

Isaiah 65:17-25
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

23rd Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
November 13, 2022

Moochers and Busybodies

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson today from Isaiah 65, God is the speaker throughout, and what God speaks of is wonderful works that he will bring about, not beyond, but within history, within life as we know it. In this vision death is still present, but it does not ruin life. People still work, but justice is present. Listen to these words from Isaiah 65:17-25 . . .

Introduction to New Testament Lesson

Both letters to the Thessalonians speak to the matter of idleness. Some of the people thought that since they expected that the Lord's coming again would happen in the near future, they might as well put down their tools, fold their arms, and wait. But there were other instances of idleness unrelated to end-time expectations—a kind of general shiftlessness. In either case, our Epistle lesson today has something to say. Listen to these words from 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 . . .

Sermon

A woman went with her husband on a visit to the doctor's office. When the checkup was over, the doctor asked the man to wait outside so he could talk to the wife. The physician had a very somber look on his face and asked her to sit down.

“Madam, your husband is suffering from a very severe stress disorder. If you don't do what I ask, he is not going to make it. Here's what I want you to do. Get up early each morning and fix him a healthy breakfast. Make him a nutritious lunch and prepare a really special dinner every night. Be pleasant at all times.

Don't burden him with chores or discuss your problems with him. You will need to do almost all the work around the house. And, you can't nag him about anything. If you can do this for a year, your husband will completely regain his health.”

As they were driving home, the husband turned to his wife and asked, “Well, what did the doctor say?” To which she replied, “He said you’re going to have a very difficult year!”

Sloth is listed as number six of the Seven Deadly Sins. Well, in our Epistle Lesson today this deadly sin is seen to be present in some members of the church in Thessalonica. As noted in the introduction some have decided that since they believe that the Lord is coming soon, they might as well stop working. Others just appear to be lazy. And for Paul, this is a matter of grave importance. So he doesn’t pull any punches.

Regardless of the reason for such idleness, Paul’s instruction is to avoid such persons. (2 Thessalonians 3:6a) And those unwilling to work should not eat. (3:10b) Upon first reading, these words seem to go against parts of scripture where we are encouraged to feed the hungry and provide for the poor. In the Book of Ruth we see how Israel was instructed by God to follow the practice of Gleaning, whereby some of the wheat or barley harvest was left for the poor and the foreigner. But these people did have to go out to the fields and glean for themselves. They did have to work to eat.

Neta Pringle, a Presbyterian minister in Delaware, tells a story about an elder in a former Church:

John had grown up poor. As he put it, “We weren’t just poor. ‘We was poaw.’ When Mama said there was pork chop for dinner, that’s what she meant. One chop and everyone got a bite.” He was one of the fortunate ones. People had helped him along the way. He had gone to college and was now a grade-school principal. And he was eternally grateful for what had come his way, so he always tried to help others when he could.

John lived in a poor town, so there was ample opportunity to help people. And one day a man approached him with a great tale of woe. He said that he had not eaten in days. Well, John was street smart enough to temper his desire to help with some cynicism. “I’m not going to give you money, but I will buy you a sandwich. What do you want? Roast beef?” “Sure.” “With mayo?” “Sure.” It was a good sandwich. John felt he had done the right thing—until he heard behind him a voice calling out to a passerby, “What will you give me for this good roast beef sandwich?”

Apparently, there are some folks like that in the congregation at Thessalonica. They know how to play on good intentions, so Paul tells them, “If you will not work, you cannot eat.” Of course, he wasn’t talking about people who *want* to work, but for one reason or another, cannot. There are many who are disabled and cannot work. An accident, or an illness, or something they were born with makes it such that they cannot work. Paul is not talking about them. He’s talking about those who want to lie around and let someone else provide for them. They put their energy into manipulating the system rather than going out and getting a job.

Now Jews, like Paul, believed in the value of work. They believed that a father who did not teach his son to work, was in effect teaching him to steal. And of course, we have the glorious example of Jesus himself, the carpenter of Nazareth. In our Old Testament lesson today from the book of the prophet Isaiah, we hear God say,

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
 they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
 They shall not build and another inhabit;
 they shall not plant and another eat;
 for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
 and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. (vv.21-22)

Good things would come, but they would come about through work.

At Thanksgiving it’s appropriate that we note Captain John Smith, one of the most fascinating adventurers who ever sailed the seas. By the time he was in his middle twenties the farm boy from Lincolnshire had already fought battles in Hungary against the Turks. He was always eager to explore the unknown. John Smith is most famous today for his leadership in founding the colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1606-07. The English soldier, explorer, colonial governor, and author was a practical man who could not put up with idleness. He urged the young English colonists in Jamestown to build homes, plant crops, and develop trade with the

Indians. But many of the colonists preferred searching for gold instead of engaging in the hard manual labor required to get the fledgling settlement through the winter. One report states that only forty persons labored while 150 folks idled away the day. Smith quoted our passage from 2 Thessalonians today to the idlers in Jamestown who refused to work.

Our leaders today need to promote this work ethic of Paul, Jesus, and John Smith. Perhaps we've seen the bumper sticker which proclaims, "Work fascinates me—I can sit and watch it for hours." Or, "I'd rather be fishing, golfing, or hiking"—really anything but working. Our Epistle Lesson admonishes us, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." (3:10b)

Yes, it is true that anytime we give to charitable causes, there may be someone who tries to take advantage of our gift. John Calvin said, "Although there are many that are undeserving, while others abuse our liberality, we must not leave off helping those that need our aid." (*Calvin's Commentary on 2 Thessalonians 3*) We just need to be realistic about that and put in place whatever safeguards we can. That is one reason why some churches do not have a food pantry. They would rather give their donations of food to agencies that are wise and experienced in dispensing food to the needy. Paul's words about work and eating give us permission to set some boundaries. Yes, we *are* called to care for the poor and the hungry, but we are not called to enable people to take advantage of our generosity.

Having dealt with the moochers, Paul then takes on the busybodies. Every organization has them, and churches are no exception. There is a fine line between being helpful and butting in, but we all know people who are much too interested in another's business. They assume ownership of issues that are not theirs. They speak with great authority about things that are none of their business—and about which they often have information that is very limited or just plain wrong. They second-guess the decisions of others: "It should have been done this way,

not that.” They are very good at keeping things stirred up. William Barclay says that while there may be greater sins than gossip, there is no sin which does more damage to the Church. Truth is, someone who is wholeheartedly doing his or her own work will not have time to maliciously pry into the affairs of others.

Moochers and busybodies. In many ways they are just two expressions of the same malady: what is thine is mine. Such folk do not have good boundaries. They think they are entitled to whatever comes their way—money, food, recognition, or whatever. But neither the moocher nor the busybody contributes to the general well-being of the community. In fact, they prove to be disruptive.

Are you familiar with the 80/20 rule? It simply means that 80% of a group’s results come about by 20% of the people. In sales and financial services it has been observed that 80% of your income will likely come from 20% of your clients. Therefore, it would behoove you to give more attention to the 20%. While the 80/20 rule may be meaningful for a business, it’s not a good model for a church. Remember the story of the widow’s mite (Mk. 12:41-49) where Jesus praises a poor widow’s offering of two small copper coins over against others who out of their abundance had given more, but percentage-wise, had given much less.

While the 80/20 rule may not be a good model for the church, it might be revealing. If we were to apply that rule to Midway, in which group would you be? The small group that does most of the work, gives most of the money, attends most of the meetings and services? Or would you be in the larger group that is content to “let George do it,” give little, and attend only once in a while. Jesus once said to his disciples,

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” (Mt 9:37)

Speaking of rules, have you heard of the Rule of St. Benedict? From the time the first disciples gathered into a community and considered how they might live peaceably and effectively together, rules have been needed to help balance the workload. And perhaps the most well-known is the rule of St. Benedict, which dates to the sixth century.

In hopes of alleviating some of the inevitable tensions among Christians sharing a community life that involved cooking, eating, working, living, and praying together, Benedict of Nursia, the Italian Christian monk, created this rule. Therein he acknowledged different abilities and sought to accommodate each person's talents. But all are to work as they are able. John McQuiston has written a modern translation of St. Benedict's Rule. In it he speaks of the necessity of service:

No one is excused from rendering personal service to others. No one is exempted from performing the mundane tasks of daily life. Rendering service to others is necessary to our own fitness. Exempting them from common place chores endangers them to vanity. (*Always we Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living*, cited by Elizabeth B. Forney in *Feasting on the Word*, p 305.)

It was in no uncertain terms that Paul addressed those who wouldn't bear their share of the work. Those who would rather mind someone else's business and ignore their own. But Paul also has a word of encouragement for those who remained faithful to the apostles' task. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in well-doing, for as Paul said to the members of the church in Galatia, "for at the proper time we will reap at harvest, if we do not give up." (Gal. 6:9) Let us be assured that our labors will bear fruit if we maintain that vital connection of the branch with the vine—ourselves with Jesus Christ. (Jn. 15:5)

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