

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18, Year C)

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Fr. Ben Hankinson

Growing up, Labor Day was one of my least favorite holidays. It marked the true end of summer, the close of three months of vacation. It loomed over the last weeks of August like a prison sentence: 180 days of hard labor to be served in Florence School District One. For me at least, it seemed to be the end of our rest and the beginning of our work. Fast forward through college and my perspective changes quite a bit. 3 day weekend. It's the little things in life, don't you think?

At its core though, Labor Day celebrates the labor and industry of the American people. It recalls our commitment to better ourselves and our lives. It calls to mind all of the work that we do. And so we celebrate all of that work by taking a day off. It may be just a bit of a contradiction, but then again maybe there's something to be said for that.

Before we get there though, I offer a word of caution to each of us, including myself. It's easy in the midst of this Labor Day weekend for us to lose sight of the bigger picture. Our American spirit can get the better of us. We think for a moment that we can achieve great things on our own. It is in such moments that we are confronted with the life of Christ. In his life and particularly in his cross, we see our faults and our failures, our shortcomings, our sin. We see our inability to save ourselves, much less do anything else which is truly productive.

Much like our labor free Labor Day, the way of the cross is illogical. It does not make sense that life should reign through death, but we know that it is true though by virtue of the resurrection of the Christ. Without the resurrection, the way of the cross is folly to everyone, and we are fools. But in the light of the resurrection, the way of the cross is the way of life and of hope. It is on that way that we offer him everything, because it is not, indeed it cannot be, about our work. It is about his. The work of Jesus Christ is the way of the cross, the way of love. In turn, we love in response to God's love.

What does our work of love look like? Well, this weekend, our brothers and sisters in the Roman church celebrate the canonization of one who displayed a deep understanding of this relationship between work and love, Teresa of Calcutta. There have been few figures in our lifetime that have captured as much attention because of the work they do. Mother Teresa, like so many others who go unnoticed and uncelebrated, lived the Gospel lesson we hear today. Setting aside mother and sisters, Teresa left her home in Albania to pursue a religious life of mission. Her love of God led her to India and its poorest slums. When asked once how she dealt with it all, she held up her hand and showed it to them saying, "You did it for me." That which you do for the least of these, "You did it for me."

I heard that story this week, and it gave me pause as I saw the very visual connection between the simple Gospel message of God's mercy and love for us and of our labor unto the Lord through the very hands of the church in showing that mercy and love to others.

To love is to do good. Love is no mere emotion or affection, love is action born out of our salvation, a love which is the fruit of the labors of Christ, the fruit of our faith. It is to take up the cross by reaching out our hands. Scripture doesn't say, get a warm fuzzy feeling. It says, get to work. You are part of the body of Christ, you have been washed through the waters of baptism and strengthened for the service of the kingdom by word and sacrament.

But before we go, we must acknowledge the simple reality of hands: they can do nothing else so long as they holding on to something. If we hold on to our family or friends or jobs or anything else more than we hold to Jesus Christ, then we are not yet truly disciples, and all that we can give in our service is ourselves. If we offer ourselves

to others, it is nice but it is not enough. Today's Gospel passage once more reminds us that we must set everything else aside to cling to the cross. We cling to it for our lives. But more than that, as we hold onto it for dear life, we show it forth to the world around us, we offer it those who most need it. We give ourselves to Jesus Christ and in turn show Jesus Christ to the world.

That is our labor as Christians. Like Teresa we must set aside that which hinders us so that we may in turn be the very hands of Jesus Christ. It does not mean that we must all become monks or nuns, or priests.

"The work of a Beethoven, and the work of a charwoman, become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly 'as to the Lord.' This does not, of course, mean that it is for anyone a mere toss-up whether he should sweep rooms or compose symphonies. A mole must dig to the glory of God and a cock must crow." (C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*).

We do that to which we have been called, that for which we have been gifted. But we do it for Christ. And as we do it, we may, indeed must, still engage in the labor of the church wherever we go and whatever we do. There are no restrictions, no minimum requirements to do the work of God in the service of others. To labor for Christ is to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to give shelter to the homeless; to visit the sick; to ransom the captive; to bury the dead. These corporal works of mercy are works of the cross, and through them we show forth its glory in all the world.

But as the church we must do more than serve the body, because in addition to these, not in place of them, we must also minister to the soul. Like the corporal works, they are not reserved for the guys wearing funny shirts or vestments. Each of us may serve by counseling the doubtful; instructing the ignorant; admonishing the sinner; comforting the sorrowful; forgiving injuries; bearing wrongs patiently; praying for the living and the dead. This is where the fullness of God's grace shines forth. Jesus Christ died and rose again to save the whole person body and soul.

That is why we draw near to him day by day, week by week returning to this place to commune with him. We are nourished through bread and wine with the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. And becoming more like him, we go forth into the world to feed the bodies and souls of those to whom we go, out from this place into our lives, our homes, schools, and businesses, we go out in love bearing no less than the love of God with us and at work in us.

Think then about how you are being called to use your labors, not only by the work of your hands but in the work of your heart to those around you. Find new ways to serve the kingdom and neighbor whether by the labor itself or by the fruits which they bear in your own life. For as we celebrate this Labor Day weekend, we celebrate all that God has done for us and all that he has gifted us with and thereby called us to do. And as we toil on the earth as doctors, farmers, teachers, or whatever is set before us, may we do so for the love of God and our love of neighbor. So let's get to work. Oh, and don't forget: That which you do for the least of these, "You did it for me."