



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

LABOR DAY PROJECT

September 4, 2016

Christian

1 Corinthians 12.4-11

Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services but the same God; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Hinduism

Work is worship

Varashaiva Proverb

Buddhism

The one who says, "It is too hot, too cold, too late,"

Leaving the waiting work unfinished still,

Lets pass all opportunities for good.

But the one who reckons heat and cold as part of the process

And does all that's to be done,

Never falls away from happiness.

Digha Nikaya iii.185.

Sigalovada Sutta

American culture has a thing about work. More than any other people on earth, we have a love-hate relationship with work, comments John Buchanan of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. Think about the usual response when people ask who you are. Most often we respond with what we do professionally. I'm Gary, I'm a clergyman; I'm Mary, a garbage collector. I'm Sam, I teach kindergarten. I'm John; I'm a retired banker. Hasn't that ever struck you as odd?

Buchanan goes on to comment that 80% of Americans who work say that they would continue to work even if they didn't have to. However, almost 90% of us say we hate our jobs! It's interesting to note that the highest incidence of heart attacks occur on Monday morning between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m. when people are returning to work. The word on the street (i.e. the internet) indicates that the 40-hour work week will soon be replaced by the 50-hour work week; workers will be expected to work 10 hours per day.

On this Labor Day weekend, created to celebrate the labor force as the backbone of our society and the work of the common person, it is important to look carefully at the intersection between work and faith. I suspect that most of us, if we are serious about our faith, are influenced in our work by basic tenets of our belief that honest labor is intrinsic to faithful living.

It is an interesting paradox that in a country like Sweden, where my son and his family live, where few of the people identify as being religious, or being people of faith, they have a healthy balance between work and family. Family takes precedence over anything at work, and in fact, there are unlimited days for people to take off work for sick children; they don't even keep track of those days. It's what you do. Everyone starts with five weeks' vacation and they are experimenting in parts of the country with a 35-hour work week. They're discovering that they are more productive in fewer hours because people are more rested, there is less waste, and the work force is happier.

In our country, work, and what it can do for us, has often become an obsession. Have you noticed that the work place has quietly, and yet not so quietly, invaded much of the rest of our lives? We hear people doing business on their phones while we're at sporting events, at the theatre, while on vacation, in hotel lobbies, and airport lounges, and even in restaurants. A New Yorker cartoon pictures a business man sitting alone in a restaurant, cell phone in hand, saying to two women talking at the table next to his: "Be quiet. I'm trying to do a deal."

Work is vital for our well-being and important in a society but keeping it in perspective is a matter of vital importance for people of faith. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," says the adage.

One of the greatest blessings in life is going to work on Monday morning to a job you love, to be paid for what you would gladly do for nothing, to find enjoyment in your toil. But the fact remains that that is an elusive blessing for many people.

Those who find themselves out of work, or with too little work to provide an adequate income to support their family speak poignantly and emotionally of the difficulty not only of income loss but of the lack of worth and value in our culture. In our culture who are you without a job? This is often a problem with retirement for many people, for without a regular job one sometimes feels unproductive and at loose ends. John Buchanan said that the only time he ever saw his father cry was when he was laid off work during one of the recessions in the late 1940s and couldn't provide adequate food for his family. One day Buchanan saw him in the living room, head in his hands, crying. Today's precarious economy has given us another topic of conversation related to work which occurs within the circle of those who are unemployed and the underemployed. CEOs are making ungodly wages while workers are being laid off or jobs are being shipped to countries where the labor force is cheaper and company profits are greater.

The prophet, sage and philosopher of our Old Testament, Ecclesiastes, reminds us that there is a balance in life, "a time to work and a time to play. And the best thing we can do is eat, drink, and enjoy the life given to us, for this is God's gift." And in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, we are reminded that everyone has been given a unique gift, a special talent, a natural ability that, if embraced in faith, provides fulfillment for the person and contributes to the common good.

The Rev. Dr. Jim Forbes, formerly at Riverside Church, New York, calls this gifted work given by God “our project.” Everyone has a project, a special task that is ours alone and for which we, uniquely and individually, have been equipped. This may or may not be connected to the work we do for income for this has to do with personal worth at its basic level. Each of us is gifted to serve the common good and that is our calling; that is our work. As people of faith, living in the context of a culture where the emphasis on work is overdone, we can learn to reframe who we are and what we do in the context of our value system. “Work is worship,” declares the Hindu proverb.

In his travelogue, *Blue Highways*, William Least Heat Moon relates the conversation of an elderly gentleman when they begin to talk about work. The old gentleman said, “A man’s never out of work if he’s worth a damn. It’s just sometimes he doesn’t get paid. I’ve gone unpaid my share and I’ve pulled my share of pay. But that’s got nothing to do with working. A man’s work is doing what he’s supposed to do.” The Buddhist philosophy reminds us that “the one who reckons heat and cold as part of the process, and does all that’s to be done, never falls away from happiness.”

The most important job for each of us is to discern, discover, and do our project, our labor of love. If our work is not fulfilling, if it is wrought with ladder-climbing that we cannot avoid, if we feel trapped in work we don’t like, or are trapped because we can’t find a job, it is vital to remember that our worth is not in what we do or don’t do, professionally. Our identity is not in our profession. We are human beings created in God’s image, each of us gifted in our own right, and our real work is being faithful to the project, the special task that is ours alone, whether or not it generates income, status or recognition.

And when the work we have to do to make a living gets to be a drag, and we find little motivation for going to work, people of faith can learn from those great theologians, the Seven Dwarfs, who admonish everyone to “whistle while you work. Just hum a merry tune. It won’t take long when there’s a song to help you set the pace.”

Theologian and academic, Belden Lane, confesses that his job is a cover for his real work. “My own particular cover is that of a university professor. It’s a way of looking responsible while attending to much more important things.”

On this Labor Day Sunday, we gather around this table to commune with God, with one another, with our soul’s deepest longings, and with life, we are reminded by the presence of the Christ that “our project,” our work, is to do those important things. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

Thanks to the Rev. John Buchanan for sermon “Labor of Love” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XXII, No. 4, p. 44-46 to whom I am indebted for some of the statistics and stories of this sermon).

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we pause once more amid the rush of our busy lives to find spiritual respite in these holy moments of quiet renewal in your presence. On this Labor Day weekend, we come into this space to reflect upon our lives, our work, and the need for communion with you as part of our journey.

We come today as workers. Some are currently employed; some are between jobs looking for work; some are retired workers; and some are volunteer workers. But workers all. We work because we care about the great opportunities on this earth and because we know that meaningful work feeds our need to be a productive part of society. We work to provide for our families. And if we are lucky, we work because we enjoy what we do.

Today we come to give thanks for all whose industry provides us with pleasures and necessities and securities. We thank you for teachers and daycare providers, for sitters and willing grandparents; we thank you for garbage collectors and road construction workers; for farmers and factory workers and truck drivers. We give thanks for firefighters and paramedics, for nurses and doctors and dentists and the wide variety of health-care specialists. We thank you for people who work behind the scenes, who are never seen and rarely thanked, but without whom we wouldn't have food, or clothes, or homes or medical care or safety. We are thankful for attorneys and civic leaders, and for volunteers who work at myriad places to make each day easier, safer and more enjoyable. We thank you for those who work diligently day after day to assist those left homeless and helpless by flooding, and fires, and earthquakes.

We thank you when our work is meaningful and fulfilling; we pray for patience and perseverance when it is not. We pray for those who are seeking employment in this fickle economy and are desperate to earn money through honest labor, so that they may contribute to society and provide for their families. Give them patience and perseverance in this difficult journey.

On this Labor Day, make us keenly aware of those who labor for the good of all; who work for the betterment of society; who see their work as their calling to serve a higher good. Make us grateful for all whose labor serves the well-being of the world. In the name of the Christ, Amen.