

November 13, 2022
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Isaiah 65:17-25

Working for a Living

On Tuesday, like many of you, I went to vote. I stood in line at our elementary school which stretched through the gym and out the door.

We were all there to choose our leaders, those who will make decisions for us and help our community be the best it can be. And of course, there are so many different ideas about what is best and what will work.

Sorting that out isn't easy. I pray for our leaders, and I hope you will too. Especially since there is so much hostility out there, and people who would rather be violent than vote.

It takes work to live together in community. It takes effort and it takes time. It takes people committed to showing up and putting in the work for our country. And the same is true for our community of faith. Church doesn't just happen. Love doesn't just happen. Faith and trust and the ties that bind us together don't just happen. They take work. It takes our best effort to do what is right and honorable and good.

That's what Paul is telling the church at Thessaloniki. You all need to do the work. All of you must put in the effort to be the church. All of you

need to chip in and contribute. Do not live in idleness, Paul says. Don't be lazy layabouts. Be hard workers for the sake of your community.

What we hear is that familiar Protestant work ethic, poking us, prodding us. Always after us to put our nose to the grindstone. The more you put in, the more you get out. If you put nothing, you get nothing. Paul says, if you don't work, you don't eat. And that sounds fair. It sounds right.

That's the moral of the story of the children's story, The Little Red Hen.

The little Red Hen asks the other barnyard animals each time to help her with her work. She asks them to help plant the wheat and then harvest the wheat. She invites them to help her sift the wheat and grind the wheat and bake the wheat into a loaf of bread. Each time, the animals refuse to help; they will not do the work. Then she takes the warm, fresh bread, right out of the oven, and she asks them to help eat the bread. Of course, they are willing to help. But the little red hen has tricked them. She tells them, none of you helped me work, so none of you get to eat my bread.

That's what Paul seems to be saying to the Thessalonians. If you don't work, you don't eat. Everyone has to help out. Hey, Paul says, "we were

not idle among you. We did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it. Me, the apostle Paul and my team, we worked night and day, so we wouldn't burden any of you. You all need to do the same." No one can afford to sit on the sidelines. No one gets to twiddle their thumbs until Jesus comes back.

Everyone has to do their part. That's how life together works. That's how community works. We all work together. With everyone giving and everyone receiving. Even a child understands that. If you reward those cleaning up that same as those not cleaning up, that child will let you know how outrageous it is. It's not right. It's not fair. And the prophet Isaiah agrees with that. Because prophets know about justice. They know about what is right and good. And the people of God have not had things be right or good for them. The Babylonians have taken everything away. They took God's people into exile, and now nothing they have is their own. The houses they build aren't their own. Their fields aren't their own. The children are taken into government service. The art they create, the music they make. The herds of cattle and the grain and fruit that they grow. All the work of their hands are taken by the Babylonians

for their empire. The prophet Isaiah sees how deeply unfair it is. He promises that God will do something. That the time will come when they will keep what is theirs. They shall enjoy the work of their hands. Their things will be their things. Their houses will be their own. Their harvests will be their own. Their children will be their own. Their lives will be long and prosperous and all theirs to enjoy. Not used or abused or devastated by another.

Everyone's labor will be their own. In the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmstead wrote about a trip he took down the Mississippi river. He was writing for the New York Times. He would go on to be a famous landscape architect, planning New York's Central Park and the park systems of Louisville KY. Before that he documented American life in the south. He saw enslaved people working in brutal conditions on cotton and sugar plantations. He noted that "a handful of people enjoyed lavish lifetimes while thousands labored for them. They earn little, they sell little; they buy little, and they have little – very little – of the common comforts and consolations of civilized life. Their destitution is

not material only; it is intellectual and it is moral ...” The work of the slaves belonged to someone else. Their lives were not their own.

Can you imagine having no say over your work? Can you imagine spending your life building someone else’s empire, constructing someone else’s houses, growing someone else’s food, raising someone else’s children, while your own children suffer? Can you imagine your labors being for someone else? And how that would rob you of dignity and self-respect? How that would hollow you out spiritually and morally?

The prophet Isaiah is speaking to people held captive in Babylon. The same people who have a history of slave labor in Egypt. These are people not on the top side of history, but from the bottom side, the underside. This is the view from the bottom of the empire where we see the great price of power and greed. And here is where the word of God arrives, to the people subjected to others, who have no say over their own work. Things will change. They won’t simply be cogs in a wheel. They and their children won’t be chewed up and spit out anymore. Their lives will be their own. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. And

all the great and powerful nations won't harm them; the wolves, and lions, and serpents won't harm them. No one will be overpowered or have life stolen from them on God's holy mountain.

Your work will belong to you. That's good news for people whose work hasn't belonged to them. But for those who haven't worked, for those who have coasted and depended on the labor of others, the news isn't so great. They will have to do that labor they've avoided so long. No one is going to do it for them now. That's what Paul is telling the church at Thessaloniki. Everyone in the community will have to pull their weight. Because some haven't. They have been idle. The Greek word that Paul uses here is atakos (ah-tak-os). It means to be not in the right spot or out of order. It comes from the Roman military rank and file order, where everyone has to be in their spot. If they aren't, your flank is exposed. The shields go down. The phalanx collapses. Everyone has to do their job. Even in the church. We are not here as individuals, but as a community. We do not follow Jesus alone but together. We are strong together. We have faith together. We work together. We share in the Spirit together, or the community fails. The people in the Thessalonian

church weren't in it together. There were some who were idle. They weren't showing up. They were just waiting for Jesus to come back. At first, that's what the earliest Christian communities believed, that Jesus would return any second. He would come back any day and judge the earth and take them to heaven with him. So they could sit back and wait. It didn't matter. Jesus was on the way.

But Paul calls this idleness; this waiting around for Jesus to finish the job. Avoiding the work of doing what Jesus did or going where Jesus went or loving who Jesus loved, because time's almost up. Paul says, No, that's not what Jesus taught you and it's not what I taught you to do. Listen, I could have sat on the sidelines with everyone else. I could have waited for Jesus back and refused to tell people the good news. I could have acted like this place is the waiting room for heaven, but I didn't. Because it's not. There is still work to do. The work of a new heaven and a new earth in the making. You don't have time for anything else. Paul admonishes the idlers, the atakos, who are out of line and causing disorder. He also criticizes the busy-bodies. The word in Greek here is, peri-er-gadz-omai. Ergadzo means to work and Peri means around. So, it

literally means those working around something on the periphery. It looks like those bustling around uselessly, doing pointless things, without getting to what really needs to be done. The busybodies are not doing the work AND they are interfering with those trying to get to the work. They linger around the outside, meddling and criticizing and gossiping. Circling the job with energy they could be using to get it done.

We might see that kind of thing today. People working AROUND a job without doing anything to accomplish something. Spending all their time and energy on finding someone to shame or blame. Circling around, finding fault and pointing fingers. Who knew we had so many qualified backseat drivers and armchair quarterbacks? Ah but it's easier to work around a job than to actually work at it. The apostle Paul says, it's easy to talk and criticize and say what people SHOULD have done. But if you haven't done the work, you don't know. You need to get in the game. Make your own contribution. Run your own race. Don't let someone else do it. Do the work yourself. Test your strength. Face your shortcomings. Find the faith that is waiting there for you to find. Be

vulnerable and fall into the mystery of God. Do your job and only your job. Let others do theirs. And trust the grace of Jesus.

Do what is right. Right now. Love like Jesus. Live like Jesus. Hope like Jesus. Don't just sit back and wait. Build and plant and harvest for the fruit of the Spirit is ours. The eternal life of Christ is ours. The kingdom of God, the new heaven and the new earth, is ours.