

Lectionary 22 + September 3, 2017

Tomorrow is Labor Day and you know what that means. Life gets busy again on Tuesday. Back to school, back to work, back to the program year here at church, back to activities, back to the routine. Labor Day weekend is a sign that summer is coming to a close and autumn is around the corner. That's what it means for me and I suspect many others. I wonder, though, if we've forgotten that this holiday means something other than a change of seasons. As the title suggests, Labor Day is a day to celebrate the American worker. In fact, as the labor union movement began, they helped put this holiday on the calendar to honor the achievements of the laborer and labor's contributions to the vitality of the nation.

Perhaps it would be good for us on this Labor Day weekend to reflect on the vocation of working. More specifically, how do we approach our work as Christians?

During Parish Concerns, Patrick will make an announcement about next Sunday's Ministry Fair. I hope you'll come and check out the many and various ways you can connect to the ministries of PRL. Using the theme developed by the ELCA, we're calling "God's Work, Our Hands" and I hope you can discern best how to use your gifts through the various venues of our common life and ministry here. These are very important things, but please do not forget that your ministry, your primary ministry takes place beyond these venues and beyond these walls. The primary work of the church takes place in our homes, our neighborhoods, the schools we attend, and the places we work or volunteer.

Your ministry in daily life includes every aspect of life – where you live and work and play. So, one primary way you do the work of God's Kingdom is through your labor. "God's Work. Our Hands." Through our hands, each day, God's work is done.

When I was in college and already knew I would be attending seminary, I was a rather zealous pre-seminary student, always focused on doing the work of God and never convinced I was doing enough. Sunday worship wasn't enough so if the

Parish I attended was having a ministry fair; I would probably sign up for as many things as I could. It was that sort of zealotry.

Fortunately, I had a good pastor when I was in college. Most of you have heard of him. His name was Dick Christensen. Those of you who knew him knew that he was direct, never minced words and always got straight to the point. One day he told me, quite plainly, "You spend too much time at church." I was taken aback and a little confused. How dare anyone challenge my zealous work for the Kingdom! He then pointed out to me that my daily work as a student was my ministry. It was my fulltime occupation and it was my ministry. I wondered why I had never heard that before.

Your ministry includes but isn't limited to the parish. It includes every aspect of your life and that includes your work. Let's not perpetuate that silly notion of dividing the world up between sacred and secular. God shows up in all things and, as those who claim allegiance to Jesus, we want to honor God in all things. Including our work.

And what does that look like?

Well, Jesus says that if you want to follow him then you take up your cross. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

And that is where it gets difficult and complicated, especially when we are called to follow Jesus in the midst of a busy world where, it seems, we are frantically trying to save our lives. Many of us put a lot of energy into saving our lives. There's no way around it.

Think about your jobs for example. Aren't you looking at getting a raise next year? Shouldn't you be working toward seniority? Gosh, Pastor Van Kley and I count on you to put money in our pension accounts. More than once, I've received notice about attending one of the pre-retirement seminars. Some of you have jobs where you are seeking to secure tenure. We work to make a living and find security and happiness. Aren't we saving our lives? What could Jesus possibly want us to do?

First, I don't think Jesus' call to deny yourself is a call to somehow abandon your identity. Nor is it a call to somehow jettison self-care. What I do think is this – Jesus calls us to abandon putting ourselves above all else and above all others, even as we live and move in structures and systems that want to pull us in a different direction. Surrounded by consumerism, individualism and all that seeks to celebrate the autonomous self, Jesus calls us to nurture a different vision and a different kind of world. Surrendering to Jesus call, we may abandon the quest for power and glory.

Jesus calls us away from a private garden and into the world of the neighbor.

Can we bring that sense of call to our places of work?

And what does that look like?

Today's scriptures are rich fare and that includes the second lesson:

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor;
be ardent in spirit. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Contribute to
the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.
Bless those who persecute you; don't curse them.
Live in harmony with one another; don't be haughty ...*

live peaceably with all and leave the business of judging to God.

If your enemy is hungry, feed her.

If your enemy is thirsty, give him something to drink.

Overcome evil with good.

Do we appreciate how radical and transformative this kind of behavior is? This is the way of Christian community among us and it is the way of life that extends into the world of the neighbor. This is the way of the Cross.

A couple of weeks ago, Britt presided at the wedding of a wonderful couple. And the couple chose this as one of the scripture readings. I had a chance to thank Theresa for including this reading in the wedding and how much we both appreciated how the wedding seemed to be a kind of Kingdom of God celebration. She commented back to me how that experience of love and joy and she reminded me that one day that is how all the world will live. "Sisters and brothers united in the spirit of truth, joy, love and mercy."

Yes, one day it will be that way. Christ will come again. And in the meantime, you and I have the privilege and opportunity to make God's dream come true. We would do well to take a clue from Paul's letter to the Romans in discerning how best to do that.

- Honoring all – not just honoring those who win
- Blessing those who persecute us instead of tweeting a mean-spirited comment to them or calling them out on Facebook
- Loving the enemy not as vague ideal but giving them food and drink
- Listening, really listening to another without agenda
- Practicing lavish generosity and hospitality
- Giving and forgiving

One of the areas we want to focus on in our on-going discernment process is "Ministry in Daily Life." I've been thinking lately that one way we can support each other in that task is to help one another develop a "Rule of Life." By "rule," I don't mean a list of "do's and don'ts." I mean a way – a way of life nurtured by common worship and prayer that names core values and values unique to each one's circumstances, station in life, and unique gifts.

Some dear friends, Alice and John, have a rule. It is quite simply: "Never resist a generous impulse." My old friends Joanne and Norm, used Micah 6: "Do justice, love kindness and walking humble with God." Esther, a former parishioner, developed a way of seeing Christ in all people, especially those with whom she struggled – the enemy. The Benedictines like to welcome all people as Christ. More than one congregation and many of its members place remembering the poor at the centerpiece of their daily rule.

What might your Rule of Life be?

And as we bring it into everyday life, including and maybe even especially the place we work, it can be away of honoring God by beginning to discern what it looks like to honor not just some, but all.

The Rite of Welcome is celebrated in this space at least once a year and many of you have participated in the Rite. You have stood in the midst of this Assembly as one beginning your journey toward Baptism or renewal of you baptismal promises. Some of you have served as sponsors and many of you, year after year, have been in the Assembly as one who prays for candidate and sponsor.

The welcoming rite includes a very moving ritual of signing with the cross.

And the signing includes the hands ...

With hands open and extended, the sponsor traces the sign of the Cross on the candidate's hands as these words Ares spoken:

“Receive the Cross on your hands that Christ's mercy may be known in your work.”

We approach our labor with cross-marked hands. Our Daily Rule is to show forth the mercy of Christ. And the good news is that the God who began this good work in us is faithful to complete it. Christ put that cross there on our hands. It was forged by God's generous heart. God gives us what we need to be about the business of “God's Work and Our Hands.” Thanks be to God. Amen.