

“Busy in the Kingdom”

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As I was looking through this passage this week, I was reminded of being a teenage boy. It might surprise my family – well, perhaps not my wife, but some of my children – to know that even though I now have degrees (I have an MBA and a Doctorate in Ministry and Masters of Divinity) there was a time when I was a rather lack-luster student. I remember being a teenage boy and my father asking me, before I played a video game or something, if I had done my homework, to which I dutifully responded “yes,” and he failed to check that I actually had done it. That was a regular occurrence throughout my high school years.

I remember my Spanish teacher pulling me aside one day and saying, “Bill, you haven’t turned in your daily assignments for three weeks.” I appreciated the opportunity to come home and play, and I wasn’t so eager to do chores or homework. I was prone to idleness.

And that is what comes to mind to me when I read this letter of Paul to his church. Paul is writing to the Thessalonians, this congregation that he founded in Thessalonica; and, this is the second letter; so, he has written them, and followed up again. He has addressed some issues he has heard about, that are happening there, and then he writes again. Both times he has to address this problem of idleness. There is no explanation as to why these people were doing this. We don’t know what it was. For some reason there were people in the community who were just not working – who were, as Paul describes it, they were busy bodies. They were concerned with everybody else’s business and not doing their own labor, and then having people in the community feed them.

Paul is admonishing them [saying] this is not good. He said, “When we were with you,” (so, when Paul and his group who were there and who were starting this church as missionaries), he said, “We could have relied on you to support us. It would have been appropriate to let you feed us, so that we could do the work of God in starting this church, but we didn’t.

“We were tent pickers. We worked while we were doing ministry in your midst, and we paid our own way; and, we did that because we wanted to set an example for you. We wanted to show you what it looked like to be followers in the kingdom of God. So even though we could have, we didn’t let you feed us and not pay you for it. We worked. So, follow our example and be imitators of God, as we are imitators of God.”

Now again, it’s speculation as to what it is that was leading these people in this church to act this way; but there are examples later in the church that are possibilities.

Calvin referred back to St. Augustine, who founded a religious order. He created one of the Monastic sects and offered them a rule – it wasn’t as successful as the Benedictine rule – but he

created a religious order of Monks. He struggled with them. He had to write a book to idle Monks, to encourage them to stop being idle and do something to help the community.

And, Luther asked, to piggyback on this, describing this strange idea that Christians might fall into, that the important work is the spiritual work and so we can do this spiritual work, and you all can do the labor.

Now that is a strange thing to bring up, as a pastor who's paid by you, to do this work [laughter]; but, what Luther was trying to get to, where he was going with this was that, he was trying to break down this separation that God's work is what we do here in this Sanctuary. When we come and we worship, when we come and we pray, when we come and we study, that is God's work; and, somehow the person who is planting in the field, or the shopkeeper who is providing for the community – the bread – or whatever else it is they are serving, that is not God's work and so the priority is the spiritual work.

That may have been the trap that these folks were falling into. It may have been that these folks were so pious that they had stopped doing anything but praying, and teaching, and being concerned with how pious everybody else was being. So, Paul here is admonishing them, if you are not going to work you are not going to eat. You need to contribute to the meeting, and it is not okay to do this.

Luther had this interesting idea: Luther said, "You know, God does not *have* to do it this way. God *chooses* to work through a milkmaid." This is how he describes it: There is a cow that has milk and we need to get that milk to the community. Now, God does not have to choose to use a milkmaid. God could just miraculously provide it. But, God is choosing to use that milkmaid; the one through whom the milk is provided for the community. As Luther puts it, this labor – these tasks – are the masks by which God's work hides. And, what he meant by that is, that all of this work that we are doing for one another, is the way that God works through us. It is the way that God is providing for one another. It is God who is doing this work and we are present in it.

Luther was trying to break down this tradition that there is this high pious work and then there are the laborers and the secular work. He was trying to help us understand that everything we do, we do as the product, or a vehicle, for God to work through.

I had spoken earlier this year on the question of why we exist. Why did God create us? What was the purpose? God brought us into the garden and God set us up to enjoy the garden and fellowship with God, but God gave us a task: to care for the garden. God gave us the purpose of being those who through God's rule entered the world. We were a mirror, reflecting God's light into the world, tending to the garden, righting what was wrong.

So, too, when Jesus came, he called his Disciples back into this vocation: "Come with me. The rein of God is again. Join with me," and the Disciples left their nets and they followed. They didn't know where he was going. They didn't know what it would mean for them, or where he would lead them, or what kind of oppression or danger he would lead them into; but they saw in him God at work, and they joined Jesus, carrying out God's work in the community.

You know, when I think about those who have laid down their vocation and turned it over, I'm drawn this weekend, in particular, to those who served in our Armed Forces. I have never served in the Armed Forces. I never even considered it for my vocation, but I contemplate what it is like to enlist. Some of you in this room have had that experience. Some of you in this room may have been drafted, and some of you have certainly served, and we enjoy the opportunity today to recognize this service, and to learn from your example. But like the Disciples who came to follow Jesus and to be the ones through whom Jesus worked, those who enlist sign up for years of service and they can't quit – they can't just walk away. If their boss tells them to go do this, they can't just say, "You know what? I'm going to find another job." It doesn't work that way. When they enlist, they sign up to do whatever it is that they are called to do; every morning they wake up, whatever it is that they are commanded to do – even into harm's way.

I was watching this week a tearful reunion. This is an opportunity for us to get a glimpse from afar, for those like me who have not served in the military or even served closely in communities with those who have.

There was a lady on a show who was about to be induced. She had two children, and about to have the third and there was a surprise reuniting. Her husband came home, and was given an opportunity to come back and be with her, and she didn't know he was coming. He was deployed overseas. He came back, and then he described and the host thanked him for his service, thanked him for what he was doing, and he said, "It is easy for me. It is easy for me to go and serve, but I'm leaving her behind with the kids, and she is the superstar in our family. She is the one who is raising these kids while I'm gone. She is the one who has gone through this entire pregnancy while I have been deployed and not here to help her."

For those who serve, they sign their lives into service and they don't know where they are going to be called. And we can see from them, people who are not idle and people who have dedicated themselves to something greater than themselves. I have never served in the military, but my suspicion is there are consequences for being idle. I have a feeling that there are some in this room who could explain to me what happens if folks try to duck their work. These are people who wake up every day, and everything they do is a service for their country.

This is an example of what Paul was trying to demonstrate to this church that he started. It is an example of people who are living their lives for something else, for being part of the good that they are called to do. So Paul, as he imitated Christ, set this example for Thessalonica and for the Monks later, who were confused about what was appropriate work and for us today.

May we follow their example. May we resist idleness and, instead, let us be used by God, not just as we gather on Sunday morning in prayer and song and study, but throughout our lives. Whether we be the medical core person on our cover of our bulletin, who is applying vaccines in humanitarian effort to help children in another country; or whether, by their example, someone putting themselves in harm's way as a door gunner in a helicopter; or, whether we are staying home raising our kids, or working and raising kids or going and doing our job in the bank, or whatever it is, let us serve our Lord Jesus Christ, that we may be the ones through whom God works, so that the community is served. Amen.