

Busy Bees and Busy Bodies

Year C
Proper 28 (33)
November 18, 2007
Isaiah 65:17-25
II Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

I have had the good fortune to be able rearrange my schedule so that I can attend the Monday noon ecumenical lectionary group held at the International Student Center over at the University. This past Monday, the group included Rev. Grant Gillard of First Presbyterian Church of Jackson. Rev. Grant is a beekeeper and this epistle passage reminded him of when the workers expel the drones from the beehive in the fall. I will not get into the details of the function of drones in the hive, to keep this sermon G-rated, but the basics are that the female bees—the queen and the workers—do all the work of the hive. The male drones are needed for reproduction, but do not gather pollen or honey. However, they do have a purpose. Let me quote from a beekeeper reference guide, “It should always be remembered that while the drones do no work physically in the hive, they do act as the best attractant to pull disease and parasites to themselves as first targets, so workers can survive throughout the active season. Then, when the honey is in and new queens are mated, their jobs done, they are cast out to initiate cleansing the hive of its disease and parasite problems.” So casting out the drones not only gets rid of many useless honey eaters, but it also cleanse the hive of the diseases and parasites they carry!

Did St. Paul really intend that we purify the church by casting out the weak, the sick, and the lazy? Well, it seems to me that to understand this scripture, we need to put it into the context of the Church of that time. In the chapter 4 of the book of Acts, we begin

to get a feeling for the life of early Jerusalem church, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians is dated at around 50 AD, some 20 years after Christ's crucifixion. I feel that, by that time, Paul's churches had settled down to a more orderly life than those passionate first few years in Jerusalem. Paul is always an eminently practical man, and does not shy away from the practical details of life, including money. One of his priorities was organizing a collection for the Jerusalem church. In 1st Corinthians 16, he advises, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” This early form of a payroll savings plan clearly assumes that church members have a regular income. This collection and others mentioned in Acts are to be made according to each disciple's ability to pay.

Paul emphasized on several occasions that he had the right to be paid by the church for his labors, but he also emphasized that he chose not to exercise those rights, as he said in 1 Corinthians, “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast.”

So, if Paul was not paid by the churches, where did his income come from? Acts 18 describes St. Paul in Corinth: “There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” Therefore, Paul earned his living making tents, or according to one interpretation, making the mohair cloth out of which tents were made. Paul therefore had every right to say that he was not a financial burden on the church.

Paul’s statement that “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,” is clearly directed at those able to work. If the able-bodied members of the church did not work, how could the community support its widows and orphans or raise collections for the poor and for famine relief? The church, ruled by mutual love, could not let any of its members go hungry. Therefore, those who could work, but chose not to, became a burden for the rest.

Paul believed that although the Church was not “of the world” it was “in the world” and its members needed to work as their society expected. Moreover, they were to give to the church from that income according to their ability to pay. In our churches today the problem does not seem to be that our members are unemployed, but rather they cannot seem to share their frequently abundant income with the church. The beauty of tithing is that it calls on us to give a tenth of our income, not a fixed amount. However, if we give to the church last, little will be left for the widows and orphans. Although fundraisers that bring in money from outside the church are valuable and provide a good

opportunity for fellowship, the heart of our support has to be the tithes and offerings that are God's share of our paychecks and pensions.

Paul was also disturbed by the fact that those who chose not to work were "busybodies." 1 Timothy describes how those busybodies spent their time, "Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to." At our lectionary group, Dr. Kerry Wynn explained that the ancient Greek word for busybody is one who "goes around the work" without doing it. They are like drones buzzing around the hive, collecting neither pollen nor nectar, but looking busy and always ready to eat the honey. Paul suggested that we shun our drones, but only until they come back to us in shame.

Although the Christians of Paul's time looked forward to the final days, Paul had the good sense to see that the life of the church here and now had a purpose of its own, not just as a way of killing time until Christ's return. In our own time, those who have given up hope for the church and the Gospel may see the church as a safe and comfortable place to wait for the end. Unfortunately, in a church without a vision, that waiting is often filled with gossip and petty disputes.

In our world, few people spend their spare time hanging around church. In fact, our professional lives are so busy that we find it difficult enough to put aside even a few hours Sunday morning. Paul's example of being able to balance making a living and working for Christ is as relevant today, as always. Of course, Paul chose not to marry and have a family, which left more time for making tents and preaching. However, almost all

of us could benefit from a review of our priorities and maybe a little better time management, so that church is not always the item squeezed out of our schedule.

For me, going on a mission trip like our recent trip in support of the Shannondale retreat center is a good illustration of the central place of working together in our Christian life. I think we all can appreciate the commitment our members display again and again by give the church first place in their lives for meetings, choir practice, building maintenance, Bible study, mission trips, FISH, Meals on Wheels, and so many other time consuming, but rewarding ministries. One of our obligations as the body of Christ is to provide opportunities for work for all members, regardless of any limitations of their abilities. Prayer is the most important work of the church and it is available to all regardless of their physical capabilities. The church needs to offer opportunities for people to join prayer teams or prayer chains to work together for the world's salvation. There must be meaningful work available for everyone. We have learned that working together is a big part of what doing church is about. At Shannondale, each of us worked, *and ate*, according to our abilities. Those who will not work are missing out not only some good meals, but also the sustaining spiritual food of Christian fellowship.

I believe that the fact that we do church on Sunday, a day of rest, is somewhat misleading. We tend to think of church as a break from the important work our lives in or homes, workshops, and offices. It is easy to forget that the purpose of the work we do in the world is to provide resources for the much more important work that we do together in the body of Christ. This opportunity to work is a blessing for us all. As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, "We continually remember before our God and Father your work

produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.

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