

If you ever have a chance to visit the Detroit Institute of Art, you'll find when you first enter a courtyard. The courtyard has two massive murals on either side, painted by the artist Diego Rivera. They took over nine months to paint and they are enormous. But there's something kind of odd about them. Because even though they are absolutely beautiful, full of color and vibrant images, what they depict is the inside of a Ford automotive plant.

That's right. They're artwork of people making cars. Now, I don't know if you've ever seen the inside of a car plant. But I have. And it's not a pretty place. It's a lot of grey concrete and grey metal and weird smells and harsh fluorescent lights and noisy machines everywhere you go. It is not a piece of art.

But for Diego Rivera, it was. Because it was those very auto plants that built and gave life to the city of Detroit for many years. And so when he depicted them, he made them beautiful. Even though the very people who worked in those plants probably saw them only as an ugly burden.

That's true for many of us, honestly. We need jobs. We need work. We need daily labor. It keeps us alive. It puts food on the table and clothes on our backs and a roof over our heads. Losing your job is one of the scariest, most stressful things that can happen to a person.

And yet, most of us do not see our jobs, our daily labor, as a beautiful thing. As an experience worth depicting in a work of art. We do our jobs because we have to. Sometimes we enjoy them. Sometimes not. Sometimes we wish we were doing something else entirely. But there's no beauty in work.

Except that, there should be. Because there once was. In Genesis, we hear about God placing Adam in the Garden of Eden. And it says specifically that Adam was put in the garden “to work it and keep it.” This perfect world that God had created with so much beauty. This perfect world that God looked at and said, “This is very good.” This perfect world had work in it.

Adam had a job. He had daily labor. He had a vocation. To work the Garden of Eden and keep it. Adam was a farmer. And that job was very good. That job was a work of art.

But then sin came into the world and everything changed. God told Adam. *“In pain you shall eat of [the ground] all the days of your life,”* and *“by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.”* And suddenly work was no longer beautiful. It was no longer a joy to Adam. It was no longer very good. Work meant pain and sweat. Work became an ugly burden.

Now, most of us just accept this as the reality of a sinful world. It's not pretty, but it's tolerable. We find something to do with our lives that we're reasonably good at. That supports us and our families. And we say that's good enough. But, truthfully, God does have something better for us. And he reveals it to us through the words of Solomon in our Old Testament lesson today.

Solomon describes himself at the beginning of this passage as “the Preacher... the king over Israel in Jerusalem.” But although he's a preacher and although he's the king, he still struggles with work, just like everyone else. “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”

In Hebrew, there are a number of different words for “work.” The word used here we translate as “toil.” It's painful work. In Psalm 90, we read that our lives are “but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.” And that's one of the biggest problems with our labor. It's not just that it's difficult. It's that it disappears. It doesn't last. It passes away.

In our text, Solomon echoes this wisdom. He says that he hates his toil precisely because he can't control what happens to the fruit of his labor. He cannot gather the fruit of his labor and trust that it will last. In the end, he needs to leave it to others. He could build barns and then build bigger barns and use them to store all of his wealth, only to find that one night he dies and all that he has hoarded is left to others.

That's exactly what Jesus describes in our Gospel lesson as well. Working and working and working. All for that moment when you can finally rest... and then you're dead. And all those years of working, all those years of toil and trouble and pain, were for nothing. They were complete vanity. Meaningless. Empty. Chasing after the wind.

And yet, Solomon has found something good in the midst of all this. He has found something beautiful in this midst of this ugly burden. He has found a gift from the hand of God. There can still be joy in our labor. And, in the end he concludes, *“There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”*

I actually don't like the ESV's translation of that last verse. The NIV got it better, I think: “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.” Because there's a difference between 'enjoyment' and 'satisfaction.'

Satisfaction is much more closely related to contentment. And contentment is really what he's driving at here. Contentment is what Jesus is trying to teach the man in our Gospel lesson.

The work that Adam did in the Garden of Eden was good because it gave him contentment. He knew that God would provide for all his needs. He knew that God was in control of all things. He didn't work out of greed or ambition or fear of the future. He worked because that was what God had called him to do. And so he was content.

In sinfulness, the work we do does not usually give us contentment. So often, we work for all the wrong reasons. We work for greed or ambition or fear of the future. We work because we think providing for our needs and the needs of our family is a burden that rests entirely on our shoulders. We work because we feel like the world is completely out of control and money will give us security. We are not content people.

And the more we lay up treasure for ourselves, the less we become rich toward God. Don't get me wrong: God doesn't need your riches. The silver is his and the gold is his, the prophet Haggai tells us. All of creation belongs to him. Your riches are his whether you want them to be or not. And if he really wants them, well then this very night your soul may be required of you.

But he doesn't. Jesus calls us to be rich toward God not because God needs our riches but because the very last thing we need to do is lay up more treasure for ourselves. You'll never find satisfaction in your work if you spend all your time building barns to hoard your wealth.

No, once again, Solomon gives us the answer to contentment. Here is the king of Israel. A man surrounded by wealth. And what does he say? *“For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God.”*

“But Pastor,” I can hear you thinking, “We can't please God! We're good Lutherans, which means we're poor miserable sinners.” True enough. We can't please God. But we can cling to the one who did please God. *“This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.”*

We can trust in Him who fulfilled God's Law perfectly on our behalf. We can clothe ourselves in the robe of Christ's righteousness that covers all our sin. We can be buried with Christ and raised to new life in the waters of Holy Baptism and walk in the new life he gives to us. We can't please God. We don't need to. Because Christ already did.

And it is Christ who calls to us and tells us, *“Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me and you will find rest for your souls.”* We can't please God, but because Christ has already pleased God we receive the benefit of wisdom and knowledge and joy.

We receive the benefit of working not in desperation for our daily bread, because we fear where tomorrow's bread will come from. We receive the benefit of working in contentment, because we know the giver of all good things holds us in the palm of his hands. We receive the benefit of working that we may be rich toward God. Supporting his kingdom. Generous toward our neighbor.

So eat. Drink. Find satisfaction in your work. For it is not the gathering and collecting of sinners who hope only in this life. It is the work of God's children in His garden. Work that He has given to us. That we may not look at the day when our soul is required of us as something to fear or dread. But as something to welcome.

For our hope is not in this life only, but the life that is to come. When any harvest we gather today will pale in comparison to the riches of God's grace that he pours out on us. Amen.