

Perspectives



Till and Keep, Leave and Cling

ACCORDING TO OUR PRIMAL STORY, THE GENESIS CREATION ACCOUNT, BOTH WORK and family are given “in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens” and fall under the divine assessment of “good”; both, however, are subject to the curse of sin and become troublesome or worse.

Despite what some of us have heard and read, work in itself is in no way part of the curse. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Work is gift, the exercise of human creativity, part of the human destiny. Without it we are not human. Work has enormous potential. Neither the human characters in the story nor the reader nor, for that matter (at least in the story’s perspective), God yet know what the garden will become. Human “tilling” and “keeping” have only begun. They are meant to continue the creative task, to interact with the materials and creatures of the earth and produce a growing and developing world that is more than the world of the day of creation, but one that, despite and because of human efforts, remains genuinely good—for humans, for the creation, for God. There is great hope in that vision.

It is no wonder, then, that unemployment is so devastating for humans. It is not merely an economic problem, it is a theological problem as well, and a problem in human definition or human being. No work, no humanity. Now, no doubt “tilling” and “keeping” include more than work for pay. All human creativity, all human vocation, all human striving are included here, and no person will ever be totally without this gift. But daily work as we commonly know it, whether in the macro economy of the marketplace or the micro economy of the household, is an essential part of who we are. In losing it, we lose ourselves.

It is in the world of sin that work must struggle with the “thorns and thistles” and requires “the sweat of [our] face.” It would be hard to argue that there were no thorns in Eden or that hard work did not produce good sweat. But these terms are used in the story metaphorically to describe the work that simply won’t work and the efforts that exhaust without reward—the frustrating work that does not deserve to be called creative. We turn against the earth and it against us, we turn against ourselves and one another, our humanity is stifled, and God’s gift becomes an affliction. And, as always in the world of sin, nothing is fair. Surely, those of us who still find our work, for the most part, creative and energizing (I include myself here) are not necessarily better people than those who find their work bitter and meaningless. Indeed, without their work, we could not enjoy much of the life to which we have become accustomed. Human beings are in the dilemma together. The thorns scratch us all, and we all smell like old locker rooms.

Family works the same way. “It is not good that the man should be alone”

(Gen 2:18). So, to each is given the other as helper. According to Genesis, the first need is not sex but community. Everyone needs a helper, male and female alike. The family will eventually celebrate its sexuality and produce offspring to continue the race, but all human community is, in some sense, worthy of the name family. "Two are better than one...for if they fall, one will lift up the other." And, while two are good, "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl 4:9-12).

What of the modern phenomenon of the "single"? Can a single person be a "family"? Certainly, a single woman or man can be a productive member of society, and thus legally perhaps a "family unit," but, according to Genesis, a single person cannot remain "alone"—at least, not and remain under the blessing of "good." In the Bible this clearly does not require marriage or sexual intercourse for every person, but it does require (or offer) a similar kind of "leaving" and "clinging" (Gen 2:24)—leaving isolation, perhaps even leaving self, and clinging to companionship, friendship, community, the other. Isolation, whether imposed or involuntary, produces something less than a complete human being.

And then, because of sin, "the gift of family," too, "can become a burden" (as the rite for marriage in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* puts it). The examples given in the story are pain in childbirth and the rule of the man over the woman. As we all ought to have learned by now, the dominion of the man over the woman is not an order of creation, it is an order of sin. It is as much a curse for the man as for the woman. It distorts the mutuality of "help" that we are meant to provide equally one for the other. We cannot get around the fact (indeed, the gift) of creation that the genders are different. Social structures are right to honor the differences while, however, maintaining the essential equality of males and females and recognizing in each the full dignity of the divine image—a tricky task requiring a lot of good will. But sin has had its way here. The Bible reports that in its own time social structures supported differences that were not necessary and did not promote equality, and they became oppressive. In fact, the curse of sin produced distortions in family life that the people of the Bible—prisoners of their time—could not yet even see or comprehend. Some have become visible to us now; others, no doubt, remain yet undiscovered, and we may have invented new ones. We are, I assume, as much prisoners as were they.

No wonder then that the concerns addressed in this issue are a big deal. No wonder we sense there is a lot at stake. No wonder changes in work and family make us uneasy. These are great gifts with great potential, but, the greater the gift, the greater, it seems, the possibility of distortion and abuse. We are given a lot in work and family. We have a lot to lose. All the more reason to step back now and then to think about where we have been and where we are going, to try to figure out the difference between what is given in creation and what derives from sin (no easy task), to assess difficulties, to rekindle hope, to learn from one another. Thus, this issue of *Word & World*—a small step in an ongoing journey.

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