



The Vanity of Industry (Labor) - *Ecclesiastes 2:11, 22-23; 4:4*

11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished by Hades for cheating death (twice) by making him push a boulder up a hill for eternity. This image remains in our cultural collective memory as an illustration of what it is like to struggle against the impossibly frustrating. The image of Sisyphus eternally pushing his boulder might be on the minds of many a working person who no longer finds a sense of purpose in their work.

Lutheran theology stresses an understanding of our labor connected to our vocation. When we no longer see how our labor can provide any lasting good to anyone in this world, we might struggle to find purpose in what we do. Like the endless processing of paperwork without any thought to the purpose or rationale by the employee handling this work, our labor may feel fruitless. Sure we have a job and should be in some way satisfied to be able to provide for our families through our labor, but the truth is, we are wired toward productivity that makes meaningless work a struggle.

This is especially true for people with a more creative bent. We desire to create something that will last. When our labor seems more like spending hours on a beach crafting an elaborate sandcastle only to have the tide wash it away. Further, if we are “consoled” with the instruction to simply move on and build the sandcastle again, and again, we can easily lose our drive to create.

Yet, vocation remains our service to God through our service to others. With this frame of reference in mind, we can understand that our labor is not truly meaningless, even when it appears to be. It is important to pursue vocational development that fuels your passions and energizes your day, but there will always be vocational tasks that will not supercharge your day. There are likely only a select few of us who truly relish cleaning a dirty toilet, but serving our families by making sure our homes are clean and sanitary remains a vital vocational service.

Thoughts for Reflection

What can you do to help your outlook on the less meaningful roles and duties that are a part of your life?