

### *Do Not Be Weary*

In an article in *The Atlantic* entitled, *Workism is Making Americans Miserable*, Derek Thompson writes, "In his 1930 essay "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted a 15-hour workweek in the 21st century, creating the equivalent of a five-day weekend. "For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem," Keynes wrote, "how to occupy the leisure."

That hasn't exactly panned out.

Instead, the article notes we are awash in *workism*.

"It is the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must *always* encourage more work."<sup>1</sup>

Those who profit from our comings and goings have found a way to feed into that frenetic pace of life... think of the number of mechanisms that track our activity for work. If you have Diamond status on airline, you had to fly a lot of miles to get it. If you can stay for weeks on end in a hotel on your points, each minute of that corresponds with time you had to be away in the first place.

It's mostly work, not leisure, that affords us all that *status*.

I have read that that the National Institutes of Health reports that one in five Americans is living with fatigue that is so severe that it interferes with daily normal life.

I've been tempted at times to ask, before our scaffolding comes down, if we couldn't have a banner printed up and hung on our building on Walnut Street that read simply, "Come sit for an hour and do just *one* thing on Sunday mornings."

I suspect we'd run out of seats.

Of course, some will say, "That's life." That's the reality we've been dealt, or the reality we've dealt ourselves and it isn't going anywhere. Pretending otherwise is foolish. It's a great way to fall behind, and it's not changing.

Fatigue can lead to depression, irritability and a generally negative outlook on life. This is no secret.

And yet the apostle writes to the Thessalonians, *to us*, "Do not be weary."

But surely women and men worked as hard then as they do now?

And yet there are more people I know than not who are working very hard, for long hours, who are energized, happy and enthusiastic about what they are doing.

What makes the difference?

I am reminded of a woman with whom I worked many years ago, Joan, who would regularly admonish me to take my day off. If she saw me in the church when I was supposed to be off, she

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>

wanted to know *why*. If I returned e-mail on Friday, she would reply saying, "That is well and good, but I'm not even going to read this until tomorrow because you are OFF today!"

Joan worked more hours than I could count. So, asked her once, "You wake up at 4:30 so you can be at the gym by 5, in the office by 6:30 and you don't go home until late in the evening. And yet, you are worried about *me* burning out!?"

She replied, "I like it. First, I *always* take my day off, Saturday, as a day of Sabbath. Second, I firmly believe that when you are doing work that you find deeply meaningful and that brings you joy, you will not burn out."

I have wondered through the years whether she is right. I certainly know I have worked late hours with others on something important and gone home tired and yet energized. And I have also gone home after a daily grind that left me just straight up worn out.

I'm sure you have also, I can't imagine ministry is different from any other job that way. There is a difference between being tired from work and being existentially exhausted! When the work we are doing matters, when we know it matters, we may be tired without being exhausted.

*Vocation is doing that work that brings our labors into alignment with God's hopes.* Perhaps it is easier to keep it going when our labors are living into God's dream.

Vocation comes from the Latin root *vocare, to call.*

If you think *calling* is just what ministers do, it's not.

God calls all of us to meaningful work – if we are very lucky, we do it for pay.

Many of us find that place where our labors align with God's hope elsewhere.

For example, for many years my father worked in a job that he didn't like very much because it paid very well, but he will quickly tell you that the years that he worked at the job that he didn't love were not wasted. "It was a means to an end," he would say. "I loved what it enabled me to do – to take time off and be with my family."

Indeed, it reminds me of a lawyer I knew years ago... big-shot malpractice attorney. Folks at church wanted her to get involved so they asked her to join the hospitality committee. You know that's really important work, don't you? That cookie and cup of tea is the hospitality of Jesus Christ. You don't know how many folks have their only conversation of the day at church. Thank our deacons every time you see them!!

But she declined. She said, "I'm not good at that; that's not my gift, and I would soon resent the work. But I *am* good at winning cases, and my clients need me and so I am paid a lot. I'm very happy to share from my material wealth for the good of our congregation."

I can think of few better ways to be abjectly miserable than to attempt to live someone else's vocation.

But to do the work that gives us joy, to share our abundance?

The overwhelming evidence suggests that when labors have rewards they are more easily sustained. When we see the *value* in what we are doing, whether it is for the purpose of helping a client, healing the sick, preaching the Gospel, teaching a child, paying the tuition, it makes it easier. Then work has meaning. Work becomes sustainable.

It is easier not to be weary.

But Paul certainly gave us an earful about work this morning, didn't he?

You should know this is not a political statement from Paul. He is not writing about minimum wage or right to work laws. He is pragmatic to the core. You can be sure this is about a *particular* problem.

And yet, it sounds vaguely unchristian. Or maybe it sounds explicitly unchristian.

In the Christian faith, we don't equate one's ability to work with the right to one's daily bread. "If they won't work, let them not eat," doesn't sound much like aligning our labors with God's hope," does it?

As is generally the case, Paul is writing to a specific problem in the church in Thessalonica.

There is throughout the pages of scripture the theme that God's work is unfinished, and that one day, when it is all said and done, *then* the work of God will be concluded.

That's a big day. That is the day of the Lord. We read about it in Luke, it's when it all comes together, when God's *vision of creation* and the *reality of existence* come together and it is God's shalom.

It turns out that some of the Thessalonian Christians were convinced, absolutely convinced, that this would happen right after lunch. Or breakfast. Or while they were in the shower. They thought it was imminent and so they wanted to be ready.

They quit working. They didn't want anything to distract them from that spiritual moment.

And yet the day of the Lord didn't happen after lunch... or breakfast... or while they were in the shower. Day after day, it didn't happen.

And with all of this non-working-waiting, they got bored.

And then they got to *meddling*. Since they didn't have anything else to do, so they would spend their days as unofficial supervisors of others' work.

There are few things as irritating as an unofficial supervisor who won't do the work, don't you think?

So, to them Paul wrote, "That is enough. There is work to be done. If you don't want to get on with it, fine, get out of it, leave us alone."

That's when work doesn't matter – *when it becomes meaningless*.

But if we are using our time and our labors for the good of the world, then we can align our labors with God's hopes.

There was a popular memo a while back. It read simply, "Jesus is coming. Look busy."

Now, the simple truth is that Jesus probably isn't coming after lunch today.

I'm not going to rule it out, but in this instance, past performance does seem to indicate future expectations. I wouldn't count on it.

And yet, throughout his writings, Paul seemed to do just that, to count on Jesus' return any day. And even with his hope and expectation of just that, he kept working. He admonished the others to keep working. "Do not be weary in doing what is right," he said.

Do not be weary of doing what is right because that is the way that God is working in the world. That's one of the reasons why I've never believed that our offerings for the church should be about what the church has done for us lately, but rather out of a deep and abiding knowledge that God is the one sustaining us, not ourselves. Indeed, when it comes to the church's work, remember that God has already done all the heavy lifting. That's why there's a cross in our sanctuary, just in case we forget that from time to time.

I heard a story while back on NPR about an author of adolescent fiction named Matt De La Pena. He has made a career and yet, it was not always a foregone conclusion that his life would follow this path. Reading books was for the sensitive. In his own words, "If there was one thing a guy couldn't be in the my *machista*, Mexican family, it was sensitive."<sup>2</sup>

It all changed when a professor, his sophomore year, handed him a novel and asked him to read it. Sometime before he graduated – it didn't matter when – and then come to her and discuss it. He read it slowly at first. And then he devoured it. As he finished the final paragraphs, the tough guy fought back tears.

The novel was The Color Purple. And she said what she loved best was that even in the harshest and ugliest of circumstances, there is still hope. He decided that was what he loved best.

It was a moment of redemption with deep repercussions.

We don't ever give up hope in this world, even while we are waiting on the world to come. Sometimes the work we do makes all the difference.

We will soon enter the season of hopeful waiting. But even then, perhaps especially then, the work we are doing *now* matters.

As I said earlier, there's a theme in scripture that God's work is never really finished. Indeed, there is an old piece of rabbinical wisdom that suggests that, after the six days of creation, God intentionally left the universe just a little bit undone so that we might be allowed to participate with God in creating something that brings about God's shalom. Do not be weary of doing what is right.

Do not be weary.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> De La Pena, Matt. *Sometimes the "Tough Teen" is Quietly Writing Stories*. NPR.com 11/11/13