

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
March 27, 2022

I'm sure I've said this before, but it bears repeating: the word apocalypse is an old word—a Greek word that means to reveal something, to lift a veil. So, when a society experiences an apocalypse, you can be sure that some truths are going to be revealed.

It will come as no surprise to you that some things have become more clear during our latest apocalypse – the COVID 19 pandemic. For two years, institutions and norms that we have taken for granted have been disrupted. They had been required to soul search – the church included – to find out what is essential, what is disposable, and what do we want to take into a post-pandemic life.

One of the places of unveiling that I have noticed the most has to do with the nature of work. Americans, by droves, have left jobs that did not give them meaning. They have fought working conditions that were inhumane and even begun to question the primacy of work in their lives.

And I have to admit, I have found myself starting to question the nature of our collective attitude toward work in our society. And I wonder if this pandemic, this apocalypse, is revealing some truths that were previously hidden.

The next time you are in a social setting, I want you to set your mental timer to zero. Then wait to see how long it takes for two people who are newly acquainted to ask one another what they do for work. This question comes often before anything else of importance: what are your hopes and your dreams? What does faith mean to you? What is your family like?

When I used to work with older people with severe illnesses, I would notice that many people – particularly men – had a very hard time knowing who they were once they retired from their job. And, in fact, they'd often be more comfortable talking about work than just about anything else. I wonder why that is?

The other day, I was in a small group, and one of the ice-breaker questions had to do with how we observe Sabbath—that biblical command to rest from work that even God built into creation. And, interestingly, instead of Sabbath, we started to use words like “idle” “lazy” and “unproductive.” We didn't talk as much about recreation or renewal. There is something powerful in our shared psyche about the nature of work, and I am wondering if it is entirely healthy. After all, we are not machines.

This is difficult for me to talk about. I enjoy working hard. And I tend to gravitate toward other people who work hard. I am always very impressed by a job well done, and I think there has to be a place in our world for pushing oneself and for excellence.

But my observation is that we have too closely tied the WORTH of a person with the WORK of a person. And I think that impulse is the reason that today's gospel – one that we all know so well – continues to be scandalous two thousand years after it was written down.

The older brother in this story has been working the family business. He gets up early and without complaint does everything that is asked of him. He is a paragon of the perfect son. And this his little brother – that bratty misguided boy – abandons his work. And yet is welcomed home with a feast and a grateful father.

This story rubs against our sense of fairness. And I think it rubs against our cultural work ethic. The one who works should be rewarded. The one who does not work should not be rewarded. How dare this father love the lazy son?

The scandal of the text is that Jesus seems to be saying that our worth as people—our ability to be loved by God—has nothing to do with what we do. Sit with that a minute. God loves you when you are at rest. God loves you when you do not perform, achieve, earn, produce, or succeed. That Gospel is nearly unamerican in its message. I think that for many of us, a piece of scripture like this one can be disorienting. I don't know about you, but when people tell me what they do for a living, I can often immediately see in what strata they belong in society. It's something that has been taught to me from childhood by every TV show I've ever watched and by messages hidden and not so hidden.

So, if God does not love us based on our work, what does that even look like? I think it looks like these two sons. The father rolls out the red carpet even when the lost son is being a fool. Even when he made mistakes. Even when he was being a little bit devious in slinking back home. When you are channeling your youngest son – those times when you are missing the mark, not succeeding – even then, you are loved lavishly by a remarkable God.

As we continue to come out of this damn pandemic and to find out what it is that life is supposed to look like in our new world, I hope that we will rethink how we formulate our own sense of work. I hope that we will be less quick to let industry decide how we are worthy and instead allow the veil to lift and to see clearly that our foundational identity is beloved of God, which has nothing to do with what we do from 9 to 5 every day. To God be the glory.