

# “Holy Spirit Inspired Work”

Ecclesiastes 2:24, Psalm 90:1-2 & 14-17 & 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

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**Prayer for Understanding** Help us to take a deep breath, to reflect as we journey from summer to fall. Remind us again that you are in the rhythm of our lives, you are offering the unforced rhythms of grace, you are with us in every season of life. Open our hearts, eyes and minds to your rejuvenating love. Amen.

Ecclesiastes encourages us to find “**satisfaction in work**”. The psalmist prayerful sings, “**O prosper the work of our hands!**”

As a child my Sunday worship work was to nudge my dad whenever he started snoring during church. Years later as a teenager, as I worked side by side with my dad, I often joined him in sleeping during worship. As dairy farmers, sleep was often in short supply. The warm sanctuary in the cold of winter and finally being able to sit after our physical work was ideal for sleep. During planting and harvesting seasons, sometimes we worked for several days with only a few hours of sleep. Yet, my parents always insisted that we attend Sunday worship.

One day I was playing horseshoe with Reverend Everhard and apologized for sleeping during worship. He replied, the Holy Spirit helps each person do the work they need to do during worship. For you and your dad, sometimes what you most need is sleep. Some people need to reflect on a divisive conversation and plan how they will gracefully mend that relationship. Some people need to be joyful over a past happening or be joyful for an upcoming adventure. Some people need to grieve. Some people need a period of time without interruptions. Some people need to imagine how they will lovingly serve. Some people need to daydream. And sometimes for a few people their work is to listen to the sermon.

The Apostle Paul wrote, **1 Corinthians 12:4-6 NLT** “**There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us.**” The Holy Spirit helps each person do the work they need to do during worship and in their daily life.

Pastor John Buchanan said, “I told my mother one time that I was bored sitting in church and would prefer to stay home. I didn’t mind the hymns, and the sermon was sometimes OK: at least there was something and someone to look at. The most boring part for me, I said, was the minister’s long prayer, which seemed to go on forever. To make matters worse, you were supposed to bow your head and close your eyes. I couldn’t concentrate, no matter how hard I tried. She surprised me by saying that sometimes it happened to her, too, and that when she couldn’t concentrate, she looked at her hands. They were right there, folded in her lap. She said she thought about everything her hands had done that week: the meals prepared, dishes washed, beds made, floors scrubbed. She said she also thought about holding my little brother’s hand and mine as we walked down the street to catch the bus to go to school. So, I began to do it, too: looked at her hands and my father’s hands. His were much bigger, a railroader’s hands, calloused, fingernails neatly trimmed but still with evidence of coal dust in spite of his vigorous scrubbing. He was a fireman on steam locomotives. His job was to shovel coal from the coal car, or tender, directly behind the engine cab, into the firebox. He explained that you had to be able to heave the shovelful of coal in one smooth motion with pinpoint accuracy. If you missed and the shovel hit the opening, coal would fly all over the cab, which made the engineer very unhappy. Later he shoveled coal into the stoker, a large screw-like device that delivered and spread the coal throughout the firebox. Before he died, he became an engineer on a diesel engine and his hands were not nearly so dirty. I often think about my mother looking at her hands in church, and it has occurred to me that she must have gotten the idea from the Ninetieth Psalm when it was read during worship, with its concluding line: “Prosper the work of our hands!”

The psalmist prayerfully sings, **Psalm 90:1-2 & 14-17 NLT** “**Lord, through all the generations you have been our home! Before the mountains were born, before you gave birth to the earth and the world, from beginning to end, you are God. Satisfy us each morning with your steadfast love, so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives. Give us gladness in proportion to our former misery! Replace the evil years with good. Let us, your servants, see you work again; let our children see your glory. And may the Lord our God show us approval and make our efforts successful. O prosper the work of our hands!**”

One day I was complaining to my dad about all the crappy work one does on a dairy farm. He explained how he sometimes found satisfaction in his work by imagining how his work was affecting other people. I found this helpful. Our work produced milk. The milk we sold was made into mozzarella cheese. Some was shredded to top Tombstone pizzas and the rest was formed into string cheese. When work became arduous, I imagined people

enjoying pizza with our mozzarella cheese, family meals, a first date, a birthday celebration. I imagined how the string cheese was nourishing a person climbing a mountain, maybe being enjoyed by a young single lady. I was after all a single teenager during this season of my life.

Ecclesiastes declares, **Ecclesiastes 2:24 NLT “So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that these pleasures are from the hand of God.”**

Professor of theology Joseph Sittler said, “The work of your hands, is precious to God: in God’s steadfast love, your work has eternal significance. Your work, in God’s eyes, prospers.”

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor has a chapter on work. She begins by listing all the jobs she has had in her life so far: “babysitter, Avon lady, horseback riding instructor, cocktail waitress, hospital chaplain, pastor, college professor;” seventeen different jobs in all. She says she still has not given up on her secret job goal: Cirque du Soleil—not as an acrobat, she hastens to add; she would be happy selling tickets.

Perhaps to celebrate Labor Day you might make a list of all the work you have ever done. You might want to include your dream job unless you are fortunate enough to have done your dream job already. Include unpaid work such as laundry, cooking, shopping, home care, caring for family. Include volunteer work such as reading to a child, opening a door for another. List all the work you do. Imagine all the good that your work has yielded. Imagine all the lives that are enhanced by your work.

Our faith tradition includes the conviction that God has a calling, a vocation, work for each of us to do. And each of us are gifted to do certain work. And the cosmos is incomplete until the day when every person does their unique work. How do you know what work you are meant to do?

Barbara Brown Taylor says that she used to think there was one particular thing God wanted her to do with her life, that God had a singular purpose for her, and her job was to discover what it is. But like most people, she wasn’t sure what it was. She waited for a voice to tell her what to do. She went to seminary in part to try to discover the answer. She prayed every night for God to speak. And then one night, something happened: in a voice in her head God said, “Do anything that pleases you . . . and belong to me.”

It was a great moment. She realized that God suggests overall purpose but not particulars, that God did not care if she became an Episcopal priest or a circus worker, that it was not what she decided to do for a living but how she did it. She was to live for God and belong to God and to love everyone.

One of the great theological breakthroughs of the Reformation is in the idea—both Martin Luther’s and John Calvin’s—that everyone, not just clergy, has a vocation. The Reformers insisted that everyone is called to glorify and love God, to love and serve neighbor, regardless of how they earn a living, and no job is more important, more essential, in God’s community than any other job. God needs street cleaners and surgeons, schoolteachers and plumbers, software designers and seamstresses, parents and pediatricians, clerks, and social workers. Regardless of what a person does to earn a living, God calls all to belong to God and love everyone—our common vocation. Luther called it the priesthood of all.

The Apostle Paul explains that there is a variety of work. Even in the church there are different skills and interests: some teach, some sweep floors, some are deacons, some are ruling elders, some are singers, some usher, some perform behind the scenes work. Everyone has a job. All jobs are equal to God.

Since all jobs are of equal status to God, no task is too small. Barbara says a parent who is spending every waking moment changing diapers and wiping applesauce off chins needs to be reminded that they are engaged in the work of forming a human being. The school janitor in the evening is providing a clean and pleasant space for children to learn in the morning. The worker who turns nuts on the bolts on the left front wheel of a car they are assembling is assuring that someone makes it to their destination safely. Every job brings us into contact with new people and teaches us new skills.

Sadly, sometimes in our distorted economy we are stuck doing work we dislike, because we need money. If this is you, then hopefully you still have some time and energy to identify something that brings you joy and the world needs. Hopefully, you can find some work that nourishes you and compels you. It might seem trivial. You might only be able to do it a few minutes a month. Remember every form of work is equal to God, paid and unpaid, being a profession athlete, doctor, a volunteer dish washer. Barbra says, “The point is to find something that feeds your sense of purpose and to be willing to look low for that purpose as well as high. It may be chopping wood and it may be running a corporation.”

God invites each of us to be true to our self, to be a unique person who does their unique work. Each person is gifted to do the work of love. Each person has additional abilities that enable them to perform work that is satisfying. Every work is of equal value. All good work brings glory to the cosmos. Gracious God prosper the work of our hands and help us enjoy satisfaction in our work. Amen.