



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

## ***FAITH, FAMILY, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK***

Vol. 9 Issue 1, 2019

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### Worshipping My Way Toward a Theology of Work

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We change our technologies, and as they change, they make possible shifts in the economic arrangements within our societies. Political actors contend with one another in an effort to give civic expression to their convictions and to serve the interests of those for whom they care. In their contention, they generate the tectonic conditions that afford and constrain these economic shifts. Understanding these changes well and responding to them prudently matters as we theologize about work. The tradition that informs my own theologizing about work—a tradition identified with Abraham Kuyper—is serious about such historical prudence. It insists on being both anti-revolutionary (rejecting futuristic utopias to be accomplished by a comprehensive overthrow of the current order) and anti-reactionary (rejecting nostalgic golden ages to be recovered by a return to some or other earlier order). How *do* we conserve what is good about things as they are, while also making progress beyond the inadequacies of our times?

For all of this historical contingency, our contradictory primordial inclinations persist. On the one hand, our charity rarely reaches beyond kin and tribe, and our avarice often attempts to exceed the constraints of prudence. On the other hand, our welcome of strangers and refugees sometimes reveals our deep sense of a shared humanity, and our generosity occasionally helps us overcome even very stubborn malign prejudices. There can be no denial that the grand upward sweep of the wealth of nations since the beginning of the industrial revolution has made it possible to marvelously reduce child mortality, improve adult health and extend the lives and increase the comforts of the elderly. And yet the same technological means that afforded these improvements allow for exploitations more cruel, oppressions more harsh and genocides more thorough than at any earlier time in human history. The toughest problems we face with regard to work and economic life appear to be anthropologically perennial, rather than historically contingent.

*“The steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting” (Psalm 103).*

The horizon that forms the backdrop against which our hearts break in the encounter with our own evil and that of our neighbors, and against which we are able to discern the prospect of hope amidst even the most dire of circumstances, is the horizon of God’s good creation. It is a horizon that alerts us to wonder and awe time and again as, in our worship and in our work, we encounter the goodness of God in our encounters with God’s creatures. It is in our discovery of the patterns of God’s blessing in the functioning of God’s creatures that we discover ways in which to heal what is broken and ways in which to signal the world that is to come. It is in our discovery of such patterns that we can find ways to survive the distortions in the political economic arrangements of our times—and ways to work for less distorted arrangements. Such discovery comes only with steady attention and communal reflection on actual practices. And it is for such discovery that we are doxologically primed as we pray along with the poets of the Psalms.

*“O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all” (Psalm 104).*

My theologizing about work started in my childhood, in the elegant, honey-gold, mid-century modern pine pews of Universitas Dutch Reformed Church in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Throughout the 1970s, I found myself wondering time and again why it was that the black staff of the church could vacuum the carpets, dust the pews and polish the silverware on Tuesdays but could not walk the carpets, be seated in the pews or take communion from the same silverware on Sundays. This racial segregation was a choice made by the members and elders of church itself and proclaimed from its pulpit; in this the church was bolstered by the white citizens and government of the apartheid state, who had made interracial worship legally difficult and at times enforced this legal arrangement with police action. These cultural choices were invisible to me as a child. I experienced racism as the natural order of things and assumed that this racialized relationship between work and worship was how God intended the world to be.

*“We sat down and wept” (Ps. 137).*

My childhood puzzlements only slowly distilled into critical questioning –perhaps as much as a decade’s worth of distilling. In the spring of 1982, some months after my fifteenth birthday, the gift of a used copy of the Good News version of the Bible prompted me to read through the Gospels. That Gospel reading became an encounter with Jesus that began a reorientation of my life. Intrigued, I paged back to the beginning of the Bible to read through the whole story of what God is doing. Perhaps the most significant punctuation moment in my teenage theologizing about work occurred in the subsequent months, when I was pulled up sharp by the exclamation mark of Isaiah 58: “In the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers!” Reading these words against the backdrop of a lifeworld in which the law reserved the well-paying jobs for white people and the dirty jobs for black people—and in which preachers extolled the virtues of such laws from pulpits—was a galvanizing experience.

*“I know my transgressions” (Ps. 51).*

As in my childhood and teens, in my twenties my theologizing about work continued to be catalyzed by the interaction between my lived experience of the Bible and my lived experience of the historical times and political places in which I found myself. As of the 1990s, such catalysis happened more often than not while I was engaging in a practice that was new to me at the time: the daily praying of the Psalms. In this gymnasium of the soul (as Ambrose of Milan called the Psalter), I began learning the full range of things we humans can say to God (to borrow from the theologian John Goldingay’s description of the project of the psalmists). And as I (and all the world) during that decade began to discover (with the help of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission), the full scope of the iniquity of the apartheid regime under which I had grown up and in which I was complicit, I frequently found myself in need of the imprecatory and penitential words on offer in these ancient prayers.

*“He restores my soul” (Psalm 23).*

Unexpectedly, early in my thirties, theologizing about work became my day job. I was co-employed by a Canadian labor union and a think tank to direct research and education at the intersection of faith, work and culture in support of the pursuit of workplace justice by my employing organizations. This employment was a wonderful gift for several reasons, not least of which was the privilege of watching, close up, as the Christian organizing of labor (every now and then) brought real-life hope into workplaces and industries where employees had previously suffered from a debilitating and embittering lack of agency. It is also in the context of this employment that I first came to believe that prayer is paradigmatic for practice: how we pray is how we come to live and work. In borrowed words that have become well-worn over the years, work is worship, and worship is work. Perhaps this conviction grew out of becoming convinced, earlier, that the Psalms are paradigmatic for prayer: how the psalmists pray is how we all can pray.

*“What is man that you are mindful of him?” ([Psalm 8](#)).*

After a (very brief) stint as CEO of the Center for Public Justice in my middle forties, I was entrusted (equally briefly) by Fuller Theological Seminary with the public theological legacy of Max De Pree. Max had been the sometime CEO of the Herman Miller office furniture company, author of books like *Leadership Is an Art* and a dear friend and generous supporter of Fuller. In Herman Miller I discovered an *organizational* expression of what Psalm 8 expressed poetically about the meaning of human work: to work is to represent God to God’s creation. That is, to work is to connect with God’s creatures and to contribute to the care of God’s good earth. And in the products of Herman Miller—in particular in the office chairs designed for Herman Miller by Ray and Charles Eames—I discovered an *artefactual* expression of what Psalm 19 expresses poetically about the meaning of createdness in

God's world: God's creatures, and the creations of God's creatures, joyously celebrate—by their very existence—the grandeur of God.

*“The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19).*

These days, early in my fifties, I am blessed with a nomadic existence. As one of my friends describes me, I am a counter-swallow, following not the summer but the winter in my annual migratory between Canada, my adopted northern home, and South Africa, my southern birth country. I had yearned for years to be able again to invest some of my sweat and time into South Africa, to make some small contribution towards justice and prosperity within its borders, and now I am able to do so. The joy of this possibility comes mixed with sorrow and perplexity. It has been a quarter century since the end of apartheid and the establishment of a constitutional democracy with universal adult suffrage, and yet more South Africans live in poverty—and the inequality gap between rich and poor in South Africa is larger—in 2019 than in 1994. It is understandable that many of those who have sacrificed for a more just and prosperous South Africa have become cynical, and that many of those who suffer insecurity and poverty are filled with despair.

*“I am helpless” (Ps. 88).*

Part of what tempers my own cynicism and despair is my recent involvement in the work of [Triga Ventures](#), a South African nonprofit that “helps equip entrepreneurs in the building of redemptive ventures, with the vision of solving some of Africa’s most pressing challenges while bridging the inequality gap that pervades our society.” At retreats in May and August 2018, I prayed the Psalms with the first cohort of [Triga Fellows](#). I considered with them how the Psalms give us words with which to respond to the work of God in our worship and how the Psalms model for us practices of wonder, heartbreak and hope with which to respond to the work of God in our own work. The ventures of these entrepreneurs incarnate hope for the future of South Africa, and the quality of the relationships they are forging with one another signposts the quality of political and economic relationships God promises us in the world to come: “I will make your overseers peace and your taskmasters righteousness” (Isaiah 60 ESV).

*“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth” (Psalm 98).*

The poetry at the beginning of Genesis portrays the hospitality of God by its structure. On the first day, God creates the welcoming play of light and darkness, and on the fourth day, God welcomes sun, moon and stars into this play. On the second day, God makes room in the sky above and waters below, and the fifth day, God welcomes flying and swimming creatures into this room. On the third day, God gathers the waters so that dry land is disclosed, and on the sixth day, God welcomes land creatures and us humans into this place of revelation. We humans are created to represent God within this hospitable creation; that is, we are made to exercise the hospitality of God towards God's creatures. In the story that immediately follows this poem, the hospitality of God is further emphasized: God plants

a pleasant garden and places the paradigmatic first humans in it to cultivate it and take care of it in God's company. As Eugene Peterson writes, "Creation is not an impersonal environment, it is a personal home—*this* is where we live."

And as Peterson also writes, "The story that has creation for its first word, has creation for its last word": the heavens and the earth in Genesis, a renewed heaven and a renewed earth in the Apocalypse of John. Because of what the Bible reveals to us, "We are now able to look upon the events around us not as a hopeless morass ... but as the birth pangs of a new creation and a beckoning to participate in God's remaking of God's creation." The Genesis invitation to cultivate and take care of God's world reveals the work of humanity (and my own work) as meaning-full. John's vision of God's recovery of all things into a peaceable commonwealth in the world to come, indwelt by the very presence of God, reveals the work of humanity and my own work to be hope-full. And as the Psalter is nicely situated in the messy middle of God's Word, so is my workday-lived response to God's great works situated in the messy middle of the history of God's world. I am so grateful for the humane paradigm these poems daily offer my work in this mess.

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