

Psalm 90:1–2; 14–17

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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The Work of Our Hands

I asked my dad one summer if I had to work. He looked at me and said, “do you have to eat?”

I said, “of course I have to eat”.

He said, “well then I guess you have your answer.”

Dad no doubt was channeling 2 Thessalonians 3:10: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” To be clear, Paul wasn’t condemning the poor, the sick, or the unemployed. He was addressing a few in the Thessalonian church who had withdrawn from participating in the community because they thought Jesus would return any moment. His concern was not punishment but partnership: that everyone contribute what they can to the common good.

Tomorrow is Labor Day. For many people, it’s the last hurrah of summer — the three-day weekend before school routines settle in, before the days shorten, before we start trading lemonade for pumpkin spice. Terely tells me it’s the last day I can wear white jeans. Who made that rule???

But at its heart, Labor Day was born out of struggle. It began in the late 1800s as a way to honor the dignity and contributions of workers — and to insist on justice: fair wages, safe conditions, reasonable hours. Things we often take for granted now were fought for with courage and sacrifice.

And here’s the thing. The Bible talks about work. Not just spiritual work, but the labor of hands, minds, and hearts: teaching, planting, building, repairing, caregiving. Psalm 90 ends with a prayer that our work would matter: “*Prosper the work of our hands.*”

We also know that we have a tricky relationship with work. Some of us work to live, and some of us live to work. But is there another way, a way of holding work and rest in balance? Can we see work as a gift and a calling without letting it burn us out or swallow up our identity? That is the question Psalm 90 helps us bring before God.

God as the First Worker, Psalm 90:1–2

The psalm begins: *"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."*

The first thing the Psalmist reminds us is this: Before our work ever began, God was at work. In Genesis, God shapes the world out of chaos, plants a garden, creates living beings, and calls it all "very good."

In the ancient Western imagination, work was not viewed this way. Think of the myth of Pandora's Box. When she opened it, all the bad things spilled out — death, decay, and yes, work. Both in the West and the East, work was often seen as punishment. The Greeks and Romans in particular prized the life of the mind and treated manual labor as degrading. Soil was considered dirty; the soul was noble. If you had to work, you were better off as a teacher or philosopher, removed from the dirt.

But Genesis, Israel's ancient creation story, reveals a God who rolls up divine sleeves and gets messy shaping life from clay. This vision blesses our labor, our creativity, and our call to join God in cultivating a good and beautiful world. God is pictured as a gardener with earth under his fingernails. Work is not a curse. It is part of paradise itself, held up as good.

As Wendell Berry reminds us, *"Good work is a way of living ... it is unifying and healing. It brings us home from pride and despair and places us responsibly within the human estate."*

Berry's words remind us that our own labor — whether in fields, classrooms, homes, or workshops — can also be holy, healing, and whole. And that vision matters when we remember Labor Day's origins. The labor movement fought to secure the dignity of workers, insisting that every person's contribution deserved safety, fairness, and respect. The struggle for just wages and humane conditions was, in its own way, a declaration that all work carries sacred worth.

That means work is not a punishment. It's woven into God's good creation. We were made to participate in God's creativity, whether that's crafting a sermon, cooking a meal, studying for a test, solving a problem, painting a picture, or organizing for justice.

But the Psalm also reminds us that God is our dwelling place, the source and home of our being. Our work flows from that grounding, not from frantic self-justification.

Satisfied with God's Love, Psalm 90:14

Verse 14 says: *"Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."*

Our culture tells us we are what we produce. That our value comes from output, accomplishment, résumé lines.

The philosopher and theologian, Rocky Balboa, echoes this sentiment when he tells Adriane the night before the fight: *"If I go the distance, I'll know I'm not a bum!"* If I accomplish, if I'm successful, if I make a certain amount of money, then I'll know I'll be acceptable to myself, to God, to a parent, whoever.

The Psalmist says something different. Our satisfaction, our worth, our joy comes from knowing we are already loved. Period.

We don't work to earn God's love. We work out of God's love.

Richard Rohr puts it this way: Our jobs, careers, and accomplishments are not our deepest selves. They may give us structure and something to do each day, but they are not who we really are. Rohr says, *"My True Self is in God and not in what I've created."* That is the good news of Psalm 90. Our truest satisfaction and joy come not from striving or producing, but from resting in the steadfast love of God.

That's an important shift, because when we work to prove ourselves, burnout and bitterness aren't far behind. But when our work begins with the assurance of God's steadfast love, we're free to see it as gift, service, and calling.

"Prosper the Work of Our Hands," Psalm 90:17

This phrase doesn't mean "make us rich" or "give us success as the world defines it." The Hebrew word translated "prosper" can also mean "establish," "make enduring," or "give lasting meaning."

It's a prayer that what we do will matter, that it will bear fruit beyond us, that it will contribute to God's purposes in the world.

For a teacher, it might mean shaping a young mind who will grow into compassion. For a parent, it might mean forming a child's sense of safety and belovedness. For someone in retirement, it might mean using time to mentor, volunteer, or pray for others. For a laborer on the job site, it might mean creating something solid, useful, and beautiful.

It's a prayer that the time we spend — whether in paid work, unpaid caregiving, activism, or creative expression — would be part of God's ongoing work of making all things new.

Work, Rest, and Justice

Psalm 90 sits in a biblical tradition that values both work and rest. In Exodus, God commands Sabbath, not as an optional self-care tip, but as an act of justice. Everyone rests: landowners, workers, immigrants, even animals. Sabbath says no one's value comes from constant production.

Labor Day echoes that Sabbath spirit. It reminds us that work is holy, but so is rest. And both need protection.

That's why the church can't only bless work. We must also advocate for fair treatment of workers, protection for the vulnerable, and dignity for those often unseen. The God of the Psalms is also the God who hears the cries of the oppressed and calls us to do the same.

Conclusion

In God's Hands

As we head into this week, hear the Psalmist's prayer as a commissioning:

*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands —
O prosper the work of our hands!*

Whatever your "work" looks like right now — whether it's a desk job, caregiving, volunteering, organizing, creating, or simply holding on — may God take it up into God's great labor of justice, healing, and love.

Our hands in God's hands. Our work in God's work. That's where it all matters.

Amen.