

OUR TOUGHEST LABOR

Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20

September 3/4, 2011

Covenant Lutheran Church, Stoughton

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator and from our Lord, Jesus the Christ.
Amen.

Another Labor Day weekend has rolled around. For 117 years the first Monday in September has been a legal holiday in honor of workers here in the United States of America. Actually, in 1894 Congress declared that day a legal holiday in the District of Columbia and the territories even though several states had created a Labor Day holiday years before. Slowly over the years Labor Day became a national holiday, a long weekend of end-summer festivities, with little more than a token tip of the hat to "Labor."

When I was a child on a farm in Iowa, my dad would say, "Every day is labor day." I think dad had it right. Remember the account of creation in Genesis 1? God created humans, male and female, delighting in who had come into being. Then the scripture reads, "*God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."*" (Genesis 1:28) That sounds like work, like labor to me! And the other account of creation in Genesis 2 speaks of work, too; we read there, "*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it...*" (Genesis 2:15) We still depend on farmers to till and tend the soil so people can be fed. I wonder if the love of gardening by many grows out of our creation roots as tillers and keepers of the garden, God's garden?

You know, though, God did much better than Congress or state legislators. God declared the seventh day of every week a labor day, or should I say an un-labor day, a day to rest and refresh from work. The writer of Genesis put it like this: "*And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*" (Genesis 2:2-3) If God took a rest from the labor of creation after six days, we need to take time to rest and renew every seventh day as well!

I find it fascinating on this Labor Day weekend that we have the readings from Romans 13 and Matthew 18. These speak powerfully and pointedly to labor.

Have you heard the phrase, "a labor of love"? St. Paul didn't use that phrase but he lifted love to the highest place, the greatest work we can do. Listen again: ⁸*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* ⁹*The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."* ¹⁰*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*" (Romans 13:8-10) St. Paul, a person whose

life had been consumed with keeping every detail of the law in order to show his faithfulness to God, came to realize that his zeal had actually violated the greater law to love. He grew to know the Jesus who said, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Matthew 22:39b)

Jesus calls us as his followers to a labor of love. Love is a verb, not a noun...an action word, not a feeling. While I deeply appreciate what St. Paul wrote, *"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law"*, I wish he had written what love does rather than what love does not do. Martin Luther worked on that in explaining the 10 Commandments in his Small Catechism. In every one he moved from the negative to the positive to show that they call us to love. Let's take a look. Please take the worship book from the pew and turn to page 1160 in the back. We'll look at three examples of Luther's keen insight that helps us go from don't to do, from avoid to engage. I'll read the commandment and you respond in unison with the meaning. See the the fifth commandment: You shall not murder. What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.

And what about the sixth commandment: You shall not commit adultery. What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.

Then comes the seventh commandment: You shall not steal. What does this mean?

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither take our neighbor's money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income.

We could go on, but you can see how Luther helps us see what the fulfilling of the law means. He leads us to the labor of love, the labor that Jesus undertook his entire ministry, seeking to bring God's goodness to every person he encountered.

So on the Labor Day weekend we think about our work, our labor, our labor of love. While I worked on the farm as a kid, my first paid job was for a neighbor, helping bale hay. My first formal job was in town, working summers during college for Pioneer seed corn company. Then teaching math, and finally serving as pastor. I've always enjoyed working. Perhaps you review your work history this weekend, too. And I realize that I have mentioned only work for which I got paid—no, I wasn't paid for helping on the farm as a kid! Yet so much of our work, our labor, does not involve monetary compensation but satisfaction or the reward of helping others. That leads me to ask: What is the most difficult work you do or have ever done? And I wonder about Jesus; what was his hardest work?

The gospel text points to very difficult work, the work of maintaining healthy, life-giving relationships. Jesus said, *"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."* (Matthew 18:15) That is tough work, difficult work, challenging work. My observations show me that few of us do this well. And not just in church but in all our life in community. I believe that Jesus could just have well said, *"If another member of the community sins against you, go and point out*

the fault when the two of you are alone.” The goal is not to humiliate or shame the person but to foster and restore healthy, life-giving relationships.

So what do we often do instead of a quiet, face-to-face conversation of concern? We talk to someone else. Do you know what Mike did to me? Do you know what Amy said about me? Did you see what Rebecca put on her facebook? Did you hear what the pastor said in his sermon? Did you ever expect the city council to make that stupid decision? Do you know that my boss..... And what does that solve? Does it relieve us? release some pressure on us? help us deal with stress? Perhaps, we think, but in reality it does not solve any problems but causes more pain and potentially leads to even greater hurt. Like a cancer that grows until it is surgically removed or treated in some other way, the unresolved issue that breaks relationship stays alive and spreads.

Jesus tells us to face the issues head on, not to go behind backs or spread tales or speak ill of others. Jesus gives step-by-step guidance to help us deal with broken relationships. And not only did Jesus give guidance, he did what he said. He went directly to those who had offended him. That’s us. Jesus came to this world, to us, who decided to follow our own will rather than God’s. We read about that in Genesis 3. And the rest of scripture tells the story of God seeking to bring us back to God’s will and way. The story reaches its climax in Jesus, who looked us in the eye and said, “God loves you too much to let you go. I’m here to bring you back.” That was the toughest work Jesus did, but he kept working even though it took him to the cross.

Jesus calls us in today’s gospel to do that same work. He wants us to go personally to the person who has offended us, look him or her in the eye, and say, “I love you too much to let you go from our community. I’m here to bring you back.” That may be the most difficult, most challenging, toughest work we will ever do. But just think...we join Jesus in the work of God, loving without reward, restoring community, giving life and hope. The result comes through God’s Spirit alive in the encounter, God’s Spirit who opens us to God and one another in reconciling love. As Jesus said, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*” (Matthew 18:20) Then, and only then, do we have the peace of the Lord, the peace of the Lord.

Now and always may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (Philippians 4:7)