Our Labor Can Make Such a Difference

Last Monday as teachers returned to prepare for the start of school this week, I shared at Mass a short story from a “veteran” teacher who told of her experience with a 7th grader named Josiah.

A student teacher when she met him, she was working with kids who needed a little extra help. Josiah was full of anger; and his teacher warned the then-student teacher Denae that no one could get to him, that she might want to quit once she got to know “her class” and Josiah was best to just ignore. Denae though didn’t do that. With some patience, some love, and perseverance, she reached through to him - and his anger faded, and he eventually thanked her for her work with him, for her patience, but most of all for seeing him as a real person. What Denae learned in this situation was that deep down inside people is such potential - and while there will be many bad experiences and days, when a person does their work with care, such good things can happen.

I think it’s safe to say most of us don’t get up and say “I get to go to work today!” or “I get to clean the house!” But what we have to remember is that work isn’g given to us as some kind of punishment by God. Adam even before original sin enters the picture is cultivating and working in the garden. Not all of us are teachers, but we all have work to do - so how do we do it?

I think so often it can be tempting to think what we do doesn’t have value. What I mean by that is many people work in a large office or a cubicle, and rarely get a “thank you” (in fact Denae noted that was the first time a student had thanked her in 4 years student teaching) for the hours they put in. And so many come home to shuttle kids from an appointment to a sports practice and then spend time helping a son or daughter with homework, but might rarely get a “thank you” for it. But yet, they do it day after day after day. Why is that?

Well, for one, a closer look might reveal not all is horribly bleak. Many people care about what they do and want to make a difference; that’s why Denae was there, and frankly why so many work in a Catholic school and parish - I don’t encounter too many employees who are here for the money. And in many positions, while it can be at times unsatisfying, I think people may stay at them because they see themselves making a difference too. This was something important to Saint Paul, as he states that those who do not work should not eat, meaning that through or work we make a contribution to the community.

For another, people take up their cross, which is what the disciple must do. In Saint John Paul II’s encyclical on human labor, he points out how we participate in the work of the Creator and the Redeemer in that we imitate God in working and resting, and that “He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform." I think that is so evident in how so many people give of their time, even when they do not want to, because they recognize that

their job is important for their company, for themselves if they are going to be a productive member of society, and for those who rely on them.

So, too, we also can't forget how our actions speak so loudly. To return to that story of Denae, the teacher she met was "burned out" and had given up on the kids. We might not think about it, but through our labor, we not only take up our cross, but serve as a proclaimer of the Gospel. As I reflect on my parents growing up, I was born when they were in their early 20s. Both worked jobs that probably wouldn't have been their first choices, but they kept a roof over my head and food on our family's table. And being we lived in an existing home in North Minneapolis and both had aging parents, that meant they were doing things always around the house to improve it, and helping out my grandparents by doing such things for them as driving them to the store in the winter, or mowing their lawn for them. Through how they have lived and continue to live their lives, they've shown me how important work is in that it has a place, has dignity, and really makes a difference.

But with that, I'd also say they showed me balance. This Labor Day weekend, we traditionally enjoy a nice relaxing holiday weekend before things get a little more "busy." But remember, each week has a day of rest, Sunday. One should not feel that working on Sunday is wrong; many people have to work to make ends meat, and often Sundays entail some homework, housecleaning, etc. But while my parents worked hard, they also made time for me growing up. I'd go to the park with dad and play catch or go sledding. We'd take day trips in summer or go "up north" for a night or two. I'd fire up the Atari and take on dad in bowling. I have a real concern that families and kids are getting over-scheduled these days. So make sure you and your loved ones don't just take a day off on Labor Day or on special occasions. Remember that watching a movie together, playing a board game, or just spending an evening together at home taking it easy is a good thing - it re-charges us and helps us to better prepare for our work.

One last word: a big "thank you" to our amazing staff here at Saint Joe's. I'm so blessed to work with amazing people. The common thread is each member of our team truly cares about one another and helping our parishioners and the people we serve. Each person I work with here at Saint Joe's has such a great attitude, and reminds me of Saint John the Baptist as we all try to point others towards Jesus and help them on their journey. What a blessing to work with such amazing, selfless, caring and devoted people on our staff. (And also to the army of volunteers who make so many events possible at our parish, like our upcoming festival).

Work isn't always much fun. But, no matter what it is you do in life, everyone who has ever worked makes a real difference in the world by helping society to improve and helping others who rely on them, but so too by being a true evangelist and a beacon to others that being a disciple of Christ means backing it up with actions. The key thing to remember is attitude means so much; as Therese of Lisieux taught, do simple things with great love.

God bless,
Fr. Paul