

## Labor in the Shadow of Sabbath

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Ephesians 4:25-32  
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I don't mean to rub it in, but those of you who missed last weekend's Circle of Mercy family retreat missed a really good time. Thanks to the efforts of Chris Bell and several other adults, our kids got to shoot the rapids on the Nantahala River. And over our three days together, the adults spent several hours telling stories of personal transformation.

We learned a lot about each other, from the rafting and the storytelling and the shared meals and even the annual talent show. Saturday night's acts included Katie Buys and Gaven Bell doing magic and card tricks; Jody Roberts playing guitar; Jim Miller singing a beautiful Irish ballad; Anthony Martinez doing another wonderful dance; and Nancy Sehested telling about her first baptismal service, in a river, when she accidentally went under along with the one she was baptizing.

This weekend, both here and in Canada (excepting Quebec), we celebrate another Labor Day holiday. At least 80 other countries celebrate the first of May as a workers' holiday. As with so many of our holidays, we have mostly forgotten the severe conflict that provides the historical context.

In the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, industrialization was hitting its stride in the developing world. The technology of commerce was producing massive amounts of profit and a widening gap between rich and poor. When recounting the roots of the holiday, many Labor Day histories point to a massive march in New York City in 1882 by sweatshop workers, demanding a shortening of the twelve- to fourteen-hour workday. The workers' chant was "Eight hours for work; eight hours for rest; eight hours for what we will." President Grover Cleveland and the U.S. Congress were so concerned about the rising tide of discontent by working people that within days of the march, a law recognizing Labor Day was approved.

The demand for an eight-hour workday was considered radical and outrageously unreasonable by politicians and industrial leaders alike. Most of us generally think of full-time employment as a forty-hour week. It wasn't that way until very recently.

Some of you know about the Haymarket Square riot in Chicago in 1886, which prompted similar strikes around the world, and the Pullman strike in 1894. A lot of strikers were killed, and the U.S. Army was deployed, in these and other incidents. It took a while, but in 1992 the city of Chicago erected a memorial to the "Haymarket Martyrs."

Several of the websites I researched don't mention any of these conflicts. And again our memories are scrubbed of those who refused to be silent in the face of oppression. Both Hebrew and Christian Scripture repeatedly testify that the worst thing that can happen to us is that our memories are scrubbed of the bloodied timbers that mark the way to where we are. In the words of that famous hymn by James Weldon Johnson:

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,  
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who has by Thy might  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee....*

***Forgetting God always occurs when we forget the struggles of the past;  
for ours is a God that speaks and acts when slaves cry out.***

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Unfortunately, the church doesn't officially mark Labor Day in its calendar of special observances. I had to ignore the recommended lectionary texts for this Sunday in order to speak about Labor Day, which I think is unfortunate. If someone put me in charge, I'd add one season to the liturgical calendar—starting with Labor Day in early September and ending with Thanksgiving. Maybe call it "Laborfest."

The theme would be: *the repentant movement from mammon to manna*. Jesus identified the former as the competitor to devotion to God: “You cannot serve God and mammon”—Matthew 6:24. The latter recalled the sustenance provided the Hebrew slaves during their wilderness journey—freely given to all, regardless of merit, and specifically designed to prevent hoarding.

Why would I go messing with liturgical history? For the simple reason that no issue receives more attention in the Bible than economic justice. It appears in more than 2,000 texts, and in one out of every ten verses in the synoptic Gospels. For comparison, the Bible has six texts that mention same-sex relations, and most are about rape or child abuse.

In one short sentence in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that the opposite of serving God is not serving the Devil. The opposite of serving God is serving *mammon*, a common Aramaic word for the power and influence that come with wealth.

It’s unfortunate that the one activity that marks the better part of every day of our lives—our work (and that includes the study done by students)—has been segregated off from that which is considered holy. Even the word *holiday*, which is when most folk get to abandon their work, literally means “holy day,” a sacred time. At least by implication, all other days, when we work, are judged to be profane.

But this is not how our creation story was framed. In Genesis, God is busy as a bee, creating dry land, and sun and moon and stars, and birds of the air and four-legged creatures of the ground, and plants of every kind, and then human beings. It must have been an exhausting six days. And, as we are prone to tell it now, God had to take a nap, a day off, a leisure vacation, a leave of absence. Time to forget about the office, turn off the cell phone, ignore your e-mail.

Several years ago I served on the board of a new retreat center that was forming, particularly to serve the needs of clergy. One of the first tasks was to come up with a mission statement. Following the first days of our conversation, I wrote some reflections to share with others on the board. This is part of what I wrote:

*If the purpose of the Sabbath House is simply to provide time and space to allow clergy to recuperate from the wearying effects of congregational leadership, then we will have failed in our mission. Even worse, we will have become complicit in a pattern of institutional pathology: binding up broken spirits and exhausted imaginations in order to send them back into a system ordained for failure (or vocational compromise). The exorbitant demands placed on congregational leaders (clergy and laity alike)—much like the pressures exerted on “nuclear families” in modern Western culture—are relentlessly out of balance. The mission of the Sabbath House must be more than allowing clergy an escape to catch up on sleep and on reading. A vision of Sabbath-keeping must be articulated as a critique of accepted patterns of congregational life.*

The biblical story is different from the way it’s usually told. Sabbath is not kept in isolation from labor. God didn’t need to take a cruise to recover from exhaustion. Rather, the Sabbath was the point of orientation for all labor. When it is good, and fruitful, and satisfying, labor is always done in the shadow of Sabbath.

I like the way labor activist Emma Goldman put it: “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.”

I also love the James Openheim poem and subsequent song “Bread and Roses,” which emanated out of a 1912 women’s strike by textile workers in Massachusetts:

*As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,  
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.  
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,  
But a sharing of life’s glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.  
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies; bread and roses, bread and roses.*

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Today's text from the apostle Paul's epistle to the church at Ephesus is basically a series of proverbs offered to assist the congregation in transforming the conflict that is bound to arise any time humans attempt to live together. Be truthful and shun lies, he said. "Be angry, but sin not." That's one of my favorite lines, because so often in the church just being angry by itself is considered a form of weakness, when in fact the capacity for anger at the state of the world is the one way we know we're still paying attention.

Put away wrath and wrangling "with malice." Wrath and wrangling are a normal part of life together, but they must be done without malice. Forgive, Paul writes, because you have been forgiven—reminding us that our capacity to forgive others is dependent on our willingness to be forgiven by God.

But my favorite of all these proverbs is verse 28: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands." If you read only that first half of the verse, you'd think it comes from the Department of Justice, or the Better Business Bureau. But the text continues. Honest work is done not in order to escape prosecution; not because it's good citizenship. Honest work is done "so as to have something to share with the needy." Notice again the connection between honoring God and repairing the economy.

So, what are we to do with all this? Continue doing some of the things we're already doing.

You may not know that our congregation was the first organization of any kind in Asheville to be formally certified as a "living wage" provider. There are now 150 of them, most of them businesses, organized by the Just Economics organization, in which a number of our members are involved and to which we've provided mission grants.

We do things like supporting immigrants. Our members played a key role in the "Feast of the Holy Innocents" observance last year that highlighted the plight of undocumented workers.

There are also things that each of us can do in our everyday lives. A couple years ago I circulated a list of ideas called "Kid-friendly ways to celebrate Labor Day":

*A simple way to connect with hourly-wage earners who grace our lives (often in unacknowledged ways) is a simple act of thank-you. So consider having your kids (adults can do this, too!) do one of the following in the coming week:*

*On the night you put out your trashcan, use a poster board to write "Thanks for your work! Happy Labor Day" in large letters. Tape it to your garbage can (so the sanitation truck driver can see it), or attach it to a wooden stake, putting it next to your garbage can.*

*Write a similar note to your mail carrier and tape it to your mailbox.*

*Do a homemade card and offer it to a grocery store clerk where you shop; or to a teacher; or drop it off at your local library or police or fire station.*

*Be creative. You may have other ideas to say thank-you to the countless number of people we often take for granted. In a few minutes' time, I bet you could come up with dozens of other ways to say thank-you all year round.*

Let me close with my most-favorite poem, which speaks of the intimate connection of the bounty of labor and the blessing of Sabbath. It's from Wendell Berry's book, *Sabbaths*. This is how we learn to labor in the shadow of Sabbath:

*Whatever is foreseen in joy  
Must be lived out from day to day.  
Vision held open in the dark  
By our ten thousand days of work.  
Harvest will fill the barn; for that  
The hand must ache,  
The face must sweat.*

*And yet no leaf or grain is filled  
By work of ours; the field is tilled  
And left to grace.  
That we may reap,  
Great work is done  
While we're asleep.*

*When we work well,  
A Sabbath mood  
Rests on our day and finds it good.*

Amen.