

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
September 4, 2016**

**Old Testament Lesson: Ecclesiastes 5:18-20
New Testament Lesson: Mark 2:23-28**

At our Summer Forum a couple weeks back, my wife, Yuri, told about growing up next to an Orthodox Jewish family who would ask for a favor no one else would ever ask for. Flipping a light switch.

Orthodox Jews are not permitted to work on the Sabbath, so when the sun goes down Friday and the family has a light on, the only way is to ask Yuri's dad, Michio, to come over and flip that switch. Lights out for the day and all is good with God. That works for them.

But what is work? Flipping a light switch? What difference does it make if we work on the Sabbath? Does God care about our work patterns and habits? Tomorrow is Labor Day, a day of national rest from the toil of our otherwise busy lives – managing the household, volunteering in the community, working at our jobs or on schoolwork.

Are you going to take the day off from all this? I mean really step back from it all? Do you take a day of rest each week? Does it matter – to God? The Bible tells us it does. God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and on the seventh day, God rested. We are made in the image and likeness of God. We are made to rest from the toil of our lives, at least one day out of seven.

And yet, how many of us can't even rest one day out of the year – on Labor Day? Just one day of not worrying about anything and trusting God in everything. Think about it: no worries; just trust.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says, "This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot."

In other words, we are meant to work, to toil – to eat and drink and work and be happy with that. Food, water and work – that's it. That's happiness, or it should be. That should be enough for us, according to the Bible. So, is it? Is it enough for us to have our daily bread, access to fresh water, and the satisfaction of a job well done?

No. Human beings crave more. We want more money than what's needed to survive, more clothing than we need to keep warm, more house than we need for shelter, more vehicles than we need to get from Point A to Point B, more food and drink than we need to survive. Isn't that terrible?

No, not necessarily. It's not bad to have ambition. That's a good thing. Rising in the ranks to greater responsibility and earning a greater reward in the process is fine. It's not bad to enjoy nice things or a variety of food and drink.

In fact, Ecclesiastes says, "... All to whom God gives wealth and possessions – and whom he enables to enjoy them and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts." Our work is God's gift.

To find enjoyment in whatever work you are doing regardless of the wealth and status it brings. And we all have access to that gift – to that sense of contentment. We all have access to it, but not all of us try to embrace it – contentment. It is possible - and a blessing- to be content in any circumstance.

We see this in the life of a 17th Century man named Brother Lawrence, a man who did, in fact, embrace contentment in life. Brother Lawrence was 25 when he applied to work at a monastery. But since he had no skills and no education, they put him to work washing dishes. He spent the next 55 years in that kitchen, contemplating the presence of God.

After his death, Father Joseph de Beaufort, deputy to the Archbishop of Paris, compiled the letters of Brother Lawrence into a book titled "The Practice of the Presence of God."

In one of his letters, Brother Lawrence says: "... We must give ourselves totally to God, in both temporal and spiritual affairs. Our only happiness should come from doing God's will, whether it brings us some pain or great pleasure. After all, he says, "if we're truly devoted to doing God's will pain and pleasure won't make any differences to us."

This is what Ecclesiastes is talking about! True happiness and joy come not from our possessions or job title or wealth, but from how we live our lives – either chasing after money or chasing after God.

It's like the teenager who came home from work huffing and puffing with sweat rolling down his face. "Dad," he said, "you'll be so proud of me. I saved a dollar by running behind the bus all the way home!" "Oy Vey!" said the father, "You could have at least run behind a taxi, and saved \$10."

Chasing after ***wealth does not bring happiness.***

I remember one key moment in my life growing up when I realized money doesn't buy happiness. I was a young boy wondering what I would be, and maybe worrying about it a bit. And I remember thinking to myself right then, "It doesn't matter what job I get as an adult. God is good and I will be happy doing anything."

I will be the happiest garbage man imaginable if that's what I become."
There was great freedom in that thought, in that prayer.

I realize now I was praying to God for a sense of happiness and contentment no matter what I became in life, professionally. I rely on that thought – that prayer – almost daily. The harder the work, the greater is that prayer – a powerful prayer, a living prayer, a prayer to live by.

Now this doesn't mean I don't "brood (or worry) over the days (of my life)," as Ecclesiastes puts it – we all do. We all worry that we're not enough or that we should be doing more.

But what this does mean, is that when we feel that way, those who rely on God for their sense of peace and joy have greater happiness in life. This is because such people are less likely to sacrifice their spiritual wellbeing in the pursuit of earthly treasures. That, says Ecclesiastes, is a gift from God, available to us all. We don't have to chase after money and success.

True, success in life is doing what God has called you to do, and being content with whatever rewards might come – material, yes, but spiritual even more. Being content brings happiness.

There's the take-home message from today's sermon – spending your life in the pursuit of success and money is not going to make you happy, and neither will constantly looking back, wishing you had more.

The truth is, no matter how little or how much you have in life, you will survive, you can thrive, as long as you turn to God for your sense of worth, your sense of joy.

In God, we are all loved and cared for and forgiven, we all receive mercy and get our share of do-overs, and we all get to take a day of rest from our work and worry.

This Labor Day weekend, I invite you to spend at least part of your day looking back on this sermon and remembering that it's OK just to be – be who you truly are: a beloved child of God, free to receive all that God so freely gives, as our creator, our redeemer, and our sustainer. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

You, gracious God, are love itself, and perfect love casts out fear. Come to us in merciful patience, we pray, to love us from fear to trust, from anger to grace, from doubt to faith.

Draw us out from a place of scarcity to hearts overflowing with generosity, from brokenness to wholeness, from resentments and forgiveness, freely offered just as freely it has been given to us.

Come to us, Lord, in the overwhelming you're of He whom you called The Beloved, Jesus, the Christ, who taught us to pray saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**