

Labor Day Sunday

9/2/07

Ecclesiasticus 38: 27-32a, I Corinthians 3: 10-14, Matthew 6: 19-24

The Rev. Joel Nelson

Reflections on Work from an Itinerant Preacher

Dear friends in Christ. Grace to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is Labor Day weekend – and I’ve been laboring in a different way the last 5 Sundays, helping out liturgically while Fr. Fred has been gone. Actually, I am glad he is coming back! I’m exhausted by noon on Sundays, emotionally and physically. I think of the other clergy behind me who often also have to attend meetings, visit the hospital, counsel, etc., following Sunday services.

Yet having said that, this has also been a fun time, a wonderful experience, a humbling experience. To stand before you as I am doing right now to share the Good News, or in a few minutes stand behind the altar as celebrant and see the anticipation, awe, and hunger in the faces of you ready to be fed is awesome, a holy moment) So a wonderful experience. It’s good to have wonderful, loving help surrounding me – Fr. John, Deacon Jim, and Mother Anne have kept me going. I have been on a sharp learning curve. I grew up in a low-church Norwegian Lutheran setting. 45 years ago, my liturgics classes didn’t cover things like genuflecting, crossing oneself, when to reverence etc.! And if you have paid close attention perhaps you noticed I have been a half step behind at times! Anyway, I have a renewed appreciation for our wonderful clergy and what they do.

As laity, we need to hold them up in prayer, walk with them – not in front, not behind, but with them, supporting them. **We are in this together.** And St. Andrew’s will be only as strong and vibrant as we work and labor together, as we remain faithful to the Gospel and mission that is ours to be agents and vehicles of the love and grace we have in Jesus Christ.

I’d like to spend just a few minutes on a Christian perspective on work. Nothing you probably don’t know, but it’s good to be reminded.

Our first lesson from Ecclesiasticus uses the image of the artist, who in his work is careful to finish his work. It also uses the image of a blacksmith, whose environment is hot and loud, yet who also is intent on finishing. Or the potter sitting at his work, turning the wheel with his feet, concerned over his product, but also intent on finishing.

Then our second lesson from 1 Corinthians pictures a skilled master builder (God) laying a foundation and building on it. And it then reminds us that the true foundation is Jesus Christ and what is truly important.

And then our Gospel from Matthew reminds us that work and treasure are not to become our God. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Observance of Labor Day, as we know, has a long history. Obviously I can’t cover it all. But if you go back to the ancient world, the Greeks and Romans saw manual work as a curse, for only the lower classes and slaves. Even the beautiful cathedrals in England and Europe – my wife and I have seen many of them, and each is unique in it’s

expression of the time and place and the Christian religion. But let's be honest: They would never have been built but for cheap labor, slave labor.

Or go back to the early days of the Industrial Revolution where factories were "dark satanic mills" as William Blake wrote. Work in factories and coal mines was hard and dangerous. Men, women, children were practically slaves at times, even chained to their machines. So obviously abuses led to the forming of Guild Halls, labor unions, etc.

But I submit to you that we who name the name of Christ, in this day and age, ought to have a Christian perspective on work.

First, as Christians we honor the fundamental dignity of all workers, professional, non-professional, skilled, unskilled, stay at home moms or dads, students, you name it. All have been created in God's image with worth and dignity – to be His workers.

Secondly, Christians view work as a high calling – that we are co-workers with God. Martin Luther back during the time of the Reformation said that all work should be done to the glory of God. Whether it be the priest standing behind the altar administering the Sacrament or the person scrubbing floors, both are equally pleasing to the Lord. In a few minutes I will be standing behind the altar as celebrant. But that will be no more important or pleasing to the Lord than when I hit the road this coming week selling books. Whatever you do in the marketplace, or at the office, as a stay-at-home mom, volunteering, or whatever you do as a Christian, it is a high calling. You are a co-worker with God.

Thirdly, as Christians, we see work as **blessing from God and a way to impact others.** I was a parish pastor for 20 years – good years, years I would not trade. But the last 24 years have also been good years. After changing vocations, I went into book sales and marketing with a couple of publishers. (My immediate family was supportive of my new vocation. But I think maybe my parents and in-laws struggled a bit at first, after telling others for 20 years their son/son-in-law was a Lutheran clergyman, and now was a traveling book salesman!) But I have loved doing both. I feel so blessed to be able to still work part time. When new titles come in during the fall, the adrenalin flows. I'm excited and ready to hit the road again. And I have found so many ways to witness to others and impact peoples' lives through my work. Sometimes it is just listening to customers talk about their lives. At times it is telling them I will be praying for them. At other times it is just the satisfaction of seeing the gleam in the eyes of a student, who, seeing the new books I am showing the librarian, excitedly asks: "Mrs. Smith, are you going to buy those books? And realizing that perhaps, I can have a small part in the educational process of that young life!

Work is a blessing from God and a way to impact others. So it is with you who name the Name of Christ. You will view others as people with worth and dignity, you will view work as a high calling, and you will see your work (what it may be) as a blessing from God and a way to impact others. Paul in Colossians 3:17 writes: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him"

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do effects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse

our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.