

Labor with Love
Rev. Mary Dicken
September 6, 2020

*Living God, may your word be proclaimed and may we claim it with joy for our lives today.
Continue to speak to us through my words or in spite of them. Amen.*

Romans 13:8-14

8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet,"[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." [b] 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. 11 And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. [c]

This time last year, I was enjoying my Labor Day weekend relaxing on a beach in Mexico. The year before that, I was celebrating the holiday at a pool party and cookout with friends in Tennessee who adopted me into all of their family celebrations. This year... this year we're in a pandemic, so there will be no international vacations or parties with hordes of friends and families. (Well, there might be those parties, but I won't be there since Dr. Fauci and Dr. Box are begging us to make good choices this weekend.) Labor Day has become so synonymous with cookouts, travel, and end-of-summer parties that — in the absence of these things this year — we're forced to think a little bit differently about what this holiday is really all about.

I will admit that I rarely stop to consider the "why" of our Labor Day holiday. I am generally going along with the crowd and just enjoying the last hurrah of summer without much deep thinking about it. But this year? This year is all about slowing down and carving out time for reflection.

Labor Day parades began popping up in the 1880s, but the nationalization of this holiday didn't come about until 1894, largely thanks to the pressure of a massive, railway strike over low wages that disrupted the nation by denying essential services like mail delivery. Leaders were forced to demonstrate they were listening to these protesters, and one of the ways they attempted to calm the unrest was by creating the Labor Day holiday. The part we don't talk about quite so much is what happened after President Cleveland declared this an official holiday. Six days after he signed the declaration, Cleveland sent 10,000 federal troops to Chicago to force an end to the strike. More than thirty workers were killed, another fifty-three were seriously injured, and the rest of the workers... well, none of their demands were met.

Even still, 126 years later, we celebrate this holiday of the labor movement. Labor Day is a day to honor *all* workers, at least in theory. In reality, though: a quarter of private-sector workers in our country won't be granted a paid holiday, and most retail stores, restaurants, and grocery stores will be open, so all of those workers are still expected to show up and work. The dignity and rights of these essential workers are still at the heart of the modern-day labor movement that continues to advocate for living wages and the right to unionize. I shared with you in the e-newsletter about some of our own United Methodist Church's long history in the movement for workplace justice, including current resolutions advocating for global workers' rights, farmworkers' rights, collective bargaining, and a universal living wage. If it makes you uncomfortable or feels too political for the church to say so much about labor justice, you should know that Methodists have been unapologetically standing in solidarity with workers since the eighteenth century. We do so because it is in our DNA, tracing back to John Wesley himself and his concern for oppressed workers, and also because of our faith. Our *Book of Resolutions* says this:

"The United Methodist Church believes God's love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people's lives to risk interpreting God's love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex."¹

As Methodists, we understand that God has called us to extend love to the world, which requires us to get involved and take a stand, even when it's messy and uncomfortable. So here we are, on Labor Day weekend, with something to say about labor because we have something to say about love.

In our scripture reading this morning, we heard the Apostle Paul tell us that a bunch of the commandments can be summed up in "Love your neighbor as yourself." He unpacks it further by saying, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

It all comes down to love. That word love is always an interesting one in our English translations of the Bible — we have just one word for "love" which means it has multiple possible meanings and often imprecise usage. This word typically conjures up all sorts of squishy, sweet emotions, but I don't think Paul really intended us to hear it that way. If we take this directive as one about how we *feel* about our neighbors, then we are oversimplifying and, really, missing the point. The love Paul is talking about here isn't about whether or not we like our neighbors or even about the sincerity of our intentions because it's not about feelings at all. Paul is calling us to moral action.

When Paul instructs us to "love our neighbor," he is telling us to do the hard work of moral and ethical reflection, looking at whatever the problem or issue at hand is from our neighbor's point of view. Loving our neighbor means working to live in someone else's skin, walking in someone else's shoes, seeking to understand the world through their eyes and lived experiences, and valuing all life as sacred. And then — this is the moral action part — we use that love to guide and direct our decisions, knowing that the decisions we make rarely affect just us. When we make this shift, consumers become stewards, possessions become opportunities, money

¹ <http://ee.umc.org/what-we-believe/social-principles-social-creed>

becomes an instrument of service, and people become our priority. Despite the temptations of the limitations of our language, this love that Paul points us toward cannot be reduced to emotions but must instead be rooted in consistent, moral reflection and action. This love is hard work. It's *labor*.

This week, my Uncle Kent sent me an article he read in the NY Times.² It was on the emergence of "divinity consultants" in American corporations. The gist was about how corporate America is drawing upon the expertise of religious professionals to provide ritual and meaning for workers — not a new idea actually. I have a couple of colleagues who have been serving as chaplains at Tyson plants for years now. The article was noting the uptick in these efforts, particularly in this covid-time where workplaces are disrupted and most of our days are spent isolated from coworkers, staring at computer screens while participating in never-ending ZOOM meetings. The trend is fascinating to me. It recognizes how increasingly disconnected Americans are from traditional religious expressions, while also pointing toward the very real desires we have for spiritual meaning and connection — so secular spaces, like our workplaces, are stepping up. The part that intrigues me even more is to consider the motivations. I suspect the corporate CEOs and stakeholders have different ideas driving them than do the "divinity consultants" themselves.

In the article, some of these corporate chaplains were interviewed, and they shared about their calling to not only craft ritual for employees that makes them feel better about their workday and increase workplace satisfaction but to also utilize this opportunity to imbue morality and justice into corporate culture. One of the consultants described his organization's mission as "helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world," saying, "We today pay attention to a business's profits; the deeper question is whether the business ennobles or debases human existence. We encourage employees to bring moral concerns into the business conversation."

Moral concern and love. In the workplace? I think the Apostle Paul would appreciate that. Even still, despite the NY Times article, my guess is that most of us in this worship service don't yet have "divinity consultants" at our workplaces. And that is OK, because we are already capable of bringing the sacred into the secular, of imbuing corporate culture with morality and justice. Not only are we capable of doing so, we bear a responsibility. "Love your neighbor as yourself" doesn't stop when we clock-in to work. In every aspect of our lives, we are called to prioritize the good of others above our self-interest or, perhaps in this case, over profit. As followers of Christ, we are to bring this sacred lens into all that we do, including the seemingly secular work that consumes so much of our time. We are called to labor but to do so with love, for labor without love is antithetical to the Gospel.

Tomorrow is Labor Day. I imagine it will look different for many of us this year, as we eschew the customary barbecues and opt out of that end-of-summer bash. Perhaps this is indeed an opportunity to slow down and reflect. I suggest that we could use our holiday this year to do a few things:

1. Get some rest. We all need it. This year is exhausting, so let's take care of ourselves.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/28/business/remote-work-spiritual-consultants.html>

2. Educate ourselves. Let's learn more about the labor movement, the connections with the Church, and the state of labor today.
3. Prayerfully examine this notion of love. What does it mean to love our neighbor in every aspect of our lives, including our work?

As we enter into this holiday:

May our rest not be wasted.

May our time be spent wisely.

May our hearts be open.

May our learnings be many.

May our spirits be filled.

May our priorities be transformed.

May our work be sacred.

May our love be magnified.

Friends, this Labor Day, let us labor with love.