

## A Future Not Our Own

### OVERVIEW:

When historian Studs Terkel claimed that “Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying,” he captured the disillusionment many people feel about their jobs.

While almost every job includes tedious elements, Scripture offers hope by framing our work in light of God’s broader story. This discussion helps group members identify specific areas of frustration and encourages them to work with the future in mind.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Does your work ever seem futile? / Do you ever wonder, “Am I really making a difference?”
- What aspects of your daily work feel ineffective, unimportant, or discouraging?

It’s rare to find work that doesn’t include tedium. Even the most fulfilling roles include tasks needed to “get the job done.” As one manager describes it, every job includes “things you do to pay the rent.” On the other hand, maybe you face such monumental challenges at work that you doubt your efforts will really make a difference. Both scenarios reflect the struggle to find purpose and hope in our jobs.

Pastor and author Tim Keller addresses this dilemma:

“Everyone imagines accomplishing things, and everyone finds him—or herself largely incapable of producing them. Everyone wants to be successful rather than forgotten, and everyone wants to make a difference in life. But that is beyond the control of any of us. If this life is all there is, then everything will eventually burn up in the death of the sun and no one will even be around to remember anything that has ever happened. Everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught.”<sup>1</sup>

He echoes sentiments expressed by the author of Ecclesiastes, who wrote:

“ ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ <sup>3</sup>What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, NIV)

- o In what ways do these quotes resonate with you? How do you typically respond when you feel this way?

**When we feel discouraged by the futility of work, Scripture offers two principles that can restore our perspective:**

**1. All work is done in the context of God’s broader redemptive work in the world:**

**I Cor. 15:58** - “In the Lord, your labor is not in vain.”

“Everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught. Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God’s calling, can matter forever.

There is a God, there is a future healed world that he will bring about, and your work is showing it (in part) to others. Your work will only be partially successful, on your best days, in bringing that world about. But inevitably the whole tree that you seek—the beauty, harmony, justice, comfort, joy, and community—will come to fruition.” – Tim Keller<sup>ii</sup>

- o How can these words inspire your work?

**2. Although we may not see the fruit of our labors, when invest in a future not our own.**

“Human work is the interface between what is and what could be, and it always leads to what will be. Our work creates the future.” - Bruce Hiebert<sup>i</sup>

Read the following poem together and then spend a few moments in silent reflection.

**“A Future Not our Own”** by Bishop Ken Untener<sup>iii</sup>

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying  
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted,  
knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation  
in realizing that. This enables us to do something,  
and to do it very well. It may be incomplete,  
but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference  
between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.  
Amen.

- o What concepts or phrases capture your imagination?
- o In what ways do you see your vocation (profession, roles, responsibilities) investing in the future?
- o How do you handle the emotional "weight" of knowing you may not see the fruit of your labor? Hope can you find hope in your daily work in spite of this tension?

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<sup>i</sup> Keller, Tim *Every Good Endeavor*.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Hiebert, Bruce. *Good Work: How to Live Your Values in the Workplace*.

<sup>iv</sup> This prayer was composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, MI for a homily marking the anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero's martyrdom. Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador, was assassinated on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass in the small chapel of a cancer hospital where he lived. He was an advocate for the rights of El Salvador's poor and was influential in the growth of liberation theology.