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Leisure, the Basis of Culture

Text: St. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

There is an old bit of folk wisdom that runs like this: “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” While the point of the saying is perfectly obvious, there has always seemed to me to be something wrong with the saying because it doesn’t rhyme. One has the distinct impression that a saying like this should rhyme. But maybe it doesn’t rhyme because it is not the original saying. If so, then, perhaps the original saying went something like this: “All play and no work makes Jack a worthless jerk.” That is a saying that both makes sense and also rhymes.

Be that as it may, it is the point behind the non-rhyming version – “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” – that I actually want us to think about today. In its folksy way it embodies a very important piece of wisdom about the relation between leisure and work, and between rest and activity, and even ultimately about the kingdoms of this world and of the next, things we do well to think about during the slow times of summer. That piece of wisdom is that it is play, that it is leisure that gives real meaning and shape to Jack’s life, and *not* work. For working more does not always improve Jack’s life; it is leisure that does that.

But is this true? And what does it even mean?

To Calvinists who believe in the virtue of work, it would certainly seem counter-intuitive. But even as a Calvinist, I had reason to think it might well be true when a few years back I encountered a little book provocatively titled *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. It was written by a well-known German Catholic philosopher of the mid-twentieth century, Josef Pieper. At the

outset, let me simply say that the book was not a how-to book. It did not deal with what one should do to stay active during one's retirement years, or even with what one should be doing with weekends, or even how to get more time away from the office. Nor did it argue that the importance of leisure is that it refreshes us so that we can go out and work some more, nor did it even weakly argue that leisure and play are important because they keep us from being dull boys and girls. Rather, its point was the very simple but somewhat unsettling and stronger one that it is leisure and what we do with leisure that gives meaning, shape and significance to everything else we do, including work. Leisure is not simply the pause that refreshes; what happens with leisure is what makes life worth living – at least if we understand what leisure is really about.

I will not burden you with a detailed exposition of Pieper. But I would like to bring to your attention that this idea may well have a biblical basis. In the Gospel according to St. Mark, we are told in this morning's lesson that the disciples gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had recently been doing. They had, according to Jesus' instructions, been busy preaching the message of the kingdom, healing the sick and casting out demons just like Jesus himself. Jesus' response to this report was a wise and compassionate one, for he told the disciples "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." For, Mark reports, they were constantly bustling about and did not even have the leisure to eat. In short, Jesus was telling them that they needed some leisure in their lives.

But why? Well, one supposes that it was for the obvious reason, or at least what we would like to think is the obvious reason, namely, that they needed a break, a weekend away as it were. They needed rest, and they needed food. But here as is the case almost everywhere in the Gospels when food is mentioned, there is also a deeper meaning. They needed food for their stomachs, to be sure; they needed rest for their weary bones. But they also needed a different

kind of bread, the very bread of life. They needed the sort of leisure that lets us hear the word of God that we live by. When Jesus tells the disciples to come away to a deserted place and rest awhile, he is, therefore, recommending that different kind of bread and that sort of leisure as much as he is recommending bread for the stomach and rest for the bones. It is, in fact, advice he himself takes when he regularly leaves the crowd behind, as is reported at the end of today's lesson, in order to go "up the mountain to pray."

To look at things this way is to have a very different sense of what leisure is and what it is for. Leisure on this view is not rest for the bones, so that the bones can go back to work where real meaning is. Rather, leisure *is* the time of fulfillment, a time that is more fulfilling than any other for it is the time when most of all we actually encounter God, and pay most attention to the neighbor we are to love. It is fulfilling because we are being filled with the bread of life. It is not simply time off, but is more essentially time away from time, a sense of eternity itself, a taste of eternal life. It is a time, oddly enough, when more that is important happens to us than during any time of work and energy. It is a time when, being quiet, we are filled with the Word and its words.

This is a very different sense of leisure than I suspect most of us are used to. It also gives a very different sense of what work is and what it is for. From early on, we are taught to value work, as well we should, for by diligent work we provide for ourselves and others, and we meet our responsibilities and obligations. It is the way we put our hearts into action in the world. But it is also the case that we, in an industrious and progressive nation such as this one, start to believe that the worth of life is directly related to our work and inseparable from it. We think that we can actually create value by ourselves and our own efforts. We therefore often work very hard, not simply to provide for ourselves, our families and others, but because we think that it is by work

alone that we can make something of ourselves. Unhappily, though, too often when we do this, work does not provide for us, it starts to consume us. We think we are building a life and creating value, but then we begin to get a nagging and disturbing sense that life is elsewhere. People in middle age, for example start to wonder what they are working for. When they do, it is usually because they have never taken off any time off for wonder itself. Clearly in such cases, it is not work that creates value, but the wonder that inspires one, and they have lost that wonder.

Consider those who have never known the inspiration of leisure and who then retire and lose a sense of self-worth when they no longer have any job to do. For those who have been laid off or fired in corporate downsizing, if they have put all of themselves in the job, they lose a sense of worth. Or consider the cynicism of younger people who say, or used to say, that they want to work hard and make a lot of money so that they can retire early. Even they don't get it right, since they seem to put as much work into playing as any job. Fun for them becomes something frenetic; it is actually an work in disguise, work to escape work, not a matter of inspiration which is what leisure should be.

So work, when it becomes all consuming, does, in fact, consume us, especially when we have no other source for finding fulfillment. Work as a basis for a meaningful life and for life together simply does not work. Try as hard as we might, we cannot by our own work alone build a meaningful life, and the harder we try to do so, the more frustrated we become.

But if it is not by work that we get a meaningful life, then how is that we can have one at all? Very simply, the answer is that we receive it as a gift. That is the real point of Jesus' advice to the disciples when he tells them to get away to a quiet place and rest awhile. They cannot build the kingdom by all their activity, even if it is kingdom building work, and even if they have been called to be laborers in the vineyard. The kingdom comes, just as the Christ comes, by God's

own graciousness. We cannot make it happen. We can only wait for it, hope for it, and desire it above all. That is why the disciples need to get away to a quiet place and rest. To receive the kingdom, they have to quit working for a time and simply and quietly wait. Afterwards, they can go back to work. But this time they are working to spread the gift they have already been given; they are not working to find it.

That is advice we need. If we would simply stop being so busy trying to build a life, and would simply rest quietly for a moment, we might then be able to accept the gift of life, and we might then be filled. We can also find meaning in whatever work we are given, big or small, for, once we are given a meaningful life, work then can be a means of sharing it, instead of a means of trying to find it while it is constantly slipping farther away from our grasp the harder we try to catch it. The goodness of life is much more like a butterfly that we cannot capture by chasing it, but which will settle in our hands if we would simply hold them still for long enough.

This is advice we need and it is good advice. As ministers of Word and Sacrament, it is the basis of all other advice we might have to give, for it is the advice to take time in your lives to pray, to meditate, and to read Scripture carefully and quietly. That above all is what it means to get away to a quiet place and rest. If we heed it, there will be an order established in our lives, one that puts rest and activity, leisure and work each in its proper place. But there is also something more to understand about this advice. This advice to go to a quiet place and rest isn't just good *practical* advice; it is good advice because this quietness and rest is how God has always meant us to worship him, and how God means for us to receive the kingdom.

Let me explain. According to the familiar story in *Genesis*, God took six days to create the earth and the heavens, things visible and invisible, things angelic and human, animate and inanimate. But on the seventh day God rested and looked out over the creation and its beauty.

Ever since then, the seventh day, the Sabbath day, has been holy. This is no minor ceremonial point; it is a primary act of faith for us to take the time to look and contemplate and not work. That is why the Ten Commandments see fit to include the admonition to keep the Sabbath holy. And if Christians celebrate the Sabbath now on the first day of the week, instead of the seventh, that is simply because on the day of resurrection we have begun to enter into God's eternal rest, a rest that will not have to be found at the end of another week of work.

The Sabbath day is holy for two important reasons: first, because on it, we imitate God's own action. We honor God's work by taking part in God's own rest. But it is holy also because, just as God, after he finished working, *looked* at what he had done and found it very good, indeed, so we are bid to take time to find it very good, indeed, too. We are bid on this day to find the leisure for wonder and awe. We are bid to find the creation wonderful and good, and thus to take the time to bless the Creator and find the Creator good, too. And in doing so, we are drawn closer to God, and are drawn into God's life.

That is the way to think about the Sabbath. It is a day of rest, of course, because we need rest and leisure. But that doesn't mean it is to be filled with all sorts of frenetic activities that we couldn't squeeze into the rest of the week. As a day of rest it is to be a day of wonder, a day of wonder that has been reserved for us from the beginning of the world, and a day that hints at the wonder of the kingdom at the end. Unfortunately, I suspect, though, that Sunday have become everything but that these days. But to think about Sundays in this positive way, that is, as a day for wonder in which we stop building our own kingdoms and simply wait for and admire God's kingdom, is also the proper way to think about the worship we give to God on this day. Worship is, or at least ought to be, a time of quiet and rest, a time for wonder, a time of quiet waiting, a time of hope, and a time to be fed. And in that quietness and rest, wonder and feeding, we are

drawn into God's life.

One final point about this morning's Gospel text. The verses we have read and thought about are in Mark's Gospel the verses that surround the story of the miracle of the fish and the loaves, when Jesus fed five thousand people with only five loaves and two fish. Over the next few Sundays, we will be reading John's extended account of that miracle and its aftermath. These verses and the story of that miracle are deeply related, and over the next few weeks it is well therefore to keep these verses about rest, quiet, and worship in mind, for what these verses say about worship they also say about that miracle, a miracle that not only portrays God's power, but also symbolizes God's feeding of his people in what is called the messianic banquet. And conversely that miracle also says something about this morning's story, namely, that the invitation to quiet and to rest is also an invitation to partake in the great banquet of God's kingdom. Let us then take the time to be quiet and to rest so that we may accept that invitation.