



September 2, 2018

## **Our Work Matters to God—and to Our Neighbor**

Joe Ahrens, Zumbro Member

### **PSALM 127 NRSV**

<sup>1</sup>Unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD guards the city,  
the guard keeps watch in vain.

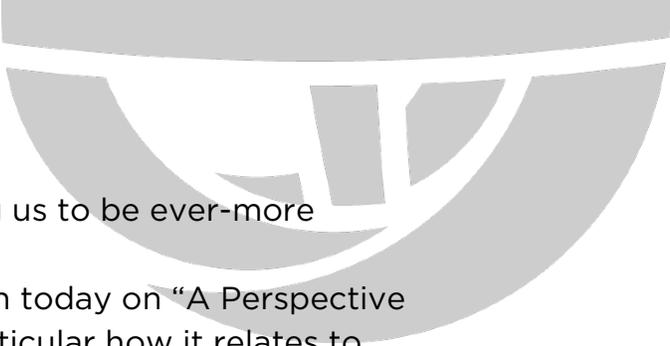
<sup>2</sup>It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

<sup>3</sup>Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,  
the fruit of the womb a reward.

<sup>4</sup>Like arrows in the hand of a warrior  
are the sons of one's youth.

<sup>5</sup>Happy is the man who has  
his quiver full of them.  
He shall not be put to shame  
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Good morning. My name is Joe Ahrens. You may recognize me from the family that sits in the front row on Sundays. My wife, Desiree, and our three young children, Declan, Jens, and June usually sit right up front. If you don't recognize me, that's ok; we've only been members here for a few years. One of the things we love about Zumbro Lutheran is how welcoming the congregation is to visitors and new members. And not just a superficial, obligatory "hello;" new members are encouraged to take an active role in this church. I am extremely humbled and honored to be called to serve on various committees, elected to church council, and deliver a sermon. I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly thank the congregation, pastors, and



staff, in particular Ruth Monson, for encouraging us to be ever-more involved.

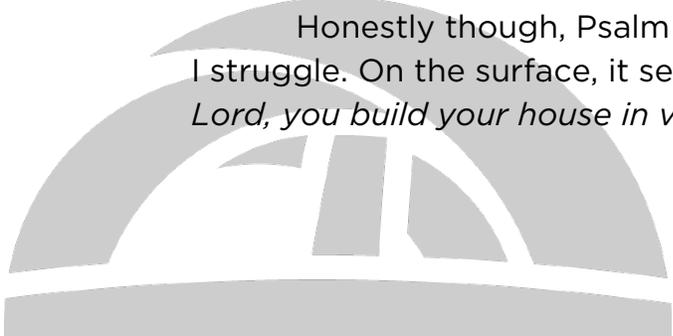
Pastor Vern invited me to deliver a sermon today on “A Perspective on Work,” being Labor Day weekend, and in particular how it relates to Psalm 127. As an analytical, “business” sort of minded person, I appreciate how short Psalm 127 is, only 5 verses long. Precise and to the point. Highly efficient. Pastor Vern first suggested I target around 12 minutes for my sermon, and I thought, “I bet I could get it down to eight.”

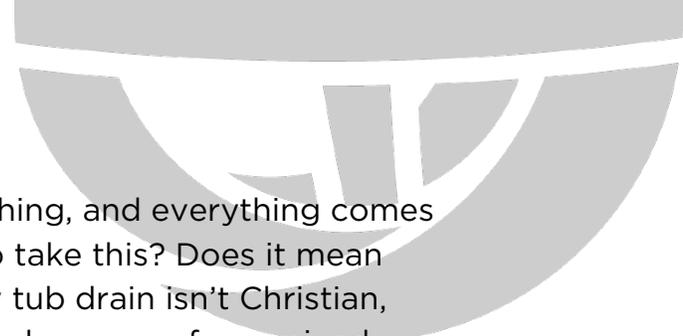
For Christians, Labor Day allows us to truly honor the Sabbath. Verse 3 from Psalm 127: “In vain you rise early and stay up late toiling for food to eat, for he grants sleep to those he loves.” It’s nice when government policy aligns with Scripture. In our ever-increasingly busy world, Sunday afternoon has become a jumpstart to the work week. Our two-day weekend is down to about a day and a half. Work-life balance has turned into work-life integration where the lines between work and home are evermore blurred. The technology of smartphones perpetually links us to the office. But perhaps this trend is starting to reverse. Many employers are recognizing the importance of “unplugging,” giving employees the opportunity to truly take a Sabbath and come back to work refreshed and, in turn, more productive. This trend also appears to be taking hold in our broader society.

Desiree and I recently attended a Jack White concert in Minneapolis. Jack White, perhaps more than most musicians, truly tries to connect with his audience. He doesn’t go into a show with a setlist, instead relying on the audience to determine the direction of the concert. He’ll call out songs to his band based on crowd interaction. However, with people increasingly on their phones, this crowd interaction in which he so heavily relies was diminishing. He even stopped touring for a while because he was so disheartened by the dominance of technology. Thankfully for us fans, he found a solution. As you enter the venue, all concertgoers are given a pouch for which to lock away your phone. You carry your phone with you but are unable to access it during the concert. This allows people to fully immerse themselves in the show without being distracted by their phones.

I imagine pastors feel much of the same disconnect Jack White was feeling. Not often, but I’ve noticed parishioners on their phones during a sermon. So, Pastors, I brought some Ziploc bags along if you want to try this next week.

Honestly though, Psalm 127 is one of those Bible passages with which I struggle. On the surface, it seems pretty straight-forward. *Without the Lord, you build your house in vain.* Fair enough. It follows a common theme



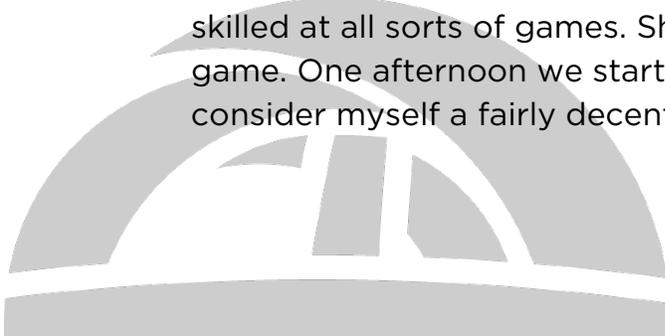


throughout The Bible. Without God, we are nothing, and everything comes from Him. But how literally are we supposed to take this? Does it mean that if the plumber I hired to help me fix a leaky tub drain isn't Christian, that leak is bound to return? If our local civic leaders come from mixed backgrounds, is DMC destined to fail? Do we discount the contributions of people like Stephen Hawking due to their professed atheism?

Perhaps. But I believe it's a little more nuanced than that. I certainly hope so, because otherwise I've got another leaky tub in my future.

Throughout the Bible we're reminded that we will know followers of Jesus by the good works they do. In Luke 6 we're told a good man brings good things from the goodness of his heart. Martin Luther also shared some of these same beliefs on work and vocation. From his "Sermon in the Castle at Weimar" in 1522, (and I'm paraphrasing) Luther suggests that a prince and tailor can equally bring glory and honor to God through their vocation. The prince is charged to protect his neighbor and the oppressed because of this appointed stature. The tailor is charged to make an honest living by providing a service to his neighbor. These examples both speak to serving our neighbors and following the example Jesus set. They don't say we'll know a follower of Jesus simply because they say they are or call themselves Christians. Rather, we will know followers of Jesus by their actions. In that sense, builders build in vain unless they do so out of love and the goodness put in their hearts by God, even if they don't recognize it as such. If the plumber I hired is honest, forthright, and fair in his good works, he does so to the honor of God with Jesus as the example, even if he himself does not acknowledge that presence. Galatians 3: 28 tells us there is no Jew or Gentile and all are one in Jesus. So what I'm saying is this. Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists, and everyone in between are capable of good works. If they work out of love for one another, we can take Psalm 127 literally in that the Lord is building the house and watching over the city.

A couple years ago my grandmother passed away, and I was invited to give a eulogy as the eldest grandchild. Grandma June remains one of the most intelligent and generous people I've ever known. I shared a story in the eulogy that emphasized both these qualities - intelligence and generosity. Several years ago, we took a family vacation to the lakes area of northern MN. A week spent boating, fishing, relaxing, and other lake activities. We also played a lot games. Grandma June was notoriously skilled at all sorts of games. She never went easy on us and usually won the game. One afternoon we started playing poker, Texas Hold 'Em. Now, I consider myself a fairly decent card player, but I was no match for Grandma





June. None of us were. It wasn't long until she had taken all our poker chips. That's the intelligence part. The generosity part is that after she had taken all our poker chips, she would pass them back out again so everyone could keep playing.

I used a Bible verse in that eulogy that I think also relates to Psalm 127. James 3:17 reads, "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy." You'll notice, the verse doesn't mention anything many degrees we have, our job title, the size of our salary, or how well-read you are. It talks of wisdom that is peaceable, gentle, and merciful. What it's saying is that it matters more in how we use our wisdom and intelligence.

In that sense, it ties directly to Psalm 127. Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. We do that by building and working in a way that is pure, peaceable, gentle, easily and enthusiastically given, and also without partiality or hypocrisy. Which means, every time we pick up a hammer or go into the office, we do so with Jesus as our example.

Most of my career has been spend in corporate accounting and financial management. I most recently have been the Director of Finance for Boys & Girls Club of Rochester. How does a director of finance serve others? I'm not making clothes for people like the tailor in Luther's sermon, nor am I protecting the oppressed like the prince. Perhaps it's somewhere in between. The better I can manage the finances at Boys & Girls Club, the better the program staff can have the resources they need to improve the lives of our youth. I can also volunteer my experience and expertise at places like Zumbro Lutheran by serving on the finance committee and now as Council Treasurer. So while I'm not directly involved with programs at Club or ministries here at Zumbro necessarily, the better I do my job, the better people that do have a direct impact can do theirs. In that sense I am serving others. We're all an inter-connected part of the broader community.

Ironically and coincidentally, this past week I accepted a new job working as a controller with Titan Development. My impact on serving others may be even less evident than with Club. But if I take Psalm 127 and James 3:17 to heart, I can follow the example of Jesus and use my work to serve others.

So, how do I interpret Psalm 127? Approach our work with the love of God in our hearts. Use our wisdom and intellect, among all the gifts we're given, in a way that is peaceful, generous, and universal. And put away your phones.

