

## **“Restoring the Dignity of Work”**

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*Genesis 2:4-7, 15-17; 3:17-19*

*Deuteronomy 5:12-15; John 6:27-29*

Any plans made for Labor Day... like visiting friends or family, going to the lake, or a nice leisurely round of golf or maybe plans to work on a few projects around the house that you been putting off? Catherine and I have planned to work in the garden... planting and mulching that sort of thing. As you might have guessed, yard work is not high on our children's list of favorite things to do on Labor Day. They would much rather we spend the day going up to Omaha visiting the Doorly Zoo or the Joslyn Art Museum than doing work on Labor Day. "Aren't you supposed to take a day off from work on Labor Day?" my eleven year old son is bound to ask. To which I will say, "Yes, that is why I am taking the day off from church work. But you on the other hand, since you do no work to speak of then it is only fitting that you spend Labor Day actually doing manual labor to get an appreciation how the other half lives."

I have a feeling that my rationale for work will go over like a lead balloon to my son and daughter this Labor Day. What do you think?

And, yet, when you think about it, there was a day when children Andrew and Emma's age had to work in factories, sweat shops if you will, for long hours and little pay, handling hazardous materials making products consumers demanded in the Industrial Age. You remember that time from history books or memory when families left the farm for the factories leaving the rural life behind of wide open spaces and a sense of caring for one's neighbor for the big city of cramped spaces, tenement houses, where one didn't care about one's neighbor.

No wonder Congress decided to pass a law in 1894, six days after the notorious Pullman Strike, to commemorate and celebrate the importance of work and the dignity of work that benefits the worker and society. Often Labor Day celebrations would be kicked off with parades, political speeches by politicians running for office, and picnics with plenty of fried chicken and potato salad to go around. At least that is how they celebrate Labor Day in the South.

Unfortunately, with unemployment rising every month as the economy sheds jobs at a record pace, more and more Americans are out of work this Labor Day and wonder what they have to celebrate. Just this week unemployment rose to 9.7 % according to the Department of Labor which measures those seeking work but unable to find it. What the statistics do not measure are those who have given up looking for work or those who took a job at a considerable loss in pay and hours. If one were to calculate the true unemployment and underemployment rate it probably is more like 18%.

If we are not careful, we are in danger of creating a permanent class of under employed people in America. Many Americans who lost jobs at the beginning of this recession are finding out that their benefits are running out. What will they do to make ends meet? Who will they turn to for help? How many more families will end up living in cars or shelters or under bridges before the economy recovers enough for employers to start hiring again?

Thankfully my oldest brother, a graduate of Culinary Institute of America, has somewhere to turn to for help since being laid off at the beginning of this recession. My

parents have been his safety net... paying his mortgage so his house doesn't go into foreclosure... and giving him money for odd jobs done around the house and on the farm. Things are so bad for people in the food industry in Charlotte right now that my brother has recently taken a job selling life insurance on a commission basis. Will he ever find work in the food industry again? I do not know... after a while... a worker, rightly or wrongly, gets the stigma as unemployable. Don't hire this guy, he is damaged goods. There must be something wrong that he hasn't found work in over a year.

Like I said, with the economy still shedding jobs at an alarming rate, over 200,000 every month and unemployment benefits running out for those laid off at the beginning of this recession, we are in danger of creating a permanent under class of people like we did in the days of the depression. My grandfather told me of those days when men would be forced to leave their families because a woman and children in tow were more likely to find help than an intact family. Men used to ride the rails. Hobos they were called. They would drift from one town to the next. Some would knock on the back door of the farm and ask to sleep in the barn and if my Granddad had any food to spare for work.

Is this what we are heading for this Labor Day as a society? And what does the Bible have to say on the subject? For the next ten minutes of this sermon and beyond the confines of this worship, I would like to focus on how we might recover the dignity of work using the Bible as our guide. And why not begin at the beginning? According to our passage in Genesis, the Lord God created the creature fashioned from the earth and placed him in the Garden to till and keep it. Note that from the beginning, work is an essential aspect of our existence. At no time does the Bible imagine life that is void of vocation. We are placed here on this earth to do the Creator's will... and work is an essential aspect of our call to care for the earth as a farmer cares for her farm and a shepherd cares for her flock. In other words, we human beings have a responsibility to care for creation in a way that nurtures life and promotes a right relatedness with all creatures, not just creatures created in the image of God. To ignore this responsibility or to abuse it by exploiting neighbor and nature is to have creation devolve into chaos. Suddenly, the goodness of the Creator is called into question by the lack of goodness expressed through the created order. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, a field will go to seed and become a forest without someone to till it and keep it.

You probably remember such a field because of human neglect. Just last year, I walked the pastures of my youth and came upon the house of Great Aunt Fanny and Great Uncle George. Except this time their house was collapsed and the shell barely noticeable from the trees growing through it. In my childhood, it was a nice wooden structure with a front porch and a tin roof. Not any more... years of neglect threaten to undue all the care Uncle George and Aunt Fanny had fostered upon that place. Looking at that decrepit house, it was hard to discern anything good from its last caretaker.

And, so, it is with God when we look at parts of creation that have been allowed to go to seed from human neglect or abuse. In fact, we see how bad creatures created in the image of God have messed things up in the third chapter of Genesis. Instead of work being blessed by our Creator it is also cursed. Suddenly, vocation, that which we do which gives us divine pleasure, and occupation, that which we do to pay the bills, are not one in the same. Work now has a cursed dimension to it whether you are a farmer or factory worker, lawyer or doctor, homemaker or homebuilder. There is a certain aspect of our job that is hard work that does not yield to our wishes, that reminds us we are not God Almighty no matter how much we wish we were.

And if we are not careful work can diminish our being so much that we cease to be human... by that I mean cease to be humane. Tragically, when this happens, we have become a creature like all the other creatures of the earth who live by the laws of the jungle, "Eat or be eaten, prey on others before they prey on you."

And lest you think this condition only affects those behind bars, think again. This diminishment of being affects life on Wall Street as well as Main Street. Work becomes all consuming. There is no rest for the weary. No time to stop and remember who and whose we are... a creature created in the divine image... called to care and look after all living things... to resume our proper place in the created order.

Is this not what Sabbath keeping is all about? Could this be why God gave Moses and the people of faith the commandment to observe and remember the Sabbath? I find it interesting that in the book of Deuteronomy the commands to observe and remember are in different order than in the book of Exodus. In the book of Exodus, the people of faith are called to remember and keep the Sabbath. But not so in the book of Deuteronomy, the order is observe and remember. Why the differences in verb order? Could it be that there is an aspect to learning that involves doing? Kinetic learning is based on this very premise... that we learn best as we do. As we observe the Sabbath, one day out of seven to rest from work that we do for a living and go to church to remember who and whose we are, work is redeemed.

Once again we have taken our rightful place within the created order... creatures tasked with the vocation to care and to tend for all living things. In so doing, we become walking icons of the goodness of creation and the goodness of our Creator. Harmony has been restored. Shalom has descended upon creation like dew in the morning. We have been given a foretaste of the kingdom to come. In many ways this is our great work to do-- the work of God. And, ironically, it is when we stop our work and remember the greater work is to believe in the One God has sent to restore all things, that we are prepared to join God in God's work. And incredibly God has given us this ministry of reconciliation that happens when God's people observe the Sabbath that the other six days of work might be redeemed.

This point was driven home so eloquently by Ted Kennedy Jr. at his father's funeral.

"My father taught me to treat everyone I meet, no matter what station in life, with the same dignity and respect. He could be discussing arm control with the president at 3 p.m. and meeting with a union carpenter on fair wage legislation or a New Bedford fisherman on fisheries policy at 4:30. I once told him that he accidentally left some money, I remember this when I was a little kid, on the sink in our hotel room. And he replied "Teddy, let me tell you something. Making beds all day is back-breaking work. The woman who has to clean up after us today has a family to feed."

May we all remember to do likewise because we keep the Sabbath and in keeping the Sabbath we remember to do the greater work of God... to believe in the One God has sent that all work and workers might be redeemed... for someone has a family to feed. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.