

A Theology of Work

By Jim Lewis

THE BIBLE IS A WORK OF ART. It is also a series of books about the art of work.

One could easily say that the Bible begins and ends with the subject of work. Work is the alpha and omega of God's existence in the world. And we are the apprentices of the worker-God who trains us to do creative and fulfilling work.

The book of Genesis begins with God laboring to make the earth, along with the fullness of the earth, and is completed in the book of Revelation with a vision of God creating the heavenly Jerusalem. God, in effect, is a day laborer who works overtime fashioning the world and all that dwells therein, and, one might add, takes a much needed day of rest.

What transpires between Genesis, the initial book of the Bible, and Revelation, the final book, is the record of an unforgettable unfolding of God's work in the world, and, for better or for worse, the work of men and women striving and struggling in the place just east of Eden.

Yet even though work plays such a dominant part in the Bible, one is hard-pressed to find much written today about the theology of work. Even though human beings spend the bulk of their lives at work, the subject of the spirituality of work is too often overlooked. Perhaps we are too busy with work to contemplate it. Perhaps we have not taken the time to connect what, in fact, is inseparable — the link between God and labor, work and worship.

Work east of Eden

After Adam and Eve fell from grace into guilt, work fell from blessing to burden.

Tucked away in the third chapter of Genesis are those hauntingly dreadful words about work following the unhappy "apple harvest" in the Garden of Eden.

Accursed be the soil because of you.
With suffering shall you get your food from it every day of your life.
It shall yield you brambles and thistles,

and you shall eat wild plants.
With sweat on your brow shall you eat your bread, until you return to the soil, as you were taken from it.
For dust you are and to dust you shall return.

(Gen. 3:18-19)

Because we have ambivalent feelings about work, it is easy to read these words from Genesis and say, "Well, that's just the way work is. It's a burden we just must bear." What is often forgotten, however, is that these Bible verses are a description of work *after* "The Fall." What is often lost in the reading is the fact that God does *not* intend for work to be dismal and oppressive. Creation is good (Gen. 1:31), human beings have been made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and we are called to share in the creative activity of God. We are invited to be stewards of God's bounty, fashioning and shaping the world with dignity and respect. Work is only boring and anxiety-producing when it is unjust and oppressive — when it is focused on greed and not the glory of God.

The religious community, if it is to be faithful to God's covenant, must ask serious questions about the nature of work in our cities and villages east of Eden. Are we producing good and worthwhile products? Are workers paid a livable wage with health care and pension benefits? Are workplaces safe? Are jobs supportive of family life? Do workers have the ability to organize for necessary changes in the workplace without fear of being fired? Do workers have adequate housing? Is the globalization of work causing problems for workers and consumers? And what is our responsibility as people of faith to those who have no work, or cannot work — the unemployed and disabled?

A recent *New York Times*/CBS Poll found that "American workers were more anxious about the economy than at any time since 1993." It was reported that the mood at work across the nation was full of anger and anxiety. Churches have a responsibility to examine and address the malaise felt by workers living in their communities.

Jesus among the “dissed”

In the modern parlance of young people, to “diss” someone is to be disrespectful of them — to cast them aside as not very cool or important. Dissed people are relegated to the fringe of society’s concerns.

Jesus loved those who were dissed. He gravitated to the dis-traught, dispossessed, disenfranchised, disabled, discarded people. One might paraphrase scripture by saying that Jesus preached a message in which the first shall be last and the dissed shall be first.

Those folks are still with us. They are society’s disposable people.

The people who do the hard labor that brings us our food, clothes and the many services we all depend on for our daily life are hired hands. They are often treated as disposable people because as soon as their hands give out (or other parts of their bodies wear thin from the work they do), they are fired or discharged. Companies look for new hands — hands that will work for less, be compliant and not complain and never attempt to join a union.

Churches say grace over lovely parish hall suppers, but too often parishioners do not know what injustices they bless. The chicken on the plate comes from farmers who are close to bankruptcy because of the poor contracts forced upon them by poultry companies, and from a large black and immigrant process-plant workforce that makes less than livable wages in an unsafe environment. The vegetables and fruit that deck the plate are picked and gathered by migrant workers — one of the most exploited populations in our nation.

The church in search of its collective soul

The wisdom of church tradition informs us that, “where the church, there Christ.” In other words, where two or three are gathered together in Christ’s name, we are promised that He will be with us.

But there is another side to that wise saying: “Where Christ, there the church.” Wherever people are broken on the anvil of social, economic or political injustice, Christ is present there. Christ is there among all who live outside the walls of the church and, in particular, Christ is present among all who are victims of injustice. It could be said that Christ is there awaiting the arrival of a church committed to connecting worship with the work of justice.

It must not be forgotten that the church exists as a community — a body of disciples searching for its collective soul. The church must be in touch with the social, economic and political systems that keep people poor and disenfranchised.

The Episcopal Church oftentimes has represented the perspective of management and, therefore, has lost touch with working-class people, as well as the unions that represent them. Building bridges to workers and union members is critical if the Episcopal Church is going to be a part of the reform so desperately required in work-

places all over the nation and world.

Churches are called upon to provide charity for the poor, and that is a reasonable expectation. But more is required if the church is to be responsible. The church is called to address the working conditions that keep people poor, hungry, homeless, without health care and unable to provide for their families. The plate will only be half full if a church:

- opens a soup kitchen, but fails to address why people are poor and hungry;
- gives clothes to folks in a flooded Appalachian hollow, but fails to address the strip mining by coal companies that causes flooding;
- calls on the sick, but fails to address the industrial pollution and environmental community hazards that makes people sick;
- welcomes newcomers to church, but fails to welcome an immigrant population that has moved into the community to work at a local plant;
- prays for the president and governmental officials, but fails to work on legislative issues that affect the health and welfare of the community and country;
- develops an active youth group, but fails to raise questions about how children are being subjected to violence and war by the media and militaristic national priorities; or
- organizes a congregation for worship but fails to see that workers here and around the world are being denied their democratic right to form unions and engage in collective bargaining.

In a global economy, the church will be called upon to address the social, economic and political ramifications resulting from jobs moving out of the United States, and an immigrant work force crossing U.S. borders in search of jobs.

“All that is seen and unseen” beckons to be recognized

Church members acknowledge and affirm a worker-God by saying the Nicene Creed, where God is described as the “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.” In so doing, congregations acknowledge not only the work and worth of God, but also the church’s mission to search out, befriend and serve people who are often hidden from the community — the invisible people among whom God resides — the people who provide the goods and services that sustain life in the community. Making this journey across deep racial, cultural and class boundaries that divide people is the challenge that faces Christians as they risk moving outside the safety of their own ecclesiastical boundaries in order to work out their salvation with “fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

Quite simply, it is the cost of discipleship. It is the work of the People of God. ●

about the author

Jim Lewis is a labor activist, Episcopal priest, and author of “Notes Under the Fig Tree” <<http://go.to/thefigtree>>, a regular column on social justice and faith. He lives in Charleston, W.V.

For more information: Learn about the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice (NICWJ), online at www.nicwj.org and the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice (ENEJ), online at www.episcopalchurch.org/peace-justice/enej/

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