

## **Sermon for September 5, 2021—“We’ve Got Work to Do”**

Twenty-third Sunday in OT, Year B—Text: Genesis 3:8-19

Well, tomorrow’s Labor Day. Does anyone know what that’s all about or are we content to let it just be a day that gives us a long weekend marking the end of summer?

For the record, the first Labor Day was held on Sept. 5, 1882, in New York City. It was an activity of the local labor unions, back in the early days of the industrial revolution, when unions were first getting organized, to combat subsistence wages and miserable working conditions.

It became a national holiday in 1884, when President Grover Cleveland pushed a bill to that effect through Congress. President Cleveland was atoning for his decision earlier that year to send federal troops to break up the Pullman strike in which 13 railway car builders were killed. That tragedy created a backlash of political sympathy for the unions. So, Congress unanimously passed the proposal for a new holiday honoring the “dignity” of labor. That’s the history of the holiday, but so what?

It seems to me that the connection between the dead strikers and having the last picnic of the season remains obscure. Overall, fewer Americans belong to labor unions these days, and I’m willing to bet that most folks enjoying the long weekend probably have no idea what they’re celebrating or commemorating. And what does “the dignity of labor” even mean today?

Well, it seems to me that we Christians are in good a position to revitalize Labor Day. I mean, hey, if the early church could take over pagan holidays and give them a distinctly Christian meaning, we can do the same with Labor Day. We can turn it into a holiday that honors, celebrates, and reflects upon the doctrine of vocation. Sounds like fun to me! Oh yeah, throw some burgers and bratwurst on the grill, crack open a cold one, and let the fireworks begin!

But in all seriousness, there might be something to this. What do I mean? Well, we know that Paul exhorted the Corinthians: “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.” We also know that the word vocation comes from the Latin word “vocare” meaning “calling.” It means that God assigns us to certain courses of life and then calls us to different tasks, different jobs, and different opportunities for service in the world. Our theology of vocation is our theology of the Christian life. It’s about how we Christians are to live in the world, how we exercise their faith, and how our ordinary lives are charged with meaning.

But what I want to pay particularly close attention this morning, is the way in which vocation is an important part of the way in which God works through human beings, ways in which we probably don’t give much thought to. He gives us our daily bread through farmers, millers, and bakers. He protects us through police, firefighters and EMTs. He grants healing through doctors, nurses and other care providers. He creates works of beauty through artists, poets and musicians. He creates new life and cares for children by means of parents.

God is at work in the people who do things for us: the ones who build our houses, prepare our food, pick up our trash, design the technology we enjoy, work in factories to manufacture what we need, offer us services to make our lives easier. What this means is that God is at work through **us** through otherwise “ordinary” people.

Martin Luther once wrote that vocation is a “mask of God.” What this means is that behind the server in the restaurant who brings us our food, behind the shopkeeper, behind the business executive, behind us in the things that we do for others, God is hidden. He wrote,

“What else is all our work to God; whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government, but just such a child’s performance by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.

“He could give children without using men and women. But He does not want to do this. Instead, He joins man and woman so that it appears to be the work of man and woman, and yet He does it under the cover of such masks. God gives all good gifts; but you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask.”

So, what this means then, is that when we thank God for our meals and all our other blessings, we’re acknowledging God’s labor, manifested in human labor. Being conscious of vocation makes us appreciate all the people through whom God serves us, helping us see in every laborer the presence of God.

Contrary to how most people use the word, vocation doesn’t just mean “job,” nor does it mean a specialized kind of job. Quite the contrary, each Christian has multiple callings; callings that can be categorized into the four “estates” that God has established for human life, the church, the household, the civil government, and what Luther called “the common order of Christian love. What’s more—all are called by the Gospel.

First, the church. Our Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God’s grace and the Church. Baptism is God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace, it’s where we are given our identity and commissioned for ministry in and to the world. All people. Not just pastors. Not just Elders. Not just Deacons. All people! Everyone has a calling in the church, as we serve one another in the ordinary work of the congregation, in everything that we do; whether it’s singing in the choir, serving on committees, counting the collection every week—everything!

What’s more, as I’ve said repeatedly, God calls us in every phase of life—even as we grow older! As I said a few weeks ago, God places no expiration date on serving him. At no point in any of our lives is there a time when God can’t use us for his purposes in the world—it’s up to us to figure out what that is! But it isn’t limited to just the church and only on Sundays!

God has also called us into families, into the vocations of the household. This is the second estate. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters are all—to borrow a Catholic term—“holy orders” in which God has placed us.

But there's even more to it than this—our theology goes deeper, and it may surprise you. What I'm talking about is this: This particular notion of vocation—what we've been talking about—places the way we make our living not in its own estate—but in this second estate, thus, subordinating work to family.

What this means is that what one does to support one's family is far less important than the family itself, a lesson I'd say more people probably need to learn. Anyone ever wonder why we don't work on a day that honors work? Well, to the Reformed way of thinking, spending time with our families is one of the most important vocations that we have.

The third estate to which God calls us is civil society; into a community, a nation, a culture. Here we have the vocation of the citizen. Which is why Christians have a moral obligation to exercise our civic duties which for we Americans includes voting, volunteering and/or holding public office—staying informed on what's happening in our society, peacefully and thoughtfully engaging one another on the issues of the day. We're called to actively participate in our society and work to make it better.

The third and final estate is the more general category, which, again, as Martin Luther called it, “the common order of Christian love,” or as I call it, relationships. This is the realm in which we interact with people from all vocations in the course of everyday life. It includes friendships, informal interactions, and even enters into the realm of the Good Samaritan.

Here too, we are called to service. Central to the notion of vocation is Jesus' command to love and serve God and our neighbor. Our relationship to God, however, is **not** based on what we do. Nor is our love for God anything of our doing. As John's first letter reminds us it's

“not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Our relationship with God is based solely on God's love for us, made known through—above all else—the gift of His Son. But our faith in Jesus Christ bears fruit in love for God, who then calls us, and sends us into our vocations to love our neighbors. Each vocation has its own “neighbors” whom we're to love and serve.

In marriage it's our spouse. Spouses are to love and serve one another. Parents are to love and serve their children. Children are to love and serve their parents. And, of course, grandparents and grandchildren and to love and serve one another as well. This is also true—as weird as this is going to sound—at work. In the workplace, laborers are to love and serve their co-workers, their bosses and their customers.

Likewise, in the state—rulers (kings, presidents, prime ministers, etc.) are to love and serve their people and citizens are to love and serve their fellow citizens. Notice that even vocations that include the exercise of authority are to do so in love and service. This is the very essence of servant leadership and the ideal model for this is provided by Christ Himself. This is an important—perhaps even crucial—aspect of our faith.

And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: It's in living out our vocation that **sanctification** happens—the continuing change worked by God in us through the Holy Spirit, setting us apart for God's use in our daily living, spiritual growth, maturity, real transformation as we go about our daily lives; whether we still work or whether we're retired.

It's in vocation that **evangelism** happens, in the natural conversations that take place in the workroom, or in the checkout line at Kroger; in the opportunities to invite people to church and to know Christ. It's in vocation that we are light and salt to the world, influencing others by living out our faith in **every** profession. It's a part of everything we do if we do it for God's glory.

Vocation is what makes us a part of what Peter called the “priesthood of all believers.” I'm pretty sure we've heard that term before. Does it mean that every Christian's a minister? No, of course not! What it means is that Christians don't have to be pastors to be a minister. What it means is that we've got work to do. All of us!

Christians have good reason to celebrate Labor Day, and in light of our understanding of vocation it can be an occasion to thank God for His gifts and His presence in the work that He gives each of us to do, and in the work through which we are blessed by others.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.