

“Doing the Will of the Father”
Jeremiah 22:11-17; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15;
James 3:17-18; Matthew 21:28-32

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Today is the day before Labor Day. We have a lot of different holidays on the calendar. Some of them seem to take up a lot more time and require more preparation than others. I don't know that I have ever really done much preparation for Labor Day. Perhaps I have just thought of it as a day off. It's a good time for a day off as we begin to get started in the fall activities. Yet, it also reminds me of how important it is that we have people in our lives who give their lives to different kinds of labor and effort so that we might have the lives we have—everybody from the folks who work in the check-out line at the grocery store to our electricians and plumbers and servers. We could think about our farmers and how they produce food, and how people produce all these gadgets we have that we feel we need so much today. Through it all, there are people who are giving their lives, their efforts, their labor to make things happen.

It's interesting to think back a little bit on the history of Labor Day. I was struck by it this year because it was signed into law in 1894 by President Grover Cleveland. Some people think it was because there was a big strike going on in Chicago around railroads, Pullman cars, and railroad magnate George Pullman, and Cleveland wanted to try to appease the workers a bit because he had sent in the army to try to quell the strike. It reminds me that we live in a world that oftentimes has very disparate ways of seeing things and often that causes real strife. It's been a lesson of history.

It goes way, way back. If we think about the Hebrews, when Joseph dies, it says, the Pharaoh forgot that the Hebrews were there as guests and began to simply use them for labor and to fear them. You might say that God sending Moses to Pharaoh was one of the first labor actions that we can remember. There are times when people are misused for their labor, and certainly that was happening with the Hebrews, so God leads them to freedom and new life. The taskmaster, afraid to lose a good thing for him, ends up dying in those troubled waters of the Red Sea.

Jesus, when he invites us to care for the least among us, I think invites us to care for those who have trouble making it, whose labor may not be enough for them to have enough food or housing or clothing. He invites us to care for the least among us. Some of that need is because there are other circumstances as well. It can be medical or mental or age or some kind of infirmity, but he invites us to care for the least among us.

So as we go into a day where we celebrate labor, I am reminded that God cares for those who labor. He's not against it. After all, when Adam and Eve were in the garden, he gave them a job. They were supposed to tend the garden. It was their labor. It is as we celebrate other folks' labor as we do on Labor Day, that I begin to think about my own labor. What about our labor? What do we do? What is important about the work I do, the efforts I give in my life? I begin to wonder how I should use my life, my efforts.

I'm reminded of the Psalm we used for the Call to Worship this morning where it says, "Unless the Lord builds a house, the builders labor in vain." We begin to think about how God does give us guidance and invites us to remember that as we use our abilities, our skills, as we use our efforts and our labor, that there's something about making sure it is in concert with God, that it fits with what God calls us to do and be.

If we simply forget about God, we can put a lot of effort into our work. I think one of the passages suggests we end up "eating the bread of anxious toil" because without God, there's never enough. There's always something else we have to do to be OK, to be valued.

In Jeremiah, it's talking about a king who lost his kingship because his labor was all about himself. It was all about how he was going to make his own life luxurious at the expense of everyone else. "Doomed" or "woe to" is how it begins in talking about the one "who builds on injustice, dishonesty, enslaving or impoverishing others." So as I begin to think about where to give my efforts, expend the skills and the energy that I have in my life, it suggests to stay away from things that feel like injustice or impoverishing others or simply using what others have produced without enabling the producer to have what they need.

He does note that the king who went before him lived a full life because he was just and righteous. When I looked at that passage, I thought, "I know I don't want woe and doom. A full life looks a lot better to me." Scripture invites us over and over again to think about how we live our lives in relationship to one another.

It goes on in the New Testament to remind us that if we want to build our lives, the foundation matters. We can build an edifice on top of a bad foundation, but it will end up just falling down or sinking into the ground. One of the wonderful things about the coming of Christ is that we're not only invited to build a good foundation, we are given that foundation. We are given the one who shows us the way, who invites us to build on who he is and what he is for our lives, and the grace of God that has been given us.

That passage at the end of James suggests that it takes a lot of energy, and that we have to put out some work to enter into the fullness of the life God has given us. When we do that then, as Eugene Peterson translates it, we create a "healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoys that full community life." This sounds great to me. It sounds like what I feel we are called to be and do. Yet, it's easier to talk about it. It's easy to say, "I want that robust, healthy community life and to be right with God" than to actually do the work it takes.

It feels to me like scripture over and over again invites us to pay attention to what God wants, to be people who are righteous—that is, in right relationship with God and with one another. To encourage each other to live into the forgiveness and grace of God that we might have that fullness of life, and that our lives might be ones that treat others well, fairly and justly. It's easy to say yes to that; it's a little harder to do it, to pay attention to what all is involved. We live in a complicated world and sometimes it's hard

to know. Sometimes it just seems like too much effort. It's a little easier to cut the corners a little or to think, "That's not my problem."

The thing I love about this story of the two sons that Jesus tells is that it's not about what we say. I can say yes or I can say no. Whatever I've said, it feels like that invitation remains. The son who said no knew that he could still go and do the father's work and that doing the work would be engaging the will of the father.

It is in that story that it feels like whatever I have done in the past, there is always that invitation to do God's work, to think about what God wants of me, of us, and try to align myself with what God wants. I can go ahead and go into the vineyard to share the love and grace of God, to be a person who tries to be just and fair, and who loves and cares for God's people.

I think Jesus gives us another way to begin, a starting point, in reminding us that we get to come together. We don't all necessarily have to agree on everything in our lives, but if we allow God to be our Lord, if we allow Jesus to guide us, then we are all invited to come to the table. We are all invited to gather around it and know that we are all God's children. We are invited to know where our sustenance truly comes from. By coming, we are accepting the love and grace of God and are invited to share it.

So as we come to the table this morning I remind you we are invited to come as God's children, to come as those who know that God loves all God's children. As God's children, we are part of God's family and get to engage in the life God gives us, called into the vineyard to live the full life through the justice and grace of God. Amen.