

THE LABOR OF LOVE...THE LOVE OF LABOR

Genesis 2: 15-25 / Genesis 3: 8-19

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It's Labor Day Sunday and in honor of the occasion, I thought I would play a little tribute to the occasion from a few years ago...

The history of Labor Day in our country can be traced back to the date of September 5, 1882. The New York City trade union organized a march from City Hall to the park at Union Square. There the marchers ate picnic lunches and listened to speeches calling for an eight hour work day. At that time, they had good reason to voice their concern. The average workweek for a full time manufacturing employee was 100 hours. The works out to seven days a week, 14 hours a day, working from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

While Congress would officially create the Labor Day holiday in 1894, the propose eight hour work day and 40 hour work week did not become the standard that we know today until 1940—nearly 60 years after the initial protest.

So, while we are often grateful for this holiday weekend and the “last hurrah” of summer that it affords, we also ought to be grateful for those who worked so long and hard to bring some balance to the average work week. It's difficult to imagine that challenges that so many people faced when your working life would consume, on average, 100 hours of your average week.

Labor Day, of course, is a good time for us to reflect not only upon those sacrifices made by workers in our past, but also upon the meaning and significance of work in our present. What meaning does our work provide? What is its purpose? And where does the balance lie between our work lives and our lives outside of our work? I realize that, for some of us, these are very difficult questions to answer. But they are, I believe, worthy of an attempt. Let's begin by taking a look at the second creation story found in the Book of Genesis.

I find it fascinating to note that within the second creation story (Genesis 2:4 – 3:24), there are essentially, two different descriptions of the work entrusted to humanity by God—two different job descriptions, if you will. We initially learn (v. 15) that, “God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” He was the appointed groundskeeper for the Garden of Eden. Not a bad job, considering the slow economy! Not only that, but there were benefits! He could eat from any tree in the garden—except for one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was definitely “off limits.”

And, as if that wasn't enough, God was concerned that the Man was alone and needed company. So God created “every animal of the field and every bird of the air.” (Genesis 2: 19) The Man was then entrusted with the work of giving names to all of the creatures who inhabited the earth. I've always wondered about what it was that moved the Man to come up with the “Duck Billed Platypus” name...

It is then that, according to this ancient version of the creation story, God created woman as companion and partner.

Now, this initial job description for the work of human beings sounds pretty good. The Man and the Woman are placed in the role of being caretakers of the garden. They have been asked to participate with God in the unfolding work of creation—even giving names to the birds, the animals and the plants. What’s there not to like? There is a creative aspect to this work that gives it meaning, significance and enjoyment.

But there is more to this story and its description of the work assigned to human beings than this lofty interpretation. What follows, of course, is the “fall” in which both the woman and the man disobey the ground rules regarding eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God comes looking for them in the Garden and they hide. But they really can’t really hide from God and, in the conversation that takes place, they acknowledge what they have done—but, of course, do so by pointing the finger of blame elsewhere—at the snake or the woman.

It is at this point in the story that God then dictates the punishment that each of the participating parties will receive for their disobedience and defiance.

- The snake is sentenced to live on his belly, eating the dust and battling humanity.
- The woman is punished by an increase in the pain of child birth.
- The man is punished by having to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.

There is, in this punishment scenario, a very different description of the work entrusted to humanity. Rather than being a creative and energizing gift, work is here a sentence to be carried out under difficult and painful circumstances.

While the first witness to the meaning of work was one of **creativity**, this second witness suggests that it work involves long and difficult **drudgery**. For our purposes this morning, I think it is fair to say that between these two very different descriptions of the work assigned to humanity, we find a spectrum that likely includes our own experience of work.

Let’s face it. Sometimes the work that we do is nothing more than dull drudgery. Sometimes it is boring and monotonous, mind numbing and physically exhausting. Sometimes, it is the very last thing that we would be doing if it weren’t for the fact that it provides us with the financial resources needed in order to survive and perhaps, thrive a bit. Sometimes work is simply work and nothing more.

I remember a job that I once had during my college days at San Jose State in which I was employed by a baking company that made hamburger buns for McDonalds.

This company made over 300,000 buns a day! I worked in the wrapping department, helping to package the buns when they came off the overhead conveyor belt that cooled them when they came out of the oven. My specific assignment was to spot any bad buns—

buns that had any kind of blemish or were misshapen in any way—and throw them into a barrel. That was my job—spotting and sorting bad buns—for eight or more hours on a shift.

It was not work that I enjoyed or found especially fulfilling. I would sometimes have nightmares that involved explosions and buns flying everywhere! I couldn't wait to get done with my shift. But you know something? That job paid very well and allowed me to put myself through college. Besides, one of the fringe benefits was that I could bring home packages of Big Mac buns whenever I wanted!

Sometimes, work is simply work and we do it because it provides us with the income that we need to accomplish our goals—whatever they may happen to be.

But, at other times, work becomes something more than dully drudgery. In fact, it becomes the very thing that brings interest and energy, purpose and passion to our lives. Like the man's and woman's opportunity to share with God in the unfolding work of creation, our work becomes a source of creativity and fulfillment in our lives.

This may be the work of an artist who finds deep joy in creating paintings and pieces of art. It may reflect the inner longing of the one who takes words and crafts them together to form poetry and story that speaks to the meaning and significance of life itself. It may be the work of the photographer who sees each new photograph as an opportunity to capture what words cannot.

Dewitt Jones is a photographer who happens to get paid by the National Geographic Magazine for the work that he does. But I am inclined to believe that Dewitt Jones would do this work whether or not he was paid anything at all. He writes, ***“What is creativity? Having spent my life in one creative endeavor after another, I can tell you that it's not something magical or mystical. It's something very simple. To me, it's just a moment—a moment where we look at the ordinary, but see the extraordinary. It happens all the time in my photography.”***

The depth of Dewitt Jones appreciation for his work can be observed in his comment that, ***“God gave me photography so that I could pray with my eyes.”*** Here is one who for whom the work of photography is the very gift that gives his life meaning, creativity and purpose. It is, to be sure, good work, even sacred work that he does. What a blessing to find such work within the context of our own lives.

There is, however, another expression of work that is not necessarily linked to the arts and artistic expression—although it can be. This expression of work is rooted in that which we have been called to do—that which we cannot help but do if we are to say “yes” to the inner yearning, the inner calling that tugs at us and will not let us rest until we do.

The word, “calling” has often held a religious connotation that suggests God calls individuals into certain forms or expressions of religious work. A pastor, for example, is sometimes said to have had a “calling to be a pastor.” And while that may, in fact, be true, I tend to believe that God's call cannot be limited merely to those who enter religious work

or ministry, but applies, in a very basic way, to everyone. Each one of us, I believe, has a calling to do the work that provide meaning and significance not only for ourselves, but for the world of which we are a part.

As the poet, Rumi has suggested, ***“Everyone has been made for some particular work, and the desire for that work has been put into every heart.”***

If the word, “calling” makes you a bit nervous, you might want to use the word, “vocation,” instead. It may be that our best, most enjoyable work is discovered in our response to our sense of vocation which may or may not be something that we get paid to do. More often than not, it seems, our vocation is something that we volunteer to do simply because it brings to us the satisfaction and fulfillment that we long for.

I have long quoted Frederick Buechner’s definition of vocation that suggests that it is that ***“place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”*** It’s true, is it not?

Our true calling—the work that we were meant to do—so often takes place at the intersection of our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger. Talk to anyone who has experienced this link and they will tell you that they would do this work even if they had to pay to do it—for it is the work that has reminded them of who they are and what their life is really all about. It is holy work, sacred work, work that gives meaning and purpose to life.

Work can be, according to our two scripture lessons from the second creation story, either a blessing or a curse. Sometimes, of course, it is both a blessing and a curse. While we would, of course, prefer that our work be all blessing, it may well be that only when we experience the difficulty and drudgery of our work that we are able to appreciate the true blessing of doing the work that brings purpose and fulfillment to our lives even as it brings hope and healing to our world.

It is my hope and my prayer that you will find that place in your work where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet. For it is then that you will be truly blessed. Amen.