



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, August 5, 2018

Proper 13

FR. ALAN GIBSON

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 | Psalm 78:23-29 | Ephesians 4:1-16 | John 6:24-35

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

No matter how much we try to avoid it, organize it, vacation from it, or finish it, there's always work to do. It never ends. The busiest people I know are the ones who are, at least in name, "retired." Liberated from the work-a-day world they often appear to have their time filled with things that look very much like work. My guess is that from the day Adam and Eve planted their first crops outside the Garden of Eden people have not stopped working, and have never had enough time to finish everything they want to get done. The book of Genesis identifies this condition as one consequence of humanity's first sin.

Work, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. Genesis also describes how God's work in creation is "Good." Jesus says that our "good works should shine before people that they may glorify God" (Mt. 5:16). Work is certainly useful and can even be agreeable. We work in order to survive, to contribute to society, to better our lot in life, and to keep from going crazy with boredom. Then we get to passages like today's gospel that remind us how easy it is to see our daily labors as the only kind of work that matters. Our work is something that must be done, endured, in order to receive a reward. That kind of thinking gets dangerous when applied to matters of the soul.

One of the earliest heresies, one that still plagues the Church today, is the idea that we can somehow work to win God's favor, or that God will love us more if we do enough good deeds. That puts God in the role of the never-satisfied parent, and many well-meaning Christians into therapy. That is not the God Jesus shows us.

The multitude fed by the five loaves and two fish ask Jesus, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" They received the benefit of a miracle and wanted to see what else Jesus could do for them, and what they had to do in order to win his favor. They failed to understand the meaning behind the miracle. They saw a show, when they were meant to see God.

While Jesus spent his earthly ministry healing, feeding and comforting those who needed help, the first thing he always looked for was a desire to believe. But who thinks of Belief as work? No one ever got a paycheck for believing, pretending to believe, perhaps; but true belief is hard to measure, rarely constant and difficult to appraise. Some days, we have to dig pretty deep within ourselves to find it. Some days we don't. And some days, we don't even try.

Believing is not one of those things we can put on our daily list of chores, somewhere between grocery shopping and the laundry. Belief is part of who we are as people called to live into "the measure of the full stature of Christ," as St. Paul puts it. It's an attitude of living that takes a lifetime to develop.

If it were up to us, on our own, we would fail dismally. We would get sidetracked by our own efforts, never finding Christ's promise of life. All we would get is frustration because the work would be about us, and not about God. The first step is to trust that God will guide us. Faith is not about pulling ourselves up by our spiritual boot straps. Such effort is little more than an exercise in vanity. Faith is what frees us from hopelessly trying to earn God's favor. That deal has already been made and fulfilled. Manna has come down from heaven. A couple of fish and a few loaves feed five thousand. Bread and wine become food for our souls that no amount of exertion could ever fill. Jesus gives himself to feed our lives and strengthen our souls.

If we choose to look elsewhere for our sustenance, then we can work until we drop and never be content. Maybe that's why the idea of Work is thought to be unpleasant. We strive and strive for something, never quite getting there, while our souls become weary with hunger. That seems like an awful lot to do, for so little in return. God has already done the work of preparing a banquet for us and invites us to the table. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."