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Ardmore, Pennsylvania  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
April 7, 2019

Lectionary Year C:  
Isaiah 43:16-21  
Philippians 3:4b-14  
John 12:1-8  
Psalm 126

### Where True Joys are to be Found

There is a writer named Jon Malesic who has attracted attention recently by writing on a controversial subject.<sup>1</sup> There are a lot of people writing about controversial subjects these days (social media is full of them) but this one I think is particularly interesting.

Malesic was, until recently, a tenured professor of religion at a Roman Catholic college in Pennsylvania. For the uninitiated, this may sound ordinary and not particularly impressive, but for the thousands of ink-stained wretches toiling through graduate school, to say “tenured professor,” at a good school, is to describe something like heaven itself—the ultimate goal beyond all others, academic paradise—like the Promised Land, but without the promise.

And Malesic quit. He quit, he says, because he was burned out. Physically burned out, emotionally burned out, spiritually burned out. The kind of work he was doing and the amount of work he was doing was destroying him and his relationships. He realized that the sacrifice he was making just wasn't worth it. So he quit.

By itself, this isn't terribly unusual. Many people have left one line of work that wasn't good for them or their families and pursued something else that allowed for a more holistic flourishing. That is a good thing, I think. Flourishing is good, and human flourishing includes physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects, among other things.

But what Malesic gets uniquely right, I think, has been in writing about this process of being burned out of works in terms that are both spiritual and culturally critical, and theologically important.

Because he sees the symptom of burnout as not just an individual situation, but partially a product of a cultural emphasis on productivity as the source of personal value. That is, the belief that who you are, and how worthwhile you are, is determined by how much, if anything, you can produce. This is a belief that is deeply flawed, from a Christian point of view. The valorization of overwork, the equivalence of achievement and virtue, is, at root, idolatry: the idolatry of productivity. And, like all idolatries, it is destructive—self-destructive. Idolatry kills.

The source and measure of personal value is in being loved by God in Christ. Full stop. The measure of your personal value, and mine, and Jon Malesic's, is in being loved by God in Christ. There is nothing that can be added to that. There is nothing that can be taken away from that. The source and measure of personal value is in being loved by God in Christ.

This is today's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians in summary. The church in Philippi is divided and there is quarreling going on. He asks them, do you want to talk about

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<sup>1</sup> This is a good example: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/taming-demon>

achievements? Let's put it this way, he says: whatever achievements you have, I have more. Paul says, I have a better pedigree than you do. I have done more than you have, accomplished more than you have, I have excelled where you fallen short.

Then he says, And it doesn't matter. All of the achievements, pedigree, accomplishments, productivity, worldly excellency: it's "rubbish." The King James translation is more explicit: it's all dung. The Greek is more explicit still: all of those accomplishments are excrement. All of it is peripheral. It isn't, ultimately, what matters—unless it makes us think more highly of ourselves, in which case it does matter, but in a bad way, because it's idolatry, and idolatry kills.

That's why he says that whatever gains he has had, whatever accomplishments he has achieved, he now realizes that they are actually losses. They are losses, liabilities, insofar as they would make him value them, and thus himself, more highly than in finding value in God's love for him in Christ. Finding one's value in anything else is idolatry and idolatry kills.

St. Paul is a sinner in need of redemption, and that redemption has come in Christ. St. Paul is a sinner in need of a new life, and that new life does not come from Paul's pedigree, or his achievements, or his accomplishments, or his productivity. It comes because the Christ who died for him in perfect love is risen, and that risen Christ has made Paul his own, and thereby brought him into life with God. Perfect love is not like worldly love, even the most wonderful worldly love. We call God's love perfect because there is nothing that can be added to it and there is nothing that can be taken away from it: it is perfect, because God's very being is love, and that love has been poured out on the world in Christ. It is a love that suffers no burn-out, not for the lover (God) or the beloved (us). Everything else is rubbish, dung, excrement. The source and measure of our value is in being loved by God in Christ, and we are.

This may sound relatively innocuous: Jesus loves me; I shouldn't brag too much about my accomplishments too much; I shouldn't think too highly of myself.

I think the stakes are higher than that. To show how, I want to use as a foil an article from the Atlantic magazine five years ago by Ezekiel Emanuel, an oncologist and bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> Emanuel is a smart guy who shows nuanced and careful thinking about medical ethics and health care policy. But a few years ago he wrote a somewhat controversial article titled, "Why I Hope to Die at 75." He makes some interesting points, as you can imagine a smart guy would, and the headline is somewhat provocative. But what bothered me was that one of the reasons (only one, but one of the main reasons) that he claimed not to be interested in living past 75 is because he said that, most likely, he will stop being productive, original, and creative after the age of 75. Sure, there are exceptions to that, he says; we all know people who maintain their output much later. But exceptions are exceptional by definition. Most likely he will have peaked, no longer accomplishing much. At that point, without productivity, achievements, or accomplishments to be had, it is better to shuffle off the mortal coil and get out of the way.

I'm picking on him a little bit; that's only one of the things he says in his article, though it is a major component. (He also says that he reserves the right to change his mind at the age of 74, which I think is fair.) But think of the implicit claim there. To put it bluntly, the implicit claim of Emmanuel's article is that when one is not productive, one should not live.

I don't think he would say that, exactly, but it is the implication. However, I am less concerned about Ezekiel Emanuel and his choices than I am about others. What about those who are chronically unemployed, for example, and struggle with their life's purpose? What about those seniors who can no longer be productive? And what about those who do not have the capacity to make their own choices? What about people with severe physical or cognitive disabilities? Some of them may not be productive at all, ever in their lives. Perhaps they have no accomplishments.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/10/why-i-hope-to-die-at-75/379329/>

Perhaps they will never get any achievements. What is their value then—with no creativity, no originality, no productivity? What is being said about their worthiness to live?

The source and measure of our value is in being loved by God in Christ. Finding value in achievements or productivity is idolatry, and idolatry literally kills. The source and measure of our worth is in being loved by God in Christ and everything else is dangerous. You can end up getting burned out. You can end up thinking that death is better than not being productive. Idolatry kills.

What do we do then? It may be worth following the lead of Mary of Bethany, in today's reading from the gospel of John. "Mary took a pound of costly perfume ... anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair." An extravagant, wasteful, worshipful action that was not productive at all. She was doing nothing but getting on her knees and loving the one who loved her first. She got no achievement out of it, no recognition. One person, at least, even criticized her for it, based on the fact that it didn't accomplish anything. No productivity there.

But the work of the Christian is the worship and love of God in Christ. In a few minutes, we will receive the body and blood of the one who loves us. The person whom Mary of Bethany worshipped will be with us again in the elements of bread and wine. We will receive it reverently, worshipfully, gratefully. He receive the one who shows us that our worth doesn't depend on anything else but his love, and thus gives us life.

But not only worshipfully. We receive him with joy. "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed," sings the psalmist. We are glad indeed. We need nothing but Christ and his love, and that is what we have been given, and that is what we have been promised, forever.

Receive the body of Christ. Worship the one who loves you perfectly. Resist idolatry. Know your infinite worth to God in Christ. And rejoice.