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The Sixth Sunday of Pentecost

Jokic, Justification, and Play

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As a Celtics fan, it was a bit rough watching the NBA finals thinking that it could be Boston in it. I didn't watch much, but I did tune in for the end of Game 5, which was this past Monday. One thing I love is watching teams and athletes, really no matter what sport, celebrate their victory, and this victory celebration from Denver Nuggets was bound to be huge, as it's the first league championship in their team's 50-year history.

So, there's Nikola Jokic, the best basketball player on the planet. He's standing on the court being interviewed by ESPN's Lisa Salters just moments after he's led his team to the pinnacle achievement of his sport. The confetti is falling and the gravity of the moment is just beginning to sink in and Salters looks up at Jokic, asking how it feels to be an NBA champion. "It's good, it's good," he says without a smile. His voice is even, if contented. He's looking at the floor, as if he had just been asked how he liked his morning coffee. Then he looks at Salters. "The job is done, we can go home now."

And then he looks up. Not at the camera. Just kinda up and away, if only for a moment, and there's this look of relief mingled with joy in his eyes as he looks where – it was almost as if he was looking towards Serbia, his home country, where he was eager to get back to. Salters laughs and congratulates him, but you can tell she's surprised at such

a.... well, what kind of response is this, exactly?

As I watched, I must admit part of me was a little underwhelmed. Come on Man. Be in the Moment! Enjoy this! You've earned it! Now Jokic did celebrate with his team; there was a great video of him throwing his all-star teammate Jamal Murray into a pool. And yet it was humorous when even later on in the evening he expressed some regret that the NBA championship parade would be on a Thursday, making it difficult for him to get back to Serbia in time for a horse race.

For Jokic, glory and international fame are but part of the pilgrimage, just a small piece of his identity. But these don't supply the deepest meaning in his life. They don't supply his life's why, his life's purpose. The why is thousands of miles away. The why is right there on his shoulders, in the form of his daughter. The why is right there by his side, in the form of his wife, as they stand removed from the rest of the Nuggets team celebrating around the podium. As the Nuggets coach is lost in celebration leading a "we want more" chant, Jokic's response quietly challenged this – the job is finished, its time to return to living.

There is something deep in us that wants to see the athlete throwing themselves on the floor overwhelmed at their achievement, hugging their trophy with tears flow down their cheeks. We like seeing that someone's work, achievement, and sacrifice were somehow all worth it. Perhaps seeing an athlete's enraptured celebration is a way to assure ourselves that what we have given ourselves to – the causes, the jobs, the careers – can justify our worth; that the trophies we are seeking will be worth it. But that shouldn't surprise us: we are a culture conditioned to see our lives in and through our achievements, through our work.

Jokic, holding his daughter, with his arm around his wife, with his eyes looking across the ocean to Serbia gestures towards a different way of being, having a different set of priorities. It's not far from what I feel St. Paul to be up to in Romans Chapter 5 when he tells us that we are justified by faith. Anytime Paul says that we are justified by faith, and he says it very, very often (it shows up in his letters 60 times), he's almost always juxtaposing faith with works. Paul can't stop talking about the beautiful liberation that is ours through faith, because he feels like we need to be liberated from confusing ourselves, our identities with our work. It was a very countercultural message then, and Jokic proved that it still is.

Think about the first question we often ask people – almost rolling off the tongue we wonder: what do you do? What do you do for a living? That last question is interesting because as it equates what we do with our lives – work is how we earn a living, earn an identity, earn a sense of self. I've talked to a number of people who are unsure of retiring. Out of curiosity, I looked up what percentage of people

over 75 still worked. 8% of this demographic in Massachusetts still works – the 7th highest rate in the country. New Hampshire, Vermont, and Connecticut were all in the top 10. For so many people, it is very hard to imagine what they will do when they retire? And perhaps we fear who we'll be without our jobs giving us a sense of meaning and purpose. We at the same time want to work less, and yet are afraid of what that might mean.

Sociologists and economists have told us that with the rise in technology we will actually be able to work less. Economists have been talking about this for a very long time. In 1965, Congress held a lengthy hearing to discuss the looming twenty-hour work week. According to their estimates, the rapidly expanding automation of the day meant that by the year 2000, Americans would have more free time than they'd know what to do with. Summer camps would have to stay open year-round. People would be taking so many vacation trips that our national infrastructure would need to be completely overhauled to accommodate all the traffic. What fanciful thinking!

Technology has not increased downtime. Instead of condensing work, it has squeezed out rest. Dramatically so. There was a great cartoon strip that went viral a few years ago that poked at this. The image shows a man and woman lying on a sunny beach, listening to the waves. The woman reads a book while the man types on his laptop. The caption reads: "I'm not a workaholic. I just work to relax."

In a late capitalist culture, our collective conscience puts the question to us: if you aren't producing, who are you? We know who they are. Those who aren't efficiently producing have a name: procrastinators. According to a study done by the American Psychological Association 20% of Americans qualify as "chronic procrastinators." This study also highlighted the fact that the emotion most associated with procrastination is guilt. That's stunning. 20% of Americans feel guilty for not "getting things done". I wonder if 20% of Americans feel guilty about more conventional moral failures, such as a lying or cheating. It is doubtful. But this illustrates how central productivity and work are to American identity. In a very real sense, production has eclipsed goodness as our culture's highest value.

The law of work holds our culture in its clutches, scaring us into activity and busyness with its one commandment: Quit Dawdling - Thou Shall Produce. The *New York Times* riffed on the theme of procrastination, theorizing: Procrastination as epidemic – and the constant guilt that goes with it – is peculiar to the modern era. The 21st century capitalist world, in its never-ending drive for expansion, consecrates an always-on productivity for the sake of greater fiscal health.

The *New York Times*, not especially known for its religious take on culture, opted for a religious to underscore our attachment to

productivity – its been consecrated. Work and productivity have *become the new religion*.

This is why I find St. Paul's message so helpful, and so liberating. Paul is here this morning to tell us that we are all so much more than what we contribute. We are so much more than our jobs, or our lack of jobs, or our frustration at our jobs. We don't have to be justified by what we do, by how well we perform. We are justified by faith in the God who is pleased with us because when he looks at us, he sees Jesus. That is to say, when God looks at us, God sees himself, our very beings mirroring back to God beauty and goodness. God becomes flesh, and walks with us, and heals us, and touches us, and leads us into community, and dies for us to show us that we have an identity that is good and true and beautiful and has nothing to do with what we can produce.

It won't be easy for us to be healed from the religion of productivity. It will take time. But let me offer you a way to experience this divine justification a little more fully in your life. The opposite of work we often think to be rest. But rest, as the cartoon strip showed, is becoming harder and harder. How much of our rest is nothing more than doing work like things with our feet up, and a beverage at hand? I want to encourage you to think about another alternative to work this summer. And that's play. Playing – playing games, playing instruments, playing in the ocean, playing ball – is a way to experience freedom and joy, and to do something that isn't about results. To play acknowledges that life is more than what we produce. Play dress up, play in your garden, play with yarn, play on your sailboat, play in the pond. Do whatever it is that helps you affirm that life is a game, not to be won, but to be enjoyed.

The best athletes like Jokic know that winning isn't everything – the sheer pleasure of the game is. The people who are most alive to me, most saintly, are often people who have a sense of play. Their life has transcended production value; they've achieved a sobriety of sanity amidst a workaholic culture. They know a child-like freedom. It's almost like they've been justified by a Love and a Joy beyond them. They have become more than their work.

I think when I meet new people this summer, I'll try and ask people not what they do for a living, but what are they playing at? That's what I'm asking you this morning: Where in your life are you tasting freedom and liberty and joy? Let's not be anxious about the trophies; we can receive them when they are handed to us; but we can hold onto them lightly. And we can do so for the simple reason that we've discovered grace, that eternal outpouring of divine love poured into our hearts. Freeing us from the need to produce, this love produces in us a playful, and free, and liberated heart – a heart that has discovered the things truly worth holding onto.