***SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

November 11, 2018

Texts: Psalm 127:1-2 and Matthew 6:24-34

 When our son Daniel was just a little tyke he wandered into the garden we had behind our house in Pennsylvania, and he saw hanging there a bright red cherry tomato. It was as tempting to him as the apple was to Eve! So, Daniel reached out and touched it, but he touched it a little too hard and the little tomato fell from its stem. At about that time Karen glanced out the kitchen window, saw what Daniel was up to, and called out, “Danny!” Caught in the act, Daniel tried to make things right. He picked up the tomato and tried to put it back on the stem, but it fell back to earth. He tried again – same result. He tried again and again and again, but no amount of trying was going to get that little red tomato back on the plant. His efforts were in vain, we might say. They were useless, futile, without hope, for what he tried to do was impossible, and trying to do the impossible is a vain effort.

 *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain*, says the psalmist. *Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.* Unless the Lord teaches your class or tries your case or heals your patients or cares for your children or preaches your sermon, your efforts are in vain. For, unless the Lord is involved in your work, whatever your work, your work is in vain. Unless the Lord is involved in your life, your life is in vain. Whatever you do that is of any value is what God does through you, not what you do alone. You can rise early and work late, you can pour yourself into your labors with blood, sweat, and tears; you can be the most ardent workaholic in the world, but if God is not at the center of the work you do, then all your hard work is in vain. You may make a boatload of money or get praise from your peers or have an impressive title on your door, but if God is not at the center of what you do, then all those accolades and accomplishments are for nought.

 We were created to glorify God and enjoy God forever. If our work fails to glorify God in some way, then we fall short of our primary purpose in life. If we fail to enjoy God’s good gifts, including the blessing of being an instrument of God’s good work, then we fall short of who God created us to be. Paul tells the church in Rome:

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.* (Romans 14:7-8)

But the world preaches the converse of Paul’s affirmation:

*If we live, we live to ourselves and if we die, we die to ourselves, so then whether we live or whether we die we are alone.*

If we live to ourselves and work to our own glory then we are alone; then our lives and our work are vain efforts, for try as we might, we cannot save ourselves any more than we can put that hand-picked tomato back on its stem.

 Our Christian vocation is to live, work, and play in response to God’s call to use our gifts to God’s glory. It is a call that is not limited to ordained ministry. It is a call that goes out to all God’s people, each with unique gifts that can be used to God’s glory. In the words of John Calvin:

*No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Whatever you do, do to the glory of God, for the gifts you have are precious in God’s sight, and God can use them for God’s good purposes. God promises to work through us if we will offer our hands and voices, our ears and eyes, as instruments of God’s good work. The work need not be grand and glorious, for God is at work in the simple things of life too. Emily Dickinson has phrased it well:

*If I can stop one Heart from breaking*

*I shall not live in vain*

*If I can ease one Life the Aching*

*Or cool one Pain*

*Or help one fainting Robin*

*Unto his Nest again*

*I shall not live in Vain.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

We do not live in vain if we simply offer ourselves to God’s glory and let God work through us. In things great and small, God can use us.

 In the great love hymn in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul makes clear that all our efforts are for nought if we don’t have love. Eugene Peterson (no relation) paraphrases Paul in these words:

*If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Love is at the heart of what we are to do and who we are to be. It is the true indicator of God’s hand at work in and through our work, for “*God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them*.” All that we do should reflect God’s love in us. All that we say should reflect that same love. Our lives should be songs of love sung to God and to our neighbors, not in some syrupy croon, but in concrete acts of caring and selfless sharing.

What difference might such love make? It might mean a little more patience, a little more kindness, a little more humility, a little more understanding, a little more forgiveness day to day, person to person. It might mean satisfaction in work, not from the size of the paycheck, but in faithful response to God’s call. It might mean seeing our work as God’s work through us, not just in holy acts or charitable efforts, but in all that we do each day. It might mean a whole new perspective on life and work. It might even mean sleeping a little better!

 My grandfather, for whom I am named, was one of the most successful people I have ever known. He never went beyond the 8th grade in school; he had to drop out and take a job in the steel mill and then in a bank to provide for his mother and sister after the death of his father. He once told me that in all his years of work – and he worked well into his 80s – he never woke up dreading to go to work. He looked forward to doing what he had to do each day. He saw his work as a trust officer for the bank as service to God by serving others. He had accolades for his work and a wall plastered with awards for his community service, but he measured his success not by those awards but by his faithfulness to God’s call. Banking is not usually thought of as a form of ministry, but in my grandfather’s hands it was. His work and life bore the fingerprints of God in loving concern for others. He lived to the Lord and he died to the Lord, and I have no doubt that he is, even now, the Lord’s!

 Ministry is not just the work of saints like Mother Teresa in distant places. It is not just the vocation of robed pastors in steepled churches. Ministry is what you and I do each and every day. It is our work, our calling, our life. But if it is to be ministry, then God must be at the center of it. If it is to be ministry, then love must be its trademark. If it is to be ministry, then glorifying God must be its goal. If it is to be ministry, then we must be the ministers, the willing instruments by which God does the work, for none of God’s work is in vain!

 In *A Christmas Carol* Ebenezer Scrooge found out the hard way that his work had all been in vain. His life lacked love, compassion, and any good purpose. *Arrive early, stay late, work hard, get rich* – that was his life. But as his fitful night’s sleep on Christmas Eve attested, such a work ethic did not offer much consolation, joy, or peace. Visits by the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future radically reoriented his life toward a more worthy goal, and in so doing, he found a new, happier life. It is in vain that *we rise early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil*, says the psalmist. It is in vain that we work ourselves to death and worry about our lives. Consider the lilies of the field, says Jesus; consider the birds of the air. Are you not worth more than they are? Therefore do not worry about your life, but strive first for the kingdom of God!

 Can you do that – set aside your worries, trust God, and simply let God work through you? Can you let go and let God, as they say? By centering our lives in God, trusting God’s presence among us, and allowing God to work through us, we may experience not only satisfaction in what we do, but also release from the worries of the day and perhaps better rest at the end of the day. The Lord gives sleep to God’s beloved, says the psalmist. So, beloved children of God, let go of your worries and give them to God, trust that God works through you, live in love all your days, and at night, sleep well – in heavenly peace, sleep well! For God has it all well in hand. Amen

1. John Calvin quoted by William Willimon in “Jobs and Callings: A Theology of Work”, *The Christian Ministry*, May-June 1997, p. 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson: No. 919*, ed. By Thomas H. Johnson, 1960 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, NavPress: Colorado Springs, 1993, p.424 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)