September 9.10 2017 Sermon

Just Work©: Why Good Work, Well Done, produces Flourishing.

This evening/morning we are going to talk about work. I know, I know- it’s the weekend and we don’t want to think about work let alone hear a sermon on it. It is my great hope though, is in the next few minutes I may help you to gain a new perspective on work that will make it a bit less toil filled and a bit more joyful.

Let us read our Scriptures together- please stand.

Genesis 1:26-28 Then God said, “Let us make mankind 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, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.
God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Genesis 2:1-3 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.
By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Genesis 2:15,18 The L ORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. The L ORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”
So “Just Work©”....
The double entendre is evident....

Just Work- we can hear or say it like this “I am just a stay at home mom”
“I am just a plumber”
“I am just a sales person”
“I am just a student”
“I am just a...... you fill in the blank

Have you ever thought that every time we modify our work with the adverb “just” to diminish the verb “am”, we are actually diminishing the image bearing good that God has put into each and every one of us? From the Genesis 1 passage we see that God created us in his image to co-create with Him- he gave us dominion or rule over all that He had created. This dominion is not intended to be a harsh abusive power-based rule, but rather a stewardship of God’s good creation with wisdom and care. So when we diminish the value of our contribution by using the word “just” in relation to our work as an adverb, we are actually diminishing the work of our creator in entrusting us with this dominion, stewardship of our work.

Then there is “Just” work. Just as an adjective has a very different meaning and can certainly be seen in the work of the activist who is speaking out for a group of marginalized people, or the lawyer who is fighting for the wrongly accused, or a judge who is making wise decisions in difficult matters designed to bring about justice for all parties.
But what if “Just work” is also the job on the manufacturing line offered to the man who is trying to get his life back on track after having been incarcerated?
What if “just” work, justice work, is the waitress and single mom who is working a second job to make ends meet so that she can feed and clothe her kids?
What if Just work is the technology company that chooses to locate its business in a vulnerable community to help train young people in software coding and engineering? What if Just work is the saleswoman who serves her clients with
dignity and integrity, even when the company she works for wants her to cut some corners for the sake of profit? I would contend that this is all Just work. My hope this morning is that you will get a glimpse of a different way of thinking about our work that moves you from “just work- diminishing the value of our everyday work” to Just Work- thinking about your work and the work of others as God’s plan A for restoring his world.

Martin Luther put it this way”
“God does not need our GOOD work, But our neighbor does.”

I also want to take a moment to give some clear definitions of work for our time this morning.
First, work is not only that which we do for payment, work is any way we are making a contribution to the human community.
So, work is about contribution before it is about remuneration. Let me say that again,
Work is about contribution before it is about remuneration.

If you work full time in the home raising children and keeping the household, that is good work even if there is no ‘paycheck’ involved. If you are student, attending classes and studying hard, that is good work or contribution. We all work in some form and to diminish work that is not remunerated diminishes the Creative God we serve.

Second, a couple of good definitions of work:

That it [work] should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God’s image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.

-Dorothy Sayers
Work is rearranging the raw materials of God's creations in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.

-Tim Keller

Human work all matters to God and if we, as the body of Christ, can radically reshape our perspective and understanding of work and its implication for flourishing, we may just be transformed ourselves, as will our church, our community and our city.

In an effort to be a good Presbyterian, I am going to look at this idea of “Just Work” three ways:
The Good of Work
The Grit of Work and
The Grace of Work

The Good of Work:

In part of our passage this morning, we read that God looked back on his work and saw that it was GOOD. The biblical words GOOD and GOODNESS are so much richer than simply ‘nice’ or “adequate”, it is used to describe the creation itself and all that God put in it. It is tangible,

One bible dictionary described Good, the Hebrew word TOHB, (toob) in man as not a mere passive quality, but the deliberate preference of right to wrong, the firm and persistent resistance of all moral evil, and the choosing and following of all the good that God put into the created order.

God’s work was described- by Him- all throughout Genesis 1 as “good” and then “very good” when he created humankind as his last work before he rested. If God himself called work good, a vital way for his image bearers in resisting evil and choosing for moral goodness, then who are we to diminish our work to ‘just’ anything.
Slide #4

A quick aside here- If we believe that the trinity was present in the creation, and I do—Father Son and Holy Spirit—than we must understand that our work is also deeply Trinitarian.

- Love and deference- the perichoresis- of the Godhead shows a constant mutual submission to one another. That was present from the moment the spirit hovered over the water. This image evokes this dance of deference- and it is how we must approach our work in relationship to others.
- The primary mechanism of the coming of the kingdom is NOT the individual, it is the body of Christ- this has huge implications for our work, it means that we must bring our very best into relationship with others in our everyday work. Work is not intended to be done alone, in isolation.

A true Kingdom perspective on work is understanding that work is not a product of the fall! It is an essential part of image bearing and the cultural mandate. As we look at our passages again, the very first act of image bearing was God putting man into the garden to “work” it and then in the passages that follow, he gave man dominion over the creation and his work- he named the animals. He gave us work to steward His creation for His people.

A final word about the Good of work, the only way we can truly recognize the good of work is to rest from work. The Sabbath is not the day we collapse in a heap from the exhaustion of work, but rather it is the day we step back from our work and say “it is good.” It may even be how we best prepare for our work. I attended a lecture in June given by a very thoughtful theologian who changed my perspective dramatically on the Sabbath. He taught that God created man on the 6th day and then the very next day was the day of rest. What he was suggesting, even stating, was that we have disordered our understanding of work and rest. If the first day after the creation of humankind was the Sabbath and then came work, I might ask us to consider how wrong our western culture has gotten the understanding of
rest. In the Jewish traditions, the Sabbath begins the night before at sundown and is also at the start of the week. In preparation for this sermon, I asked my FB friends to offer their perspective on Sabbath- here are just a few of the many great responses I got:

- I'm learning that rest is a sacred and intentional act and could be just for an hour. For me it is anything that helps me to slow down and experience the wonder and beauty of the Lord. It could be a day in creation, a walk with my dog, time taking pictures, or even a good nap!
- Sabbath Rest comes when I cease from the activity of regular work and focus on my Creator and Liberator.
- Being fully present to the moment, without expectations of myself, others or my environment.
- I think of Sabbath as not doing anything that I might put on a "to do" list - it is ceasing from productive and/or creative tasks. Rest can be any number of things including very active play - especially for people who work sedentary jobs. For me rest usually involves engaging in relationship with others (when I'm not napping, that is!).
- “Sabbath is a deliberate act of interference, an interruption of our work each week, a decree of no-work so that we are able to notice, to attend, to listen, to assimilate this comprehensive and majestic work of God, to orient our work in the work of God.” Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, p. 110

Do you view Sabbath as your starting point? I know I struggle with this. For me I am most often focused on.....

The Grit of Work

While work is not a product of the fall, work was broken by the fall and aspects of our work have most definitely become toil. While we all can quickly identify inherently bad (not good) work such as pornography, human trafficking, drug dealing; I think we can sometimes we expand the definition of bad work to anything we do not find “fulfilling” or that we find mundane.

Many of us have a wrong understanding of work and our relationship to it. One of the broken aspects of work in our western culture is that we believe we derive our identity and meaning from our work. You often see this when a person loses his or
her job or a career takes an unexpected turn and they sink into a deep depression or season of lost-ness. This is often because they have tied who they are—their identity—so closely with what they do, that they have lost sight of where their true identity resides, in Christ.

So it begs the question, how do we bring our identity and meaning to our work? If we are in fact co-creators with God in taking the raw materials of this world and rearranging them for good use, then work is fundamental to our humanness but it is NOT the source of our identity.

God intended work for our good and the accomplishment of His mission and purposes. Jesus demonstrated this by incarnating as a worker, a carpenter.

Steve Garber says “Vocation is integral, not incidental, to the mission Dei.” I have talked with Steve a great length over many years around his convictions about work and vocation and a brief comment here is necessary. Work and Vocation (or calling) are not the same thing.

“The word calling or vocation is a rich one, having to address the wholeness of life, the range of relationships and responsibilities. Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally—all of this and more is seen as vocation, that to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the face of God.”

-Steve Garber

I believe we are made to bring our vocation or calling— who God uniquely created us to be-- to our work- who I am uniquely in service to those places where I live, work, serve and play.

**Slide #5**

Another way work has been broken is how we have dis- integrated our understanding of work and compartmentalized it. The Hebrew word for Work is Avodah. It is used and translated in multiple contexts throughout the OT as Work, or Worship, or Service. In our world, we Work Monday – Friday, We worship on Sunday and We Serve in various places as there is need. But what if our work is our worship, our worship is our service, our service is our work. What if we are worshiping in everything we are called to put our hands to?

We have TRI-Farcated- a new word- that which God intended to be thought of as
deeply coherent. Work, worship Service, not three separate activities but one whole life.

A final comment on the grit of work: We often think about work in our culture in relationship to two things- leisure time and retirement. We often view our work and something to be tolerated until we get to that place where we can go have the ‘real’ fun.

I started my working life at 13 when I began to babysit. At this age, work for me was definitely a means to an end. When I realized I could earn money to acquire things, I was delighted. The first dollars I earned were dedicated to a pair of shoes

**Slide #6**

Not exactly this pair of shoes, but very similar. (hey it was the 70’s). I still love shoes although hopefully my taste has improved, but at 13 I counted the dollars and the babysitting jobs it would take to get me these lovelies. I no longer work as a means to an end, to buy shoes (ok maybe just a little) but because I love what I do.

Do you view your work as means to an end? Getting you to the weekend? This concept is idealized in many ways-. TGIF- right? We work to get to Friday, when we do the things we really love, which are NOT work. This notion was popularized in our music- at least the music I grew up with:

The O’Jays 1975 hit “Living for the weekend” it starts out with the words. “Let me just sit down and relax a minute, Thank God it’s Friday and I just got paid…”

**Slide #7**

And then there is

“Working for the Weekend” written by the Band Loverboy and released in 1981 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahv5gFHzIlc Play from :40-1:05

“everybody’s working for the weekend, everybody needs a second chance.”

We have enculturated this belief so deeply that we see it now showing up in many aspects of our lives. Work as a means to an end, the end being our leisure time-
partying, playing and letting down our hair, so to speak. Leisure as the ultimate goal. I am not objecting to leisure activity, I am objecting to it as the goal and purpose of our work.

Co-related to this are our concepts of work and retirement. There are a number of ways this shows up in our minds and hearts. One key way is the belief that we are working so that we can retire into a life of leisure. Legislation supports this- we have mandatory retirement ages; Social Security becomes available when you hit a certain age, you pay in so you can get a payout. Whole industries have grown around retirement in the financial services space, in the adult real estate space- the over 55 community in the sunny parts of our country and more. The message it sends—you have worked hard- gritted it out, now enjoy the fruits of your labor. This is not necessarily wrong, but I do think it represents an incomplete theology of work. Nowhere in the canon of Scripture do you see the notion of retirement. People age, their roles change as do their capabilities but the idea that somehow there is an “out to pasture season” that should be sought after is very dehumanizing. In our youth oriented society, I think we are continually undermining the richness and wisdom that comes from our elders. They are the wisdom keepers of our generation and we should cherish them, not dismiss them.

Bruce Bickel, who many of you know, left his role at PNC two years ago after almost 30 years of service. When I talked with him about what is next for him, he said “I will never retire, God will simply reassign me.” He continues to teach and counsel many of us. His vocation and identity did not go away with his job, he is now deploying it in lots of different ways.

One author commented on the difference between retirement leisure and Sabbath like this:

So Sabbath, unlike leisure, alternates with work. The time is set apart, or holy, in that it is a disruption of our normal routine. The retiree who plans an uninterrupted life of leisure isn’t alternating leisure with anything else. Unlike the Sabbath rest, a life of pure leisure isn’t an in-breaking of another mode of being in the world.

God gives us the Sabbath, not as a suggestion but as a command, Sabbath and work in right relation to one another help us to begin to then view and
understand....

The Grace of Work

If work is a grace, a gift then how do we receive that grace and understand that the places where we do our work we are to bring glimpses of the coming Kingdom, of shalom. And what is the implication of this grace in our post-modern world?

- 15 years ago, Henry Blackaby widely shared his vision that the mission field of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century was the workplace- here in the West and beyond.
- A few years ago Katherine Leary Alsdorf stated that the primary place of evangelism and spiritual formation in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century will be the workplace.

That in post-Christendom the ways in which people connect with God will rarely happen in the church or through the kinds of evangelism we were equipped for in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. We must reset everything. If this is true, what are the implications for:

2. The workplace:
   i. Genesis model for business and - the purpose of good work is to provide goods and services for the flourishing of the human community and to offer people a places to make meaningful contributions in community.

The workplace is a primary means for the affirmation and restoration of human worth and meaning. It is the primary place of true Biblical Justice which John Perkins teaches us starts with radical love and hospitality. Hospitality that is not less than inviting your neighbors to dinner, or providing a meal for a family in need but a much more robust hospitality that embodies the biblical concept of “Welcome the Stranger”

**Slide #7a**

One of the best examples of this kind of hospitality I have ever come across is the story of a Car Dealer named Don Flow. Don owns Flow Automotive in the mid-
Atlantic region, a group 20 dealerships established in the 1950’s and taken over by Don from his dad in the late 1970’s. Don went to his pastor to get counsel on how to run his business based on biblical principles. The advice he got was to put some tracks in his service waiting rooms and pray before meetings. He knew there had to be more and his search led him to Regent College in Vancouver and Professor Paul Stevens who told him to study the book of proverbs and come back with all the business principles he found. This led to Don to build a culture of radical hospitality that included:

- Equalizing both prices and interest rates so that people with lower financial means and education did not pay higher prices and interest rates
- His service departments were run on the value of caring for every customer as if they were a guest in your home, and the stories of how that has played out over 30+ years abound.
- Flow provides scholarship programs for all children of employees
- There is a benevolence fund that any employee can access for an emergency need with no questions asked and no expectation of payback for up to 5k.

3. The Church
   i. In 2010 Mark Greene challenged the church to re-examine its purpose with this question- does the church exist:
      1. To recruit the people of God to use some of their leisure time to join the missionary initiates of church paid workers.”?
      Or
      2. “To equip the people of God for fruitful mission in all of their lives”
   ii. We all have the same 168 hours in a week. Research tells us that Christians spend on average 3 hours per week involved in church related activities. If we spend 50 or so of those asleep, then that leaves 115 or so for our waking hours.. So that leaves over 100 hours a week that we are working, playing, sabbathing, serving- how are we equipping our people for fruitful mission for all of their
lives!
This will require the re-examination of many of our programs and church activities, indeed, it will require a radically new paradigm in how the church actually understands equipping and discipleship. We here at MPC are embarking on a journey this fall into a powerful series called ReFrame. It will be good, and hard and provocative and it will help us make the shift to becoming a church that discipless every member for fruitful mission in all of life.

Martin Luther King Jr. had this to say about the grace of work:
   If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep the streets like
   Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like
   Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven
   and earth will pause to say, “Here lives a great street sweeper; who swept his
   job well.”
   -Martin Luther King, Jr.

I want to close with a story of the kind of workplace that demonstrates the Grace of Work....

**Dump Slide #8**
The Dump:
In the community where we spend time in each summer, there exists the town dump. Now I don't know about dumps in other communities but the dump in Boothbay is something to behold, truly.
Here are a few of the notable things about the dump:

- It is incredibly well organized.  **Dump Slide #9**
- There are areas for each kind garbage, recyclable including glass, cardboard, paper, metal, yard trimmings, grass, building materials, food scraps and more.  **Dump Slide #10**
- There is the “pick’ dump where items that are still usable but may need some repair are taken to be made available to anyone who wants to “pick” them.  **Dump Slide #11**
- They turn tree trimmings into mulch- free if you haul.  **Dump Slide #12**
The motto on their website reads “we have a place for just about everything”.

More astonishing than the dump itself and it is a bit astonishing, are the people who work there. They may not be highly educated, but boy do they know their work well. There is clear pride and ownership in the smooth running of the dump, and it runs like a well-oiled machine. They direct you exactly where you need to go to unload your haul, whatever it is. These folks are mostly longtime residents of the region, living on a small income. In many places they might be considered marginalized, vulnerable or at risk. And perhaps they are, but don’t tell them that. They are clearly aware that the work they do is vital to the wellbeing of the entire community. This, my friends, is good work. Work the way God intended. These people are not “just” the garbage people. They are doing Just work that serves the human community and brings a needed kind of order.

David Brooks quoting Wendell Berry. “The name of our proper connection to the earth is ‘good work,’” Wendell Berry wrote, “for good work involves much giving of honor. It honors the source of its materials; it honors the place where it is done; it honors the art by which it is done; it honors the thing that it makes and the user of the made thing.”

Work is good, God invites us to join him as co-creators in everyday work. Our identity comes from him and we bring it to our work everyday. Work is first and foremost about contribution, not remuneration. And work apart from Sabbath rest, is wrongly ordered.

Work is gritty. Work, like everything else has been broken by the fall and our work has parts of it, sometimes large parts of it that are hard, filled with toil and difficulty. But work is grace. It is the place where we can bring the very best of ourselves in service to something greater than ourselves, it is worship- where we demonstrate neighborly love, it is Avodah. So how do you view your workplace? As a place of ‘just work’- get me my check and get me out of here? Or do you view it as your mission field, a place of Just-ness where you might be the best chance your co-workers have of encountering the living God?
Let us pray.
Gracious God, you indeed establish our work for us and call us to be co-creators with you through our work for the flourishing of your world. May we leave here today with a fresh perspective on the work you have called each of us to put our hands to, whatever it is, wherever it is. You worked and we work, work is good and it is a grace. May we view our work as integral to our discipleship and our formation and may we start each day praying that we can bring our identity in you to our work each day. Help us to re-order our daily work for our good and your glory.
In Christ’s name
And All God's people said-
Amen

The Benediction:

Psalm 90 is considered part of the wisdom literature and is attributed as a prayer of Moses for his people, long in exile. It is a reminder that despite our circumstances, it is God who establishes, makes firm, our work. And it is a gift.

Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.  
13 Relent, LORD! How long will it be?  
Have compassion on your servants.
14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,  
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
16 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
for as many years as we have seen trouble.
18 May your deeds be shown to your servants,  
your splendor to their children.
17 May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;  
establish the work of our hands for us—  
yes, establish the work of our hands.