

### **Ecclesiastes 3:9-15**

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

### **Luke 10:38-42**

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

### **“Working for the Laud”**

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There are a lot of stories that could do this. The banquet about to begin, the Master of Ceremonies is told the pastor who was supposed to give the blessing would be showing up, there apparently was a big storm. I made that part up, but... So the MC agreed to give the invocation, stepped to the microphone, and he said, "There being no clergy present tonight, let us thank God." Terry Bradshaw, professional football player, quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, in his book *It's Just a Game*, talks about what it feels like to be disliked. You can feel his pain. "I will never forget the sound of an entire stadium booing me, as long as I live. The sound went through my body like an angry wife through a bank account. It was painful, painful. I felt I had let down my ancestors, not just my friends and family, but I had let down my ancestors, who had suffered terrible hardships to get to America so someday their great-great-great grandson would stand in front of 75,000 people and get booed. Not just my friends, my family and my ancestors. I felt I had let down my college, the state of Louisiana, and the entire South." What difference does it make?

There isn't a man or woman or boy or girl in this room who doesn't understand these words in Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiastes as a word means "preacher," and the preacher said that passage, there's a time to die and a time to be born, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to seek, a time to lose, a time to keep silent, a time to speak. And then the preacher said, "What gains the worker from our toil?" What difference does it make? What's it all worth? The boss down in the office seems enamored with the new young employee, who couldn't spell CAT if you gave him the first two letters, and you have to

spend all your time fixing the mistakes that they make, and the coach at the school doesn't realize how hard you worked to get ready for the game, and you were told you'd get to play, and the coach looks down the bench and he doesn't even see you. And your parents have come to the game because you told them you might get in. What gain is the worker for the toil? Always there's a prodigal who gets the attention we ought to have coming to us. The great pianist Rachmaninoff, when he was young, he was giving a piano recital. There was some kind of Beethoven sonata, and there were long pauses, several of them, in the piece, and during one of the long pauses a woman who was sitting up beside him where he played tapped him on the shoulder and said to him, "Honey, play something you know."

What gain is the worker for the toil? What difference does it make if we're working for the laud. If we're working for the laud, it doesn't make a difference sometimes. If we're working for praise, it often doesn't come. What we need is an agent. If we're working for the laud, we need some people who will be our advocates. You know, I think Martha in that story needed an agent. She was worried and distracted by many things, working to clean up the house, working to fix things up, you know, to get them right. Working to get it done and worried about how things look and what people think about her. What she needed was an agent, someone to promote her, so she didn't have to worry.

Krista Tippett was here this past week, as we all know. The sanctuary was absolutely packed, she was wonderful. She gave us hope and encouragement, and she said, "You know, this church is alive and exciting." And while she was with us, she had dinner with those of us who paid extra to be in the parlor of the church before the presentation. Abby Kershaw prepared a wonderful variety of food. Stuffed mushrooms, I don't know what they were stuffed with, salad inside a piece of bread, pastries with I don't know what... grapes, cheese... Krista was in the Parlor, said she wanted thirty minutes alone before she gave her presentation in the sanctuary, and since I have keys, they asked me if I would escort her to Rebecca's office, which I was glad to do. I thought she probably wanted to visit, but I found out she didn't. Anyway, we were walking down the hall, we were at the hall outside there, and she slipped and fell right on the ground. Grapes and guest speakers flying everywhere. A little bit later, she left Rebecca's office, thinking she could get back in, and she couldn't. She'd locked herself out. Fell down on our floor, locked out of a room, she collected herself and her speech was inspirational, but even more than you knew, when you think about what we put her through.

The next morning, two of us had the privilege of having breakfast with her. She's on the radio, you know, every Sunday you can hear her about 12:00. She interviews very important people. I told her, I said, "You really ought to be on television." I told her that she could be the next Bill Moyers or Charlie Rose, and then I said, "You're better looking than either of them." I said, "For example, you came a thousand miles and you slip on our floor and we lock you out of your room, and you're smart and you're wise and you're beautiful, and you ought to be on television. We could make you a star. What you need, Krista, is an agent. We could be rich here. I will be your agent." It wasn't working out so well for her. I don't think that will happen, but she should.

People need agents. Jesus had an agent. John the Baptist was his agent. He was the one who went before, he said "There's somebody coming after me who is before me, and I'm not even worthy to carry his shoes." John the Baptist was Jesus' agent. Moses had an agent. It was Aaron who did all the talking, because Moses stuttered. We all need an agent. What gains the worker for the work? Working for the laud, we need some help, and we have it. There are people who speak for us. Maybe it's the best man at you wedding, or the maid of honor at the altar. Maybe it's your best friend, who know you and who will become your advocate. Maybe it's some anonymous stranger you don't even know, who admires you from a distance. Or a friend who is indeed a friend. When a word can be spoken, they will speak it. When a tribute needs to be made, they will make it. When a testimonial is called for, they are there.

An interesting thing happened in North Carolina when I was attending a church meeting about two weeks ago. There were 30 of us, they came from all parts of the world. In fact, the person sitting on one side of me was the president of a Methodist seminary in Russia, and the woman on the other side of me was a bishop in California, and we were asked what happened in our lives since we last met in March. When it got to be my turn, I said our daughter had a baby boy, and I don't advise any of the rest of you to get out your pictures, because my grandson is the cutest and smartest baby in the world. Guess what? There are 29 agents in that room, and they all had pictures of their children and grandchildren.

There are people who are agents for us, people who promote us, and we may not even know it. People who speak well of us, and if we're working for the laud, the preacher said what gain is the worker for that work if we're working for the laud? Sometimes it's like Martha, we're not sure our working matters. We're not convinced we're getting anywhere. Jesus said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you're worried and distracted by many things." We need agents who will speak for us, and we have them, and we're grateful to have them. Working for the laud, worried and distracted by many things, and the preacher in Ecclesiastes said it, what good is the worker for the toil. What good to we do, what accomplishment do we make? What work will outlive us? If we write a book, will people read it in 20 years? If we get our name on a building, will they tear it down?

Martha was a doer, and she got it wrong. But the preacher in the New Testament had a different view. Jesus said Mary had chosen the better part. Mary had chosen better. There is need of only one thing, Jesus said. Mary just sat there listening. She was able to be present. She wasn't worried about how it looked to other people. She was taking in the moment. She, according to Jesus, had hold of the most important thing. Jesus doesn't say what it is. It would be helpful if he had, but we have to figure that out. We need an angel to help us. It's a spiritual thing, I think. What is the better part? What is the one thing? We all need an angel to speak to us, to tell us, not just an agent to speak to others for us, though we need that, and we have it, but an angel who speaks to us. The word "angel" means messenger from God, and the truth is, if we're working for the laud it depends on the agent to promote us, but if we're working for the Lord it depends on the perception of the one thing, and the one thing that is necessary to know it, and to work toward it.

Susan Bach has angels. Susan Bach has angels, two of them. Her angels are her parents, Betty and Don Hutchins, members of our church. Susan has written a chapter in a book. Betty gave it to me this week. There are some other big names in the book, but none bigger than Susan, in my opinion. It's a book about motivation and success and doing something with your life. Susan Bach tells us the most important conversation we ever have is the one with ourselves. The most important relationship we have is with ourselves. She goes on to say, "I believe God resides in each of us. God is in our heart, our very being. The most fascinating journey we ever take is inward. The deeper we go, the more we can cherish and rejoice in the gifts God graces upon us."

She prefaced this, I emailed her, and we were in conversation with each other, Susan and I, and she said this. She said, "Bless my dear parents. I so adore them. I am very grateful for the beliefs and values and convictions they instilled in me and my sister at a very early age. I am proud of them." See, they are her agents, messengers from God, telling her the important thing, working for the Lord. The better part is never about doing, it's about being. It's about becoming, it's about evolving. It's not who listens to us when we speak, it's to whom do we listen when God's word is spoken. It's not what did we accomplish in our daily labor, but what was praised by our giving of ourselves. Being, becoming, growing, evolving. When the message comes, did we hear it?

Wednesday night I got to meet the architect who designed the Parlor of our church. He and his wife came to hear Krista Tippett. Some of you know him. In the midst of our visit, I told him there was something about the design of the Parlor I didn't understand. And I suggested that we walk over to see it, because I was confused about something, and I had to unlock the door, but I got keys, and we got in. If you've ever been in the Parlor, go look, if you haven't seen this. If you go into the Parlor, you look up above, and on the west side on the east side on the north side on the south side, way up high there's this glass, and this glass is subdivided. And if you look at that glass, the way it's subdivided, it looks like, and this is what I said, "I don't understand this, it looks like arrows pointing down. Four arrows pointing down." He was getting a little nervous, and I said, "What did you have in mind? That could be considered a negative, a downer. Something coming down on this congregation - four arrows pointing down." And he said, "Don't you see, it's the Trinity?" And I said, "It's four pieces of glass. The last time I counted, the Trinity was three." He said, "If you look at it, maybe it's a flower with a stem and leaves." And I said, "Yeah, but why would you cut off the blossom?" We couldn't resolve it, I think he went away a little angry. So I took the question to the Men's Bible Study that meets on Friday. Now, here is a group that has an opinion about everything. But I think they got it. They said it was the word of God coming down to us on earth. That's how I'm going to think about it. Coming down to us, and I will add, reminding us of the one thing that matters, working for the Lord, to do the one thing with our life that will outlive us.

Reinhold Niebuhr was quite right when he said, "There is nothing worth doing that can be done in one lifetime, therefore we live by hope." And Rilke the poet had the right idea when he wrote, "God speaks to each of us as God makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear from God. You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing, Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big

shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand." God said, "Give me your hand." This was the poem that opened Krista Tippett's book, the poem from Rilke. Rilke was one of her angels. At the end of the book, she writes, "I see my grandfather's face, stern and full of maddening contradictions, intelligent eyes bright with humor, and the best he could muster of love. That image, his life, forbade me to write off a religious sensitivity that I find lacking, but I have it. Now my head is full of many voices, eloquent, wise, strange, full of dignity and grief, hope and grace. We speak because we have questions, not just answers, and our questions cleanse our answers, and enliven our world." One thing is important. It's spiritual. Angel voices, messages from God, telling us and reminding us just one thing, and you do it without credit, and you be it without notice, and you be it without knowing how much good it does, because you have lived it, and it's faith. It's a mother's voice, or a father's, or a college teacher's, or a parent, or a loved one, a husband or a wife, a son or a daughter. It's the voice that comes from death to life, and it reminds us to do what we can, and never think we can't, and recalls for us the gifts God graces upon us, and urges us to use them well. Working for the Lord.

One of the people who went on the mission trip to Guatemala came back and had this to say. "I went to Guatemala to change the world, and I realized I did. But the change was in me." And Brad Cecil said it - "We have visited the mission, and it is us." And Gandhi said, "Be the change in the world you wish to see." Working for the Lord. Being the one thing. Angels remind us. Messengers tell us. It's about being. Agents are our advocates, telling others how great we are, and we need them, and we have them. Angels are messengers telling us how great God is, and we hear them, and we know what they say is true. The preacher of the Old Testament said it, "What gain is the worker for the toil." It's what we do. Not much, sometimes, it seems. The preacher in the New Testament says, Jesus says, there's only one thing that matters. How great thou art. It's who we become with God that matters. Are we working for the laud? Are we working for the Lord? Are we Martha, or Mary, or a little of each? Are we doing, or becoming? I don't know, but we do best when we pay more attention to our angels than if we worry about our agents. Let us pray.

Oh God, we are thankful for those who have the courage to tell us what we need to hear. Amen.