

Our Needs Are Holy To God: The Need To Achieve

Eph. 2:10; Genesis 1:27, 31 and 2:19-20a

Today is Student Sunday! So let's begin with a shout-out to our graduates and students of all ages. They have all finished the most challenging school year we could have imagined, and they did it! We should also give a shout-out to teachers who took up the challenge of distance learning and loved their students through it. And parents suddenly charged with the challenges of home schooling, and who now think teachers are vastly underpaid!

Today's need is the need to achieve. It is no small need. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs the level above Belonging is Esteem Needs, the need for the feeling of accomplishment. We all need the feeling of accomplishment. We all need the experience of achievement, of greater mastery in one area of life or another, and the pleasure we feel in this new mastery.

I

I first chose some verses in Proverbs about the virtues of hard work, but then ditched them! They were variations on the story of the Ant and the Grasshopper. We heard it from childhood, this story that extolled the virtues

of hard work and the vices of laziness. The great American morality tale. That one is already too ingrained in our minds. Can we think more deeply than that about the need to achieve?

So then I went to Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s *poeima*, poem, workmanship, work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works.” We are each of us works of art fashioned by the Creator. So now we are makers, creators of good works, works of beauty, truth and goodness. Each of us, then, is an *original*, with our own unique ways of doing these good works.

Then I went back to the creation stories in Genesis. In Genesis 1:27 we learn that God has created us in God’s own image. This *imago dei* is, as I suggested a couple of weeks ago, the *capacity to love and to be loved*. But it is also our capacity to make things, create things alongside God in the ongoingness of creation. At the end of the chapter, when God has finished the six days of creation we read: “And God saw everything that God had made, and indeed it was *very* good. Not just good, *very* good! And we get to be partners with God in the doing of good things and makers of good things.

When we move to the second creation story in Genesis 2, God gives us, humankind, the task of the naming of the animals. The naming was easy for some animals like “cat” and “dog”. But what do you call an orangutan?

And when Adam got to the opossum, we discovered he didn't spell very well. "What's that 'o' doing there!" But don't you think that there was some fun in the job of naming?

II

As the child grows the child learns mastery over one thing then another. And we watch the child experience delight as something new is mastered. We have the human need to achieve!

Wendell Berry writes about the importance of *pleasure in work*. It is the pleasure we have when we have accomplished something and the feeling we have *while* accomplishing something. Who of us has not looked at something we have finished and felt pleasure and satisfaction.

Yes, there is drudgery, sometimes misery in work, especially if there is no pleasure in it. But pleasure makes for a better product. As Berry writes, "Pleasure perfects work, and is its indispensable measure."

There is the *extrinsic pleasure* in work as we receive the rewards of our labor, but there is also the *intrinsic pleasure* in work that makes us better makers.

For me writing sermons is deeply pleasurable. Yes, it is hard work, some weeks harder than others! But without the pleasure in it, it would not be the sermon I would want to offer to you and God.

I see the pleasure carpenters take in building things. I see the pleasure teachers take in seeing their students' eyes light up with new knowledge, the pleasure business people take in providing a livelihood for others and in producing a good product. I've seen the pleasure mathematicians take in solving mathematical problems. (I don't *understand* it, but I see it!) And writers and home makers and musicians and mechanics.

There is pleasure in the mastery of some skill. So yes, the need to achieve is an important one.

III

What about the need to *succeed*? Is that the same as the need to achieve? The question deserves some probing. Who defines success for us? Is it measured by money, status, productivity? Do we let culture define it too much for us? Is there any *soul-work* in our *work-work*? What about becoming a better human being? Could that be our ultimate success?

Sometimes in mid-life people discover that their earlier definitions of success are no longer adequate. It doesn't satisfy on a soul-level. It is not work that is in partnership with God in God's purposes for the world. They search for a call within their work. They re-invent work. They sometimes change their work.

We are now talking about calling and vocation (that is what vocation means, a calling.) Young people, one of your chief tasks in the next decade is to discover what you will do as a career, a vocation, a calling. I have always found Frederick Buechner's words about calling a help. God calls you, he says, to the meeting place between your great joy or hunger on the one hand and the world's great need on the other. Where the lines intersect for you is your calling. So think about your gifts and talents, your joy and your hunger. Then think about the many great needs in the world. There is a meeting place there for you. And for us people of other ages, we may find that meeting place changing at different points of our lives.

IV

I greatly admire the writing of David Brooks, N.Y. Times columnist. In 2015 he wrote an article called "The Moral Bucket List". He talked about meeting people who seemed to radiate an inner light. They make people around them feel better. Their lives are full of gratitude. They lift us up.

Brooks wanted to find out how to be more like them. So he did research and wrote a book called *The Road to Character*¹. I recommend it.

He identifies two kinds of virtue: “resume virtues” and “eulogy virtues”. The resume virtues are the ones we use in the marketplace, the ones that define success as the world defines success. The eulogy virtues are the ones talked about at our funerals. These have to do with things like kindness, courage, honesty, steadfastness, love. I think we’d agree that the latter virtues are finally more important than the former. But how do we live so to develop these virtues?

Here is what Brooks reports:

- 1) *The Humility Shift*. We come up against our weaknesses, sins, and learn from them.
- 2) *Self-Defeat*. When our weaknesses lead to defeat and failure, we learn from them and find ways to grow as human beings.
- 3) *The Dependency Leap*. We discover how much of who we are and what we’ve accomplished have come from the assistance of others. We learn humility about how much we need others and gratitude for all the help we’ve been given along the way.

4) *Energizing Love*. Some great love can redirect and transform our lives. For Dorothy Day the great social reformer that event was the birth of her daughter, Tamar.

5) *The Call Within the Call*. We go into professions for many reasons: money, status, security. But later we discover the “call within the call”, how to make our profession a *vocation*.

In the early 20th century Frances Perkins’ life was changed the day she saw garment workers hurl themselves out to high windows to their deaths trying to escape the fire in the Triangle Shirt Factory. She dedicated her life thereafter to worker’s rights. She was the first ever woman Presidential Cabinet member, serving in the Cabinet of F.D.R.

6) *The Conscience Leap*. We discover that cultural values are not the truest ones. Brooks talks about the Commencement addresses we hear over and over that are full of the message: “Be True to Yourself”. This is, of course, important, but it can easily turn into a life with the “self curved in on itself” (Luther). Brooks says,

But people on the road to inner light do not find their vocations by asking “What do I want from life? They ask what life is asking of me.

How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world's deep needs?

Achievement, success, ambition? I'm as ambitious as the next person, maybe more. On the Enneagram I am number 3, achievement oriented. Winning. Looking good. For better *and* for worse! But I'm trying to be ambitious for the right things, ambitious for God's things, ambitious for example for Grace Baptist. Along the way, I've discovered the "call within the call". What about you?

1. David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (N.Y.: Random House, 2015).