

Preaching out of Season: Some Reflections on Labor Day Sermons

McCoy Franklin

First Presbyterian Church, Auburn, Alabama

When Paul admonished Timothy to preach in season and out of season I have no doubt that he had Labor Day in mind as one occasion of the latter type. There is probably no time of the year less stimulating to a preacher than the Labor Day weekend. It comes either at the end of a busy summer or, what is worse, at the end of vacation when we have resolved not to think about anything of substance. Like climbing Mount Everest, we sometimes preach a Labor Day sermon simply "because it is there," because it is a Sunday when we have to preach and we are frantically grasping for a sermon idea. There are better reasons. The very fact that Labor Day is a "secular" holiday with roots in the world of work offers the preacher an opportunity for talking about an important area of human life.

The Place and Function of Work in Contemporary Society

Labor Day is a good time for reflection on the place and function of work in our lives and in our society. Is work a blessing or a curse? A gift to be celebrated or a burden to be endured? Is work simply an economic necessity or an emotional, spiritual, or a moral necessity as well?

C. Douglas Meeks has written about the way our society has spiritualized work: "Work becomes a criterion of what it means to be human. The definition of sickness in our society is not being able to work. The definition of deviancy in our society is refusing to work" (*Christianity and Crisis*). Concerns about the place and function of work are being raised from every corner of our society today. Workers who feel trapped in boring, unfulfilling, or dissipating work wonder whether this is just the way all work is or whether it is possible for work to be meaningful. Workers whose skills have been made obsolete by technology are struggling to find a way to keep their lives from unraveling. Community workers are concerned about the terrible increase in child abuse, wife abuse, and other forms of violence which have accompanied this loss of meaningful work. Retired Americans who think they cannot wait to be freed from the pressures and rigors of work, then find themselves frustrated and depressed after retirement.

These questions and concerns do not determine whether work is a blessing or a curse but they do illustrate how much importance we and our society place on our work. These questions should be of particular concern to the readers of this journal because of the deep religious roots of our attitudes toward work.

The religious roots of work seem particularly deep in the soil plowed by the Protestant Reformation. Max Weber's classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, lays out the close affinity which exists between the capitalistic glorification of work and certain elements in the Protestant movement. Weber does not argue that one movement caused the other but rather that there was an affinity between the two so that people who were attracted to one movement were likely to be attracted to the other.

Luther's concept of the "calling" is very important in Weber's study. It had the effect of stamping honest work with divine approval, thus giving it a dignity and value. Calvin developed the concept further by depicting work as a way for the believer to promote the glory of God and to respond to God's grace, thus affirming one's election. This had the effect of giving daily work a more significant place in the Christian life than it had ever enjoyed before.

It seems, then, that work is supposed to be a blessing and a gift. So why does it sometimes seem the opposite? Why is it often a struggle just to survive? Why is work sometimes so frustrating, so unfulfilling, so deadening to the human spirit? One biblical story which attempts to answer these questions is that wonderful story about the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3. From the literary standpoint, this is an aetiological story which attempts to tell why some things are the way they are: why there is antagonism between snakes and people, why there is strong attraction between men and women, why there is pain connected with giving birth, and why it is such a struggle to survive in this world.

The story begins with a positive evaluation of work. The world is presented as the result of God's direct and well-planned work which created a garden out of dead wasteland. God established the positive value of work by example and then formed the human species for the specific purpose of continuing that work, "to till and to keep" the world God had made. Work was intended as a creative activity which is reflective of the work of God and shared with God.

But this is only the beginning of the story. Adam and Eve were not satisfied with role of co-worker with God. They wanted to be the boss—to be God. They disobeyed God's instructions and intentions for them, destroying the special relationship with God which they enjoyed. The story goes on to describe the effects of these distorted intentions and broken relationships. One of these effects was a curse on human work: "cursed is the ground because of you."

Gerhard Van Rad sees in this story the bringing together of two curses applicable to the two primary work traditions of Palestine. One curse described the experience of the Palestinian farmer who was trying to squeeze a living out of the dry, rocky soil. The other curse described the experience of the wandering, Bedouin shepherd whose impoverished life was always tottering on the edge of starvation.

It might be difficult to see what relevance this story has for us today. Our situation is radically different from that of the primitive farmer and shepherd. Yet the sense of frustration and futility described in the story is shared by many modern workers. In the story, the thing that takes place between the beginning when work is positive, significant and fulfilling and the end when

work is frustrating and futile is the “fall.” Work takes on the same fallen nature which affects all other human enterprises. Intended to be a blessing, a way to glorify God, to serve neighbor, and to enter into God’s own creativity, work has been perverted, distorted, and warped to such an extent that it becomes a curse, a burden to be endured. The economic necessity of work reflects its fallen nature.

Max Weber, in the work cited earlier, shows how the Protestant doctrine of work eventually lost its religious moorings. Work came to be seen less and less as a way to glorify God (Calvin) or to serve God and neighbor (Luther) and more and more as an end in itself. Work became an idolatry and ultimately a curse to the human enterprise. It still functions as a religion for many people in our society today, having become not simply a means to an end, but an end in itself with intrinsic value all its own. We sacrifice ourselves to our work, and we look to our work to save us and to give our life meaning. Every minister has encountered such people. In fact, ministers are probably more susceptible to this particular idolatry than most. Human work, then, has the potential for either blessing or curse.

The thing that makes the difference is the purpose which we work. I suppose it could be argued that all work has some purpose. The purpose may be totally economic. But for work to reach its potential it must have a purpose which transcends the self. I once knew a coal miner who was able to find purpose and even joy in working at one of the dirtiest, most dangerous jobs imaginable because he was using it to earn money for his children’s education so that they would have the opportunity for something better. No amount of money is sufficient to make the doctors, nurses, and other relief workers in the refugee camps of Ethiopia endure the daily barrage of suffering and death that surrounds them there. They must have a more compelling reason than economic incentive. Work reaches its potential only when its purpose resonates with God’s purpose for the world. The theological term we use for that is calling or vocation. I want to say more about that in the third section of this article.

Work and Play: Work and Worship

Labor Day also seems an appropriate time to reflect upon the relationship between work, play, and worship. Gordon Dahl has written, “Most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship.” (*Work, Play and Worship in a Leisure-Oriented Society*)

A proper understanding of the relationship between work and play might save us from making an idolatry of our work. Dietrich Bonhoeffer sees great importance in the fact that the Decalogue commands us to rest from our work. The fourth commandment presupposes that work is natural, but God knows how easy it is for our work to gain such power over us that we can no longer leave it. We come to believe that we can sustain life by our own work and thus we forget God. Bonhoeffer sees this as the reason why God commands us to rest from our labors. The commandment demythologizes work for it reminds us that it is not our work but God’s presence which sustains us.

Part of our confusion about work and play lies in our confusion about the difference between them. Why is it that when I am planting shrubs in my yard it is a leisure activity but when the nursery crew is doing the same thing it is work? That is because we have depended upon economic considerations to distinguish work from play. I remember when I was a child it was OK for me to engage in recreational activities on Sunday as long as it did not cost money. I could go to an amateur baseball game, but not to a professional game because a professional game required someone to work. I could not go to the movies on Sunday because that also required the projectionist and ticket seller to work. These same economic considerations which we use to distinguish between work and leisure, we also use to distinguish what is important from what is frivolous. Leisure is frivolous because it does not earn anything. In his "Advice to a Young Tradesman" Benjamin Franklin warns:

Remember that time is money. He who could make ten shillings a day through his work, but goes walking half the day or idles in his room, even if he spends for his amusement only a six-pence . . . has in addition given up five shillings, or rather thrown it away.

One of the reasons we work so hard at our play is our uneasiness about the legitimacy of leisure. We do not know how to accept it or enjoy it. Therefore we often fill leisure time with frenetic activity, hoping to justify our leisure by the intensity with which we work at our play. If we understood that rest and leisure are gifts of God, no less than work, we might be able to enjoy our leisure time more, and be less compulsive about our work.

Likewise a proper understanding of the relationship between work and worship might also keep work from becoming an idolatry and save worship from irrelevancy and banality. Work and worship are two facets of the same reality. Work is the means by which we worship. Worship is the purpose for which we work. It would make a big difference in both the way we work and the way we worship if we kept this relationship clear.

It would certainly make a difference in the way we work if we treated our work as a means to glorify God, as Calvin taught. Our culture encourages our tendency to compartmentalize life—to treat life like a chest of drawers with a separate drawer for each aspect of life and each drawer safely and conveniently isolated from the others. We try to make work, home, politics, religion all separate compartments which operate by separate sets of rules and values. Most professions and business organizations have their own value systems and faith commitments which are almost always at variance with the Christian faith and value system. There will always be conflict and discomfort for anyone who tries to bring work and worship together. It is much simpler to keep them separate, and certainly much safer.

It would make a tremendous difference in our work if we saw the place where we work as a place of worship. It would make a difference in the care and diligence with which we performed our work responsibilities if we knew that our faithfulness at work is part and parcel of our faithfulness to God. It would make a big difference in the sense of satisfaction we could find in the drudgery everyone has to do—the housework or the homework or the

paperwork or whatever label we place on our drudgery—if we could see this work as contributing to God’s work in the world. It would make a difference in the way employers and others in managerial positions deal with their employees in such matters as wages and benefits, working conditions, and promotions if they saw that they had to answer to God as well as to the stockholders. It would make a difference in the way lawmakers, public policy makers, and government agency personnel set policy and treat people who come to them for assistance if they knew and believed that inasmuch as they served or failed to serve the least of their brothers and sisters they serve or fail to serve God. It makes a big difference in the way we work when we keep the relationship between work and worship clear.

It will also make a big difference in the way we worship. At first glance it would appear that there would be no need for corporate worship. People could say to the minister on Sunday the same thing they say to the Heart Fund solicitor who knocks at the door, “I gave at the office!” If we worship through our work, what place is left for traditional worship, either corporate or private?

Let us think about that for a moment. Think about the people who are most diligent in trying to glorify God through their work, those who come closest to putting their Christian faith and values into action. Are these the people who are most likely to neglect the corporate worship of the Christian community? Of course not! These are the very people who are most consistent in their personal worship and the most regular in their corporate worship. They come to worship because they have tried to bring their Christian values and commitments into their work, and they know how difficult that is. They know how far short they have fallen. They know how badly they need forgiveness for the past week, and how badly they need guidance and strength for the week ahead.

The Meaning of Vocation in a Career-Oriented Society

Labor Day is a good time to talk about the concept of Christian vocation. The question is surely being raised by young people faced with a baffling array of job possibilities; by women who have taken time out from a career for family responsibilities and now are thinking about reentry into the job market, and by middle-aged men and women for whom the current job has become empty and dissatisfying. Persons who have been forced to retire by government or company policy but who still want and need to be engaged in significant activity are asking questions about vocation. The church has a responsibility to help all these people think through the implications of Christian calling.

While the terms vocation and career are often used interchangeably, the church needs to reclaim and reemphasize the special connotations of vocation. The Latin root of vocation (*vocare*) means to call. To speak of our work as a vocation carries certain presuppositions. It means that work is a calling, that someone calls us to it, and that the one who calls us is God. That is quite different from a career.

Seeing daily work as a calling is a new idea to many people in our society and even in our churches. Most people think of a call from God as a mysterious occurrence which happens only to a few “religious” types like ministers and

missionaries, but which has not relevance for “normal” people like themselves. People need to be reminded of that basic tenet of our Protestant heritage which affirms that every believer is called to serve God through daily work. If every person is supposed to have a vocation, if every disciple of Christ is supposed to listen for a call from God concerning his or her daily work, then they will need some help in recognizing God’s call.

People should be encouraged to look within themselves as the starting point for finding God’s call. This starting point is implied by the doctrine of creation and of providence. We look within ourselves because we believe we were created by God. God gave us our talents, skills, interests, and abilities. We also believe that God has been involved in our lives since birth, using our experiences, opportunities, even our disappointments and failures to prepare us for future responsibilities.

But this is only the first step. Unfortunately it is the only step many people make in their decision-making process. This may be all that is needed for a career, but a vocation requires another step. The second step after looking at ourselves is to look at the world. The biblical accounts of people receiving God’s call are instructive here. Moses, in the wastelands of Midian, was reminded of the Hebrew people who groaned under Egyptian bondage. Isaiah, in the Temple, was reminded of the sin of the people and the need for someone to go to them. The needs of society are always echoes of God’s call. God has identified so closely with human society that God can say, “When you wrong a brother or sister you wrong me. If you hate a brother or sister, you hate me. If you minister to a brother or sister, you serve me.” Because of this identity, God’s call will always involve a responsibility to other people and to the world in which we live. This does not mean that only “helping professions” can be true vocations. It does mean that the needs of the world can never be absent from our vocational choices.

The needs of the world are another important ingredient in the call of God. Everything the church does should be geared toward helping people see the needs of the world, helping people hear the groans and cries of the world, in order that they may hear the echoes of God’s call. John R. Mott once said, “To know a need and have the capacity to meet it is what constitutes a call.” Frederick Buechner said it like this, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Still one more ingredient is needed to constitute a calling. That is response. After all the personal evaluation and social analysis has been done, a person must respond. A person can ignore God’s call. A person can reject his/her own calling. But a person can never fulfill the purpose for which he/she was created apart from this calling. Walter Brueggemann says, “We do not find out who we are and then decide what we are going to do. We understand who we are in the process of understanding what God is calling us to do.” That is why vocational concerns are so important. Labor Day is an appropriate time for helping people think through their vocation as they reflect upon the work they are doing.