

SERMON SERIES

*Making Our Garden Grow*

SERMON TITLE

“Doing the Work” (Genesis 2:8,15)

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Today, we continue our summer Sermon series inspired by the findings and recommendations of our Long-range Planning Ministry Team at Meadowbrook. Each week we will explore how the Bible speaks into the areas identified by our Long-range team, including the 4 top categories the team believes to impact the future health of our local church. Last week, we considered Openness to Change. In future weeks we’ll explore Reaching Young Adults and Education on our Forecasted Financial Status. This morning, we explore Increasing Attendance and Participation, an important topic as it speaks to our current situation as a church, but a crucial, ongoing one for any congregational church. We are reminded that there is no denomination in congregationalism and that we all lead the church together. It is our responsibility to do so.

When we consider the history of the Church universal, including our own history at Bushnell and Meadowbrook, we know that we've always been called to do the work together. History reflects this as ongoing, but it also communicates how the way we approach mutual leadership may look different over time.

As a congregational church, we are gathered around a covenant, distinct from any specific denomination’s actions or creed. A covenant is a contract. It is also a promise. All of our members will remember that the way we officially welcome people into membership at Meadowbrook is by way of their “owning the covenant,” agreeing and committing to actively working together with other members in our local church.

So how *does* our collective and individual attendance and participation impact the overall ability of our church to thrive? This is something we must keep in mind as we revisit scripture and what it speaks to us now, in this moment.

In our passage from the Book of Genesis, we are reminded that humankind was brought to the garden of Eden by God and given work to do.

“Eden” means *paradise* or a *well-watered place*. Scholars believe

that here the garden more points to an orchard with trees than a vegetable garden or another form of garden of plants or flowers; thus we see how the tree of life and tree of the knowledge of good and evil were in the garden of Eden.

View it literally or figuratively as we may, it is clear that humankind did nothing to earn this placement in paradise. Since it takes place before work has been done, this placement in paradise seems to say more about God's grace. And yet God did give humankind work in this paradise. Work seems to be part of our identity then, something we're called to do, in one way or another, even when our environment is looking pretty good and things are going well. This is important for us to grasp because people often behave as if work is something that is negative or to be avoided. We want to get work over with so we can go do what we want, what we like; suggesting that doing whatever we want is what is of value and not our vocation as people called to share our gifts. The broader culture in America can seem to overtly celebrate achievement and greatness, which are not necessarily the same as doing the work. Consider disparity in compensation, for example, and how people talk about it.

Why do we want to avoid work, anyway? Maybe it's because we feel disconnected from the type of job or task, we don't support its aims, or it harms us in some way. Perhaps we avoid it because we don't see it as an important part of who we are as human beings. We raise the value of our own labor while devaluing that of others, and nobody wants to be paid less. But what if we saw how work is an integral part of being human? How would that change the way we view what we do and how we value what others do? Rather than taking whatever we want while the getting's good, we instead embrace a culture of mutual work and respect; as children of God, all of us, we then see our shared identity as workers for the kingdom of God, sharing love through the specific gifts we have been given.

When we see work as part of who we are, we begin to think of what we do as vocation or calling. We all know we've been blessed with unique talents, so then it becomes more about how we have access to employ them as part of our daily lives. Acknowledging and internalizing God's call to work helps us value the uniqueness of one another and all

the amazing things we have to contribute and share in this world. Rather than trying to be done, our focus shifts to helping others start or continue.

What does “doing the work” look like for us in our local church? Well, we’ve acknowledged that in congregationalism we all do the work together. We pray over and discuss how different areas may be covered by unique groups or individuals and have such things as bylaws and policies to guide the leadership structures we put in place, including at Meadowbrook, our Advisory Council, Boards, Ministry Teams, seasonal and new activities and ideas, and what Staff we may employ and what specific things they may do. Again, in a denomination, decisions may be made in different ways due to their view of authority and organizational structure. But in congregationalism, we are the authority and organizational structure. This means we are free to discern where to go and what to do together as a church and also that we alone are responsible for doing the work together. No one else will do it for us. It is up to us by design.

People know what to do because they show up. They are informed by being present in their heart, be it in-person or online. In the church, we know what to do by attending Worship services and actively participating in church events and ministries on a regular basis. The more we are present and participate, the more we know and can help out by applying our unique gifts to the needs and opportunities that arise. And we all can be present and participate. Technology has blessed us with many ways to remain connected and to be engaged in the local church. We can intentionally plan to welcome one another to be present in ways that affirm who we are and what special talents we may have to offer, and we can do so lovingly for all people.

So what does this mean for us? What does this speak to our own attendance and participation? We, all of us, are invited to prayerfully considered our gifts and how we might grow in involvement at Meadowbrook. We can read the weekly Messenger to see what’s going on, what we can sign up to help with, what teams or groups we might join if even for a season, and we can bring our ideas to one another, not with the view towards others carrying out what we say but with a commitment to actively participate in the ideas we believe in. We join a

Bible study, attend Worship every week unless we are ill or travelling, get involved in specific ministries of the church and even change that up from time to time. We also encourage others to get involved. We invite our friends, families, and neighbors to join us in attending and participating in the life of the church, because *we* are the church. This is congregationalism. And it takes all of us. And our great God knows, the world needs us and needs us now.

Friends, I'd like to leave you with a challenge. Over the next couple of weeks, before the summer moves to the fall, prayerfully consider your own attendance and involvement not *at* Meadowbrook but *as* Meadowbrook Congregational Church. Talk to me about what ideas interest you; share what gifts you'd like to bring to the table with one another; think of what changes you might even make in your regular routines to enable you to get more involved as the church. Your ideas and gifts are important. You are important and what you do matters. So take the leap. Say yes. And continue to *be* the church, together.

We raise our hearts to Jesus, whom we follow in all we say and do, that our work may give glory to the God who made us and first placed us in that beautiful garden. May we till our garden now, that we may see it bloom tomorrow.

May it be so. AMEN.