

PROPER 18 B 09 ~ Sunday, September 6, 2009

- We gather for worship this morning on the Sunday of what we call *Labor Day weekend*, a weekend attached to a holiday commemorating American workers and the late 19th century labor movement. We may have lost some of our historical awareness of how the holiday came to be, but every one of us thinks and talks about *work* every day. Work is one of the most common topics in our thoughts and conversations. And yet, given that, it is curious that *work* is often one of the least-explored ideas in our thinking – especially from an intentionally Christian point of view. What is ‘work,’ *anyway*, and why do we so often experience it as something negative or burdensome?
- To answer those questions *well* we have to go back to our Bibles and to our basic Christian teaching *about what it means to be human*. Of course the first chapters of Genesis are not meant to be read as literal history, as if they were something analogous to newspaper writing. The first chapters of Genesis – like so much of the first five books of the Bible – are profoundly thoughtful and reflective theology, which is more often *poetry* than historical reporting. In our culture, we usually link *truth* with *facts* and *literal history*. Yet many other cultures link truth with literature, so that songs and poems communicate what is real and true. Genesis is like that. And one of the most important truths that Genesis has to teach us concerns the way that *we are meant to be like God – literally! God created us in God’s own image and likeness, so that sameness with God rather than difference from God would be the preeminent quality that would mark humans off from other living creatures.*
- *We are to be like God – not just in our being, but also in our doing.* It is as simple as that! And yet, as simple as that is to say, we all know from our experience that it is so hard to put into practice. This is because of a second profound truth that Genesis will teach us. As much as we are meant *to be like God* in our being and in our doing, *we so often put ourselves first, and God second.* As a result, we are out-of-kilter with the order and pattern with which God has made everything else. And Genesis teaches us that our being out of kilter with God and with the patterns of creation has *not only* affected *us*; it has affected *everything* around us.
- All of this directly affects our questions about *work* and about *labor*, which become easier to deal with once we remind ourselves of those truths. For example, *consider this question*: picking up on the mythic imagery of Genesis, *was there “work” in the Garden of Eden?* Most of us would quickly say, ‘No, there was not any work in Eden – that only came with the Fall.’ We are likely to say this because we so quickly associate work with *labor* and *toil*, and with experiences that *deplete* our energy and our creativity. And this is precisely why our question about work in the Garden of Eden is so important. We might just remember to stop and consider God’s gift to Adam and Eve of the ‘work’ of naming all the animals, and the ‘work’ of co-stewardship of the Garden. Before the Fall, the first human beings were given the opportunity to share in God’s own creative and energy producing work, rather than something that was energy-depleting and tiring.

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- Now, it is true for us: work in everyday life – work in the world around us – tends to be *energy-depleting* and sometimes even *de-humanizing*. Look at the way in which the word *occupation* tends to displace the word *vocation* when people talk about work and employment. *Vocation means calling, and a genuine calling always comes from God.* By contrast, in the way that an *occupying* army seizes territory, *occupations* seize our time and our energy, and we often weigh the trade-off between what we *get* for our labors with *what we give up* in performing them. Labor Day first became noteworthy because it celebrated what came to be called workers rights, which had become overlooked in the industrialization of modern western countries.
- But the Bible has the power to remind us of something *higher*, something *greater*, and something *more profound*. Though our occupations may differ, we all share a common *vocation*, a common calling to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called in Jesus. This is to live a life in which we seek to be *godly* in our being as well as in our doing. This is a Christ-like life which is also a creative and energy-giving rather than an energy-depleting life.
- These insights prepare us *to read rightly* the Letter of James. In traditional translations of the letter, we find James talking about faith and about works. And in reading James we have to be very careful to remember that *we are not reading Paul*, who has a whole different matter in mind. When Paul talks about faith and works, Paul is focused on *the process of coming to be saved*, and the appropriate role of faith and of works in being saved. James is talking about *life down the line* – he is talking about the lives of people *who have already been saved*, and the way in which one would naturally expected *saved people* to live, who were truly joyful and *thankful for having been saved*. You would naturally expect them to live lives that were not just full of *God-talk*, but lives that were also filled with God-acts or God-action. Or, to paraphrase Paul, *'don't just sit in love... Walk in love, in the same way that Christ actively loved us!'*
- In other words, if we are to associate *work* with Christian faith in any way, we should not think of something that is taxing, burdensome, and energy-depleting – in the usual way we think of work in everyday life. The work of Christians is the “*work*” of *joy*, the work of *thanks*, the work of *gift* and of *generosity*. This is “*work*” of a completely different kind.
- *Christ among us is the presence of joyful strength, the presence of cheerful offering, and the presence of self-less attention to other.* It is not that these attributes come to us *naturally*. They don't. And this is the whole point. Though we were made to flourish in these virtues, our natural humanity *after the Fall* tends in other directions. And that is why these attributes come to us *supernaturally* in Christ, rather than *naturally* through our own nature and proclivity.
- *We discover Christ freely offering us the power and spirit of God*, especially as we meet him in the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Experiencing the joyful spiritual power

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of God, *offered to us without condition*, we are moved to open ourselves to become conduits for this joyful power, this creative spiritual energy, so that the work of Christ becomes a liberating and enlivening force *in our own lives*. As we have said, this is not the natural energy-depleting work in the everyday world of labor and employment and of occupations. This is the creative, energy-giving supernatural work of vocation and grace, and of Christ who touches our lives with the spiritual power of God.

- It all comes down to this: *if you have to do something, it is likely work and toil, and will involve stress. But, if you get to do something, it is more likely to be pleasure and joy, and the result of some grace. Living a Christian life is something we get to do!* It is *not* something we *have* to do, something imposed on us, leading to stress. We so often forget one of Jesus' most compelling and simple sayings: *"Come to me all ye who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For my burden is easy, and my yoke is light."* The rest that he gives us *is God's own rest* on the seventh day of Creation: *not* the rest of the cessation of doing, *but* the rest that reflects fulfillment of his purpose, the rest that completes his pattern for the world. This is the rest that God gives us to enjoy this weekend, and always. *Amen+*