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Proper 17 Year A RCL

Pray for workers

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Since this is Labor Day weekend, I'm of a mind to talk about work. My work, your work, God's work, and work of people like Wojciech and Ewa who clean our church. Both candidates for the President of the United States have spoken of "hard-working Americans." It's not really the thing anymore to call people "the middle class" or "workers." Now it's all about *hard-working Americans*. Hard-working Americans is a nice term: it soothes our soul, it salves over the reality that plenty of people working in America are not Americans. It makes it clear we're talking about the *true* Americans.

Most of all, the term "hard-working Americans" taps into our very foundational story of this country, the American dream, the American promise, the American premise: that if you work hard enough, you can achieve anything. Now while we

love our celebrities, while we love our soldiers, while we love our Olympians, our biggest heroes are our grandparents and great-grandparents who sweated and toiled and put their noses to the grindstone and made something of themselves while they built this country. We love the stories of our heroes best when they are about a struggle from rags to riches, from being nobody to being somebody through hard work.

Some people are ambivalent about the holiday of Labor Day because it calls to mind unions and socialism. Of course others love Labor Day because it calls to mind unions and socialism!

But most Americans of any political stripe do celebrate the aspect of Labor Day that gives “hard-working Americans” a day off – except of course those in retail...and, oh yeah, those in tourism, and...oh, well, yeah, those in hospitals and public safety offices. But no matter.

We're Americans! We value hard work! We are proud of the American work ethic! Our founding myth is based upon it!

But do we really, anymore, truly value hard work? Do we value other people's hard work? What about the unskilled laborers? Do we value their work? It seems to me most everyone I know chases after "labor-saving" devices as much as possible. Are we more likely to talk at coffee hour about our vacations and trips, or our work? Many, many people play the lottery in hopes that they might never have to work again.

I was talking to another mom whose child goes to my children's Montessori school. Now in most Montessori classrooms, the children do the cleaning: dusting, polishing, sweeping, cleaning the bathroom, scrubbing the sink, mopping the floor. This mom was expressing her dismay about that. "Can't they hire that done?" she complained, "why should my son be cleaning a toilet?"

Why should anyone have to clean a toilet? I want to know. It's because we human beings *use* toilets and we human beings don't want to have dirty toilets. Toilets need to be cleaned. Do we value hard work, or is it just that someone's gotta do it, but hopefully not me.

The first lesson this morning is filled with references to work at many different levels. The most obvious is the toil of the Israelites. The Lord told Moses out of a burning bush: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from...their oppressors." So here is the most startling reference to labor in the Moses story. We have slaves, toiling under the oppression of harsh bosses. We have one ethnic people, an overclass, trampling on another ethnic people, the underclass. We have laborers who are forced to do the dangerous, dirty work without a just wage. This is not at all a

story about pride in hard work. This is a story about bondage and injustice. God is not pleased.

Americans who remember our actual foundational history are scandalized by the mirror that the Moses story holds up to us. Our country may have been founded on the story of hard work, but mixed in with that is our terrible history of bondage of one people over another. We are still, despite Barack Obama, recovering from black racism. We are still coming to grips with how a giant chunk of our early success as a country came on the backs of free labor in the South. We are still in the throes of believing that some work is below us – perhaps cleaning our own toilets – and is better left in the hands of...who? Someone black? Someone Polish? Someone Mexican? Some of the most dangerous work in our society, soldiering, factory butchering, textile manufacturing, chemical manufacturing, is left for the poor, and...increasingly...non-American.

Just what kind of work is it that we value, if any at all?

This week I took my daughter to the hairdresser to get her haircut for the start of school. The first step was a shampoo, deftly performed by one of the shampooing ladies. After handing the shampooing lady a tip, my daughter wondered aloud to me, "What would it be like to be a hair-washer?" I, fortunately, said, "Just think how relaxed you'd make people feel every day!" I was so tempted to add, "Boring, frustrating, dead-end, please don't aspire to that, my child."

Let's look further at this story of Moses, because it is telling. Let's lay aside the Israelites in bondage in back-breaking labor for little pay. Let's lay aside the immigrant labor that made the Egyptians' lives easier and the immigrant (or outsourced) labor that makes our lives leisurely today.

What was Moses' work? This story is about how God called Moses out of his nice inlaws' family farm business in Midian, tending flocks, to a life-long commitment as a liberator and deliverer. Moses moved from skilled middle-class

work to renowned world leader by God's command. Even this aspect of the story calls into question our American myth. Is plain old hard work at our respectable jobs truly respected? Or do our American folk stories, or even our BIBLE stories, simply assume that only the big jobs matter, only things that rocket you to fame, wealth, power, and fortune can be described as God-endowed. We would tell a story about God calling out of burning bush to Moses to work as a liberator, but certainly he never had been called out of burning bush by God to be a tender of flocks. We tell stories in which only the professions are truly meaningful.

St. Benedict founded a Christian community in the Middle Ages that survives to this day in the many, many Benedictine monasteries and convents around the world. In Benedict's day, the monks and nuns lived with all things in common in a community that maintained a rule. The rule is summed up in three Latin words: ora et labora. Pray and work. Benedict taught that all the brothers in the community would benefit from praying and working. They all farmed, they

cooked, they sewed, they cleaned, they hosted guests; and they all prayed and studied and rested and meditated.

Over time, that broke down. Folks like St. Francis came around a few generations later and pointed out that the Benedictines were breaking their own rule, that they had wiggled around the rule so that the ordained brothers had become the pray-ers and scholars and the lay brothers had become the manual laborers. The ordained brothers sat under the shade of the tree and taught, while the lower brothers sweated over the boiling laundry and bent their backs in the vegetable garden.

I don't have the answers here for you today on this Labor Day weekend. I'm not sure anyone in the Bible ever got it completely figured out. I'm not sure

Christians teach a good theology of work. Jesus called away fishermen to become healers and evangelists. Paul kept manufacturing tents and sails, the labor of his hands.

Whether priesthood is a high calling from God and the skin-cracking work of being the shampooing lady at the hairdresser is not, I find that hard to believe. I believe all work should be respected, and all those who work should not only be dignified, but also paid a living wage.

Given even holy Benedict's followers' lousy track record, it is clear that we must be vigilant about that ideal – that everyone who works should be paid enough to live on and even enough to have time to rest and to pray. God will always hear the cry of those who suffer under harsh taskmasters without earning enough.

We not only have a long way to go in the United States and in the world, but we will probably always have to keep working at it. The market doesn't fix it because markets will always be trying to keep labor costs down. Only people can make this happen.

Do we really value hard work, work of the ilk that bends bodies and cracks skin and jeopardizes health, like the work many of our ancestors did? If we did value it, we'd probably do more of it. For those who are stuck with such tasks in these days of air conditioning and manicures and enriching children, my thoughts are with *them* this Labor Day.