

Years ago, my brother was waiting on a flight to Las Vegas for a training course. He and several of his physician colleagues were traveling together. As the plane prepared to board they called the first-class passengers, as they do. One of his colleagues stood up and started walking toward the plane. “Tom,” my brother yelled, “are you not booked in with the rest of us?” His colleague, who is a very tall man answered, “You all can ride in the back with the chickens if you like, but I am not flying all the way to Vegas with my knees crammed against my elbows.”

I thought about that particular moment this week as I read Frank Bruni's column in the *New York Times*.¹ In years gone by, if you were tall, you either had to buy a first-class plane ticket, or you arrived early to the airport, gambling that a kindly ticket agent would take pity on you and place you in the exit row seating, where you might pass your flight without feeling like a pretzel. But now, now you can buy that privilege. For an extra premium over the price of the flight, we can spring for the right to fling the emergency exit hatch right off the side of the plane and help our fellow passengers down the inflatable shoot. We will pay for the privilege of that extra six inches of legroom. And just so we're clear, I am not judging you, if you do. I have sat crammed against the bulkhead enough times that I can't definitively say what I wouldn't be willing to do to extend my legs fully during a transatlantic flight. And I'm not even six feet tall. But Bruni says, though, by monetizing it, by attaching value to it, or making it a perk that comes with airline status, we've turned it into something else. Rather than being a service we render to our fellow passengers, it is now also a marker of value. He writes, “Lately the places and ways in which Americans are economically segregated are popping up everywhere. The plane mirrors the sports arena, (I'm leaving that alone), the theater and the gym.”

I was shocked. I have not encountered any class stratification at my gym. But he went on. “No sooner does a fitness trend appear than it spawns strata, so that you can spin in candlelight at SoulCycle, in less gilded trappings at Crunch, or in bare-bones fashion at the YMCA. There's an accordant price scale. Even the fanciest gyms have rungs of enhanced fanciness, as such executive locker rooms. At Equinox (I guess that must be a gym in New York City) trainers are designated by their numbers – tiers 1, 2, and 3 – that signal both their experience and their hourly rate, and (get this) there are deluxe inner sanctums within certain Equinox clubs, where they use eye scanning technology to see who belongs.”

He went on to write about our Hertz status, our Delta level, our insurance plan, our TSA pre-qualification, as well as the ability to buy the rights at certain theme parks to step in front of other waiting patrons to go on a ride. How utterly and completely exhausting! But seriously, I thought for a while about what it takes to achieve such status, and of course, I know that your smartphone will track it all for you. And I have personally stayed in some fine hotels, on points after all. But as I thought about what it takes to accrue those advantages, let alone the means of just monitoring them, it left me all but exhausted.

1 Bruni, Frank. *The Extra Legroom Society*, in the New York Times. 11/12/2013

I wonder sometimes if exhaustion is not one of the greatest challenges facing the church and culture today. I listen to some of what particularly our parents of children here at the church have to juggle in order just to make life work. It makes me tired on their behalves. Indeed, a while back, I toyed with the idea of asking Melinda to have a banner printed up to go in the place out by the street on Morningside Drive, that read simply, "Come sit for an hour and do just one thing, 11 AM Sundays."

Constant activity strikes me at times as a perverse way of seeing value and a strident means of managing life.

Of course, I'm quickly told and rightly so, that this is the way the world works today. This is the reality of life. The fact that the I-85/I-285 interchange is perfectly capable of depriving me of an hour of my life if I am so foolish or so misfortunate to be there at 4:30 in the afternoon, is immutable. It doesn't really matter whether I like it or not or how much I rail against the stupidity of placing that many cars on a mere 14 lanes at one time, it doesn't change. That's life. That's the reality we're dealing with. That's the reality we've dealt ourselves, and it isn't going anywhere. Just like me, if I'm sitting on the highway that time of day. Pretending otherwise is foolish. It's not changing. It's not going away. It's life. But surely it's exhausting, sometimes?

I read this past week that the National Institutes of Health reports that one in five Americans is living with fatigue so severe that it interferes with the living of daily life. Fatigue can lead to depression, irritability, and a general negative outlook on life. This is no secret.

And yet the apostle writes to the church in Thessalonica, and by extension to us, "Do not be weary." It can sound a little tone deaf, at times, don't you think? Surely, women and men worked just as hard then as they do now, perhaps harder. The Psalmist notes that the manner of our lives is toil and labor, and yet, there are more people I know than not who are working very hard, for long hours, who are energized and happy and enthusiastic about what they are doing. And there are still others who perhaps are not as enthusiastic, but muddle through and don't find their labors to be excessively tiresome or onerous. It reminds me of a minister I worked with a number of years ago. Joan would regularly admonish me to be sure that I took my day off. If she saw me in church, she wanted to know why. If I returned an email to her on Friday, she would reply saying, "This is all well and good, but I'm not even going to read your email until tomorrow because you are OFF today!" And she worked more hours than I could count.

So I pressed her on it once. Joan, how is it that you, who admonish me regularly to take a break, are working in excess of 60 hours a week? You wake up at 4:30 so you can be in the gym by five. You're in the office by 6:30. I leave most nights around six, and you're still here. And you're worried about me burning out?

She replied, "I hear you, but I like it. First," she said, "note this - I always take my day off. Saturday is my day off, and it is my Sabbath. I do no work on that day. I pray; I light a candle. I read a book, but I do not do work on my Sabbath. Second," she said, "I firmly believe that when the work you are doing is that which you find deeply meaningful, that which brings you joy, you're not going to burn out."

I have wondered, through the years, if she's right. As I have moved in ministry through different roles, I have certainly noted the times when the hours grew later and later, and I and others departed from the church in the dark to drive home. And I think she's on to something, because when the work we are doing matters, when we were doing it together and we know it matters. We can see how it's going to make an impact on the community, on this church, on our life together. We may be tired, but we don't leave exhausted.

Vocation, or calling, is doing that work that brings our labors into alignment with God's hope for the world. Maybe it is easier to keep working when we know that our labors are in alignment with God's hope for the world. And if you think calling is just for preachers, it's not.

God calls all of us to work for the kingdom. Some of us are fortunate to do it for pay. Many of us find that place where our labors align with God's hope for the world is in fact that place where God has called us.

I never get tired of Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation – *where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger*. Where our labors align with God's hope, you know, that can be done in many different ways; I don't want to suggest that it always has to be done by what we do for pay, by any means.

For many years, my father worked in a job he didn't like very well, frankly, because it paid a lot. And I'm grateful he shifted toward the end of his career toward something he enjoyed more. But he will quickly tell you if you ask him, that the years that he worked in that job he didn't love were not wasted, because he said, "It was a means to an end. And I loved what it enabled me to do. I loved that it enabled me to provide for my family. I loved it enabled me to take time off. I loved that each of you was able to get the advantages that I didn't have."

So, vocation is not always what we do for pay, but it is where the work that were doing comes into alignment with what God hopes for the world. We call that hope for the world Shalom. It is God's peaceable kingdom.

The overwhelming evidence suggests that when labors have rewards they are more easily sustained. When we see the value in what were doing, whether it's for the purpose of helping a client, for healing the sick, preaching the gospel, teaching a child, paying the tuition - it makes it that much easier, because it has meaning; it becomes sustainable. It's easier then not to be weary.

But then we come to that Letter to the Thessalonians, to that troublesome line that Paul threw out there. "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." That is not a political statement. Paul is not writing about minimum wage; he is not writing about right to work laws. He is pragmatic to the core, and the answer to what is addressing lies in the Letter itself. This is about a particular problem in the Thessalonian church. Yet I understand, as we read it, it might sound vaguely un-Christian to us. It might sound explicitly un-Christian to us. If you won't work, don't eat. Doesn't sound like the way that we assign value in the Christian faith, does it, by how much work we do? In fact, it sounds a little different from that place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger, doesn't it? As is generally the case, though Paul is writing for a specific problem. And the

problem is this: Yes, there are people who are not working; that seems straightforward. The answer Paul seems to suggest is to give them a little hungry therapy, and that will motivate some action. But that's not what's going on.

Drew read for us this morning from Luke's Gospel a passage about the day of the Lord. It is a recurring biblical theme. There are places where people seem to pine for the day of the Lord and ask for it, but if we pay close attention to what Drew read, it doesn't exactly sound like a day any of us would much look forward to - temple walls being thrown down, all manner of disaster. And yet you will find it all over the Gospels. You will find it all through the Hebrew scriptures. It is a deep, deep part of the Old Testament - the idea that there is a day of the Lord.

Throughout the pages of scripture, there is a theme that God's work remains unfinished, and that one day when all is said and done, the work of God will be concluded. That's a big day. That is the day of the Lord. There's all sorts of imagery attached to it. Some of it is the stuff we don't want to encounter at all in our lives. Some of it is a bit more beautiful. One of the beautiful spirituals in our hymnal sings that is the day "When the stars begin to fall..." There's all sorts of imagery associated with the day of the Lord. But it all points to a nexus, where it all comes together, where God's vision of creation as it can be, as it should be, becomes present reality - when the existence of all of us share together, that all the world shares together, is God's Shalom, God's peaceable kingdom, where there is always enough, where there is no war, no disease, no famine. It is the perfection of creation. It is God's Shalom. It is a wonderful image.

The problem is some of the Thessalonian Christians were convinced, absolutely convinced, that this was going to happen right after lunch, or right after breakfast, or while they were in the shower. They thought it was imminent. So they wanted to be ready, and they consequently quit work, and quit working. But then day after day, the day of the Lord didn't happen. It wasn't after lunch. It wasn't after breakfast or while they were in the shower. On and on it went. And with all of this idleness, they got bored. And when they got bored, they got to meddling. They didn't have anything else to do, so they would spend their days as unofficial supervisors of other people's work. Now I have to tell you, there are few things in life more irritating than an unofficial supervisor, don't you think? And to them, Paul wrote: *That is enough! That is enough! There is work to be done. If you don't want to do it fine! Get out of it. Leave us alone. We have things to do.* When work doesn't matter, it becomes meaningless.

But generally, it does matter. Generally work does have meaning. The Reformer Martin Luther had a wonderfully developed doctrine of vocation. He would say everything we can do, we do for the glory of God. Whatever you do, you do it for the glory of God. And that's how the possibility of using our labors for the good of the world comes together. That's how that peaceable kingdom is lived out. That's how we align our labors with God's hopes and dreams for creation. That's how that deep hunger and that deep gladness come together, when we are doing the labor that we do, the work that we do, for the good of each other, for the good of those we encounter, with an eye for all the ways that God has blessed us.

That is a little different from just muddling through, because the simple reality is Jesus probably isn't going to come after lunch today. There was a cartoon I read a number of

years ago. It came in the form of a memo. It read simply, “Jesus is coming. Look busy.” Now I’m not going to rule it out! Jesus might come after lunch today. But in this instance I would say past performance does seem to indicate future trends. I would not count on it, and all through his writings Paul seemed to do that - to count on Jesus’ return any day. All through his Letters, they’re tinged with this expectation, this hope that Jesus is coming back. But despite all that, despite that expectation, despite that hope that the day of the Lord was coming, that Christ would return, he kept on working. And he kept on working because the work he was doing mattered, and he knew the work that everyone he encountered was doing could matter. “Do not be weary,” he said, “in doing what is right,” because that is the way that God’s work gets done in the world, when what we are doing is right.

I read article this past week on NPR by Matt De La Pena. I’d never heard of him. He is an author of adolescent fiction. But as he wrote and told his story he said it was not always a foregone conclusion that he would become a writer of adolescent fiction. He was an athlete; he was a macho guy. He thought reading books, he said in his own words, was for the sensitive... his own words. “If there was one thing a guy couldn’t be in my *machista*, Mexican family, it was sensitive.”²

It all changed though when he was in college. One day, a professor during his sophomore year handed him a novel and asked him to read it. The professor said to him, “I don’t care when you read it, just sometime before you graduate. And when you have read it come back and talk to me. We’ll talk about what you read.” He was intrigued by this book that his professor had handed him. One night after a basketball game, he opened it up. It was slow going at first, and as he continue to read he found that he devoured it. When he came to the last paragraph of the book, the tough guy found he was fighting back tears. The book was *The Color Purple*. His professor told him when they discussed it, that what she loved best was that even in the harshest and ugliest of circumstances, there is still hope. And he decided that’s what he loved best, too. It was a moment of redemption with deep, deep repercussions. You see, we don’t ever give up hope in this world, while we are waiting for the world that is to come.

Yes, we are waiting on Jesus. As we move into the Advent season, that will become more and more clear, but the work that we are doing now matters. The way we do it, what we do, it matters, because it can be - indeed, when we are living in our calling it is - God’s way of working in the world.

There’s an old bit of rabbinical wisdom that I love: It says that when God was just about done creating the world, God paused and left a little bit of creation undone, so that you and I could participate in concluding God’s work and bringing that wonderful Shalom, that peaceable kingdom into being, here all around us, in everything we do.

Do not 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.

2 De La Pena, Matt. *Sometimes the “Tough Teen” is Quietly Writing Stories*. NPR.com 11/11/13