

This week I came across an article  
 about something I *know* happens in our lives  
 but that I *didn't* know had a name.  
 It's a phenomenon called "Workism."  
 It's when a person equates her work with her worth,  
 or equates his profession with his sense of life's meaning.

In an *The Atlantic* magazine article called,  
 "Workism Is Making Americans Miserable,"  
 writer Derek Thompson says that Workism,  
 "is the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production,  
 but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose; and the  
 belief that any policy to promote human welfare must *always* encourage  
 more work" (original emphasis).<sup>1</sup>

Thompson goes on to cite statistics to show how,  
 especially for young people,  
 "[f]inding meaning at work beats family and kindness as the top ambition."  
 "We've created this idea that the meaning of life should be found in work . . ."  
 one interviewee says,  
 "We tell young people that their work should be their passion."  
 It's like the old saying, "If you love what you do,  
 you'll never work a day in your life,"  
 except that Workism takes the adage *to the extreme*.

The idea that one's work must be their passion,  
 that one's professional productivity is also one's identity and life purpose . . .  
 I don't think that applies to only people who are in the 9-to-5 workforce.  
 For some people, like stay-at-home moms or dads,  
 their parenting can become their sole purpose,  
 with their worth riding on how well their kids are doing,  
 or how picture-perfect, Instragram-able their home-cooked meals are,  
 or how clean and well-designed their home is.

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1. Thompson, Derek. "Workism Is Making Americans Miserable." *The Atlantic*, 24 Feb. 2019,  
[theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/](https://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/). Accessed  
 Jan. 2020. All other quotes are from this article.

Workism can also apply in the lives of retired people, who, once they leave behind their professions and daily work, are literally confronted with the question, “Well, what are you going to *do* now?”

And so retirees must begin a whole new quest for meaning and contribution in the later years of life, that, in my experience as a pastor watching many of you make that transition, is no easier and contains no less pressure than the quests of young people to “find their passion.”

When a culture of Workism dominates— where work equals people’s worth and meaning— then that also means that *lack of work* means *lack of meaning and worth*.

This harms the dignity of those without jobs, who, either because of unemployment or illness or disability or immigration status or age— the culture of Workism deems personally deficient and inadequate.

No wonder the article’s author concludes that in “a culture that funnels its dreams of self-actualization into salaried jobs is setting itself up for collective anxiety, mass disappointment, and inevitable burnout.”

*How do you experience Workism at work in your life?*

I thought of Workism as I studied the gospel lesson for this morning, because while the disciples were certainly not job-obsessed modern Americans, they are *at work* in today’s passage from Matthew chapter four. They’re literally *on the job* when the scene starts. “As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother *casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.*”

The gospel writer Matthew provides no other details about Simon Peter and Andrew other than their names, their relation, and their profession: fishermen. That they are *fishermen* is the important qualification we apparently need to know about these soon-to-be disciples. As far as the text is concerned *at this point*, other than their names and the fact that they're brothers, Simon Peter's and Andrew's job is their identity. The gospel defines them by their profession.

What if Simon Peter and Andrew also saw themselves that way, in real life? What if they expected to derive their worth from their professional success and their satisfaction from their business venture? It's not *so hard* to imagine them as first-century Workists.

Now Jesus challenges all that. Jesus interrupts their Workism with a simple invitation to walk away from it: "And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.'" There is another life Jesus Christ has in mind for these two. Another identity where fishing—what they catch and the market price and their day-in and day-out toil—will not reign supreme for their sense of identity and worth. That day beside the Sea of Galilee Jesus lays a claim on Simon Peter and Andrew that is *not self-justifying* but from God. Where it's not *what they do* that matters but the claim and call they *receive* from God.

And then, Jesus does it again, as if to make the point of God's claim *really clear*.

“As [Jesus] went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.”

Here again we get these soon-to-be-disciples’ names, their family relations, and their work: net menders.

But unlike Simon Peter and Andrew,  
James and John are not alone;  
their father Zebedee is in the boat with them.

And Zebedee’s presence  
heightens the drama.

Having Dad there adds outside pressure to James’ and John’s response to Jesus’ call.

With the man who likely taught them their entire profession  
right there in the boat,  
we can imagine the weight of expectations  
that James and John would have faced:  
that they continue in the family trade,  
that they grow the business,  
that they succeed and accomplish more than Zebedee did.

Nevertheless, Jesus called them.

Jesus calls to James and John *through* those compounding expectations  
and calls them to a life beyond that first-century style Workism.

For Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John,  
and for all the disciples,

Jesus lays a bigger claim on their lives than their fishing.

Jesus’ call provides another voice

that drowns out any of their inner monologues of self-justification.

Jesus’ voice shouts over the voices that tell them they’re not enough  
or place crushing expectations on them.

Jesus has another identity and purpose for them,  
not based on the fish they catch,

*but grounded in the God who has now caught them.*

And what do they find when they follow?

What does being a fisher of people offer these four instead?

It offers . . . salvation.

It saves the disciples from the endless cycle of Workism.  
 Because when they leave behind their work,  
 AND the infinite self-justification that stems from it,  
 the disciples find themselves in the presence of One  
 who cures every disease and every sickness among the people.  
 Not just the physical ailments of the sick and epileptics and paralytics  
 but who also cures those who are afflicted with various diseases and pains,  
 including the acute pains that come from endlessly justifying yourself  
 by your work  
 and the cultural disease of Workism.

To put it in Lutheran terms,  
 Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John walk away from self-justification  
 to find justification by grace through faith,  
 which is not their own doing,  
 not the result of *work*,  
 but the gift of God.

Jesus calls from beside the sea of Galilee and beyond the Jordan  
 and from this Scripture  
 to us,  
 countering the Workist voices who say your work is your meaning  
 and instead proclaiming, “You are not what you do.”  
 Jesus interrupts all our attempts to find meaning through our schoolwork  
 or housework  
 or careers—or lack of them—  
 and boldly says “You are not the sum of your accomplishments.”  
 Jesus saves us from all the ways we wrongly base our inherent worth and  
 identity  
 on what WE do  
 by laying the claim,  
 “First and foremost you are mine.”

For us modern people who live under the tyranny of Workism,  
 Jesus’ call beside the sea of Galilee is Good News today:  
 it is a radical invitation to walk away from a mindset that’s self-justified  
 and toward the freedom of being God-justified.  
 It probably won’t involve leaving your job or your family,

and it probably won't happen immediately,  
but it will involve Jesus reforming the role that work or family or  
accomplishments  
play in your self-worth.  
And that, my friends,  
is a freedom and salvation, indeed,  
the beginnings of a cure for every disease and every pain.

AMEN.