them during the series. My hope in having you write these down, though, isn't only to give us as preachers some guidance in knowing what to address but it is for you to hold these questions before God this season, inviting God to give you insight and understanding in these questions that you hold. So let me just give you a second to make sure you have a slip of paper and then I'll continue on...

To put some legs on our series we're going to be doing interviews each week to hear about your work lives. And just to clarify, I mean paid and unpaid work, so this series isn't just for folks that have jobs. Our society pays for some kinds of work but God doesn't see work through the same paycheque lens. We want to explore together what Scripture says about work and how it relates to how we've been created.

Today Tim is going to interview Andrew, so I'll invite them to come up now.....

Okay, so let's delve into the Scripture shall we and see what we can discover about work. If I were to ask where the earliest mention of work in scripture is, I suspect that some of our minds would drift to the curse. When Adam and Eve sinned God said that Adam would now have to work the earth with pain, sweat and toil. If we are honest, I think many of us see work mostly through that lens. Over the holidays a distant relative was telling me about his business of setting up sound and lighting systems for churches and schools. He started the business because he enjoyed this kind of work but now, even though his business had been quite successful he said the job was mostly drudgery. With a sigh he said, "Well, what can I expect really? Work is work, right?" He saw work mostly through the lens of the curse. Advertisers bank on this, too, by always trying to sell us things or experiences that reduce our work or that help us finish our work more quickly so that we can get on with enjoying life without work.

While we certainly do find that work became twisted and more difficult as a consequence of sin, (Mark will talk more about this in next week's sermon), we need to go back before the curse to see if work is something that is built into the design of the world and that is inherent to being human or if it is something that we just have to do because we live in a broken world. So, let's turn back to Genesis 1 & 2 before Adam and Eve's sin and explore what we find out about work.

In fact let's go to the beginning of the beginning Genesis 1:1. Would someone read that? "In the beginning, God *created*". Hey, what do you know! The very first thing that we learn about God is that

God works. Who would have thought, eh? God actually works. And in case you're tempted to argue that *speaking* light into being doesn't sound like much work, listen to some of the language that is used in chapter 2 to describe this work of creation. There we find God *planting* a garden, *sculpting* a man and other animals out of the dirt, doing surgery on Adam to take out a rib and then suturing it up, and a little later sewing a garment for Adam and Eve after they became ashamed of their nakedness. Here we have God portrayed as a gardener, an artist that creates beauty for the eye, a potter that sculpts, a manager, an anesthetist, a surgeon, a tailor and more. God was never cursed by sin and yet God works. **God works and declares this work very good.**

And, on top of that God continues to work. I could give you lots of examples throughout Scripture of God's on-going work, but Jesus states it plainly in John 5:17, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." For us, this means that when we work we are not working alone but alongside the Creator who continues to work in our midst. God created the world and continues to be at work in the world. I wonder if part of what heightens the drudgery of work is that we forget that we were made to be co-workers *with* God, and instead we assume that this work is something we have to do on our own. Later in the NT, when Jesus invites those who are weary and tired to come to him, he doesn't say, "Come to me and we'll go get a massage," but he actually invites the weary into a picture of co-working. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," he says, "for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." It is a picture of being yoked together as two oxen, side by side, working together. What aspects of your work have you been shouldering alone? What would it mean to yoke together with Christ in your work?

It's not just that God is working and we have to work so therefore, we must be co-workers. What we see here in Genesis is that God actually designed the world that way. **God designed the world for humans to be God's co-workers.** It's not that God needs us. God had no problem creating the whole world without any human help, and yet, God intentionally designs a world where humans act as God's agents in the world. It's kind of crazy that God would entrust us with being part of that work, but that's exactly what God does. In Genesis 2 we read that before the humans were created there was no one to work the ground, so God put the man in the garden **to work it** and **take care of it**. In Genesis 1 we read, "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so **that they may rule over** the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground." Being created in God's image comes with a work purpose. Of course, the way this purpose is worded here as "ruling over the other creatures" or as some versions say, "to have dominion over", likely makes many of you uncomfortable. And fair enough. Many of our

forerunners took the language of “ruling over and subduing” as a license to exploit creation for our own selfish purposes. But that is jumping to an interpretation that doesn’t make sense in light of this text. We are told that we are created in the image of God, but the image of God we have here in this creation story is not of a tyrannical ruler that exploits his subjects for selfish gain, but instead we have the picture of a generous giver that provides abundantly for all that has been created. One that says, “Here, eat, eat. Look at all that I have created. Isn’t that fruit delicious and isn’t that colour beautiful? See how I’ve made them with seeds so they can reproduce. Let’s tend this together. There’s more work to be done.” For God to create a world with such care only to turn it over to humans for the purpose of exploitation makes no sense. These instructions to rule over must be read in the context of what we see about God and also in the context of the other instructions given here for the work of the people, those of tending and caring for. So, from the beginning we see, that our work is to care for and tend to this good creation and all its inhabitants. It is to faithfully represent God on earth, to fulfill the purposes with which God began creating the world to begin with. This is our work.

We all have a dominion, so to speak. By this I mean people or tasks or land that we have been charged to care for or tend to. It may be your children, it may be some important ideas or thoughts, it may be your garden plot, it may be the food you prepare for those who sit at the table. This is the region of influence that God has given you to tend. Are you tending these in a way that reflects the likeness of the Generous Creator here in Genesis? How can you tend these in a way that encourages abundant flourishing?

There are two more themes that I want to point out briefly in terms of understanding our work from these two chapters.

First, I’d like you to notice that from the beginning God is working with tangible, material stuff in this picture. Sometimes we assume that the work of a theologian or someone working with people or church work, for example, is somehow more spiritual or valuable to God than chopping carrots and beats or working with a hammer and a nail. But God is as spiritual as it gets, folks, and notice what work God is doing in this picture. God is working with dirt and river water, bodies and bones, seed bearing fruit that is delicious to eat and beautiful to look at, fish scales, bird feathers, and smelly livestock. God worked with tangible stuff. And what did God have to say about this work he did? “It is good.” God takes the material world and our work in it seriously and the work we do with our hands has just as much potential of being valuable to God as work that is with ideas or people or religion. All of these can be part of participating in God’s work here on earth.

The other theme here that I want you to notice, is that even in the midst of this abundance, there is also limitation put in place right from the beginning. After the 6 poetic days of God's creation work, God rested for a day. And of course, we know that later this rhythm of taking a Sabbath day of rest once a week was given to God's followers as well. The other limitation we see the limitation on the fruit that Adam and Eve were allowed to eat. They were given all of the fruit of the garden except for the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Just as we are instructed to limit our work to 6 days, Adam and Eve were instructed to limit their fruit picking work to all but one tree.

I want us to see this because we need to know that not only was work part of the design from the beginning, but limitations to that work was also part of that design. Unlike what our culture tells us, "the sky is *not* the limit." The Sabbath boundaries remind us of our humanness, it is a time to pause and remember that it is God's earth, God's people, God's resources we are tending. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil reminds us that there are boundaries we can cross in our work that puts us in the territory of evil. We are not God, and yet we can cross the line into assuming we are, we can begin exploiting and ruling over the earth for selfish purposes. We need boundaries and limitations in our work and this was built into the design of the world. We live in a culture often balks at limitations, but the reality is that limitation in work can actually be freeing and can in fact release us to greater fruitfulness. Choosing to work within limits once again opens up the opportunity and gift to recognize that we are co-workers with God. And though work was part of the design from the beginning, these limitations remind us that our identity is not wrapped up in our work but in the Creator who gives us our work. When we accept our limitations, we can rest knowing that the Creator can use our measly loaves and fishes to feed the multitude because we are not working alone. When you hit the limit of your patience with your child, you can lean on the awareness that God is at work tending and molding your child along side you, because you are not parenting alone. "Not everything that can be done should be done."¹ Not everything that can be done is good for God's earth or God's purposes. Working within the limitations that God has given us and that is built into the design of the world is part of the mandate of work. I wonder where you find yourself tempted to push beyond these limitations, where you push your body, your family, the community, the earth beyond their limits for good flourishing. What would it

¹ From an excellent website on the theology of work: www.theologyofwork.org . This quote and this idea about limits is from this particular page which offers commentary on Scripture pertaining to work: <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/genesis-1-11-and-work/god-creates-and-equips-people-to-work-genesis-126-225/limits-genesis-23-217> . I would highly recommend checking this site out for more ideas, inspiration, and support in considering work, vocation and calling from a Biblical perspective.

mean for you to pull back in trust, to learn to work within the limitations that God has given and built into the world?

What we see here in the beginning of Genesis is that God is at work in the world and we have been given the joyful task of working alongside God. So, whether you are folding laundry, answering emails, calculating a budget, changing diapers, shoveling snow, talking to an angry client, wrestling with an ethical dilemma at your job, know that you have been created for this. You bear the image of God in this world and the Creator is there to equip, to nourish, to tend to you as you work alongside each other. May God bless you in your work this week and may God meet you in the questions you continue to hold about work, vocation and calling this season.