

Todd Allen
2017
Interim Pastor
Ordinary Time

September 3,
22nd Sunday,

“Labor Contracts”

Texts: Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16: 21-25

Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”^[c]

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16:21-25

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that as we come to Your Table this day, we may meet you as you wish us to do so; therefore may the words of my mouth—and the mediations of our hearts—prepare us as you would wish it. In Christ’s name, we ask this. Amen.

Good Morning, and—in advance—a may I wish you a very Happy Labor Day tomorrow.

For we are—as tradition has it—on the cusp of the end of summer, and the beginning of fall. Perhaps—with me—you’ve noticed the “termination dust” on the Chugash mountains yesterday morning. Well, it was there! It’s a sign that a new season is upon us very shortly. Time—as they say—stands still for no one.

And that is how God wants it to be, too—our lives are very much a journey—and a journey that is meant to lead us forward. We see this illustrated—and starkly so—in our reading from Matthew’s gospel, and—by way of extension—as we turn, once again, to Paul’s Letter to the churches in Rome: As we come to this point in Paul’s letter, he is fleshing out what it looks like to love as Christ loved us—there are—as it were—rules for how you and I—as disciples of our Lord—should journey forth, together. And it comes as no surprise that the apostle patterns his teaching upon how Jesus lived—acted—and thought, upon his ministry—his work—his labor—among us....

For the labor of Jesus was focused—and purposeful. Let us hear how Paul will summarize it later, in his letter to the Philippians—in words we know well:

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature^[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

How can we fail to be moved by these words—and especially as we look to this Table? Here—writ large—is a reminder of the humility of Jesus, a mindset—as Paul reminds us, that Jesus did not need to have, given His standing with God—but a mindset he nevertheless adopted, and all for our benefit. Here was the choice he made, and everything Jesus did—his work—his labor, if you will—grew out of it. And so, as we approach this Table, today, let us do so with the sense of awe that our Heavenly Father wishes us to have: Here—before us—is the supreme example of humility—the humility of His Son—and—because of it—the work of the One who has also saved us through his death on a Cross—even, Jesus Christ, the Lord...

But, of course, there is more to the equation, for our labor—what we do—and the thinking behind what we do, friends—matters to God—in fact, it matters a great deal....

This was the impetus, by the way, for the creation of the holiday we will celebrate tomorrow. Labor Day, simply put, is a day to remember the contributions workers have made to the well-

being of our country. For far too long—as the proponents of this holiday suggested—the toil of the average man—and, later woman—had been assumed, even marginalized, when it came to the strength, laws, and prosperity of our great land; and so, inspired by the example of a labor festival he witnessed in Toronto Canada, Peter McGuire, the president of the American Federation of Labor, began to push for a similar festival here. The year was 1882—and it took another 12 years before this festival became a national holiday. By the way, the President who signed this proposal into law, Grover Cleveland, was not from Ohio, despite his last name: He was a native of New Jersey. Hopefully this will come in handy during your next Trivial Pursuit game...

But it is not trivial, what Paul asks of those who would be imitators of Christ:

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good”

Here is a tall order. We cannot say that we genuinely love one another—much less God—if we accommodate injustice, in any shape or form. Here is what Paul is saying. And, yet, how often today do we hear the refrain—within our society today--(quote) “that’s just the way things are”? Friends, at the very heart of the movement to make Labor Day the holiday we will enjoy tomorrow, was the belief that things could be changed within our society through our labor, and—what is more—that there was an imperative to do so. And where does this belief come from? It does not originate in our Declaration of Independence. It has deeper, theological roots, here in Scripture. It rests with something beyond political parties—even though party politics—or, our common life as citizens of this land—is the arena in which it is played out.

How, then, can our common life be changed--transformed? Again—as I said last week—it rests with us—each of us—being the Church of Jesus Christ—within these walls—and also outside of them, and let me now--as I promised last week—unpack this idea by suggesting the kind of mindset you and I should demonstrate to one another—and to the world:

First, a respect for those who serve us.

At heart of our Lord’s work, friends, was the attention—and the concern—he showed for those who were over-looked—and un-appreciated. He respected children—valued women—and he did so at a time when this went against the grain. There has been much progress made in this area of our life together—but there are still glaring inequalities in terms of income and opportunity. What does it say about our country when, on average, the CEO of an S&P 500 company earns 300 times what a middle-level managers makes for the same company? And forget about the people who come to clean the CEO’s office each evening: They typically earn 1/1000th of what he—or she--makes...

What would Jesus say to this?

And I would be remiss to fail to lift up the service of so many others within our society—of those who stand up—and stand tall—for us, as citizens. Here, I think of our military—our police, fire, and emergency services—not to mention our teachers, state and local officials. We must not forget their labor—for us all--tomorrow...

And now, let me lift up a second mindset we can take away from this passage in Romans:
A concern for our “responsibilities”—as much as a concern for our “rights.”

Perhaps I don't have to say too much here, for I think we all know how easy it is to think first about what we are owed—as opposed to what we owe others. How does this impact our life within these walls—and also outside of them? What does it mean when Paul writes: *“Honor one another above yourselves”*—or, as another translation has it: *“Outdo one another in honor?”* Of course, our rights need to be respected—but at what point does this turn into trampling upon the rights of others? What do we owe others—in terms of our respect and our concern? Our Founders designed our society to operate with a healthy balance between rights and responsibilities. Are things out of balance? If so, how can we—as people of faith—demonstrate a more healthy balance in how we live together—in this place—and in our public lives?

And, finally, a third mindset Paul suggests here:
A choice to be more loving—without expecting to be loved in return...

Here is the very essence of the life Jesus led: He freely loved all that he met—there was no expectation, on his end, that he would be loved in return. And how hard is this way of life for us to embrace, well, I don't have to tell you and—in fact—our society would have us believe that love is as contractual as our showing up at 9:00am to work. If we put some love in, well, we should get some love in return. And how often—and even without even realizing it, perhaps—do we let this expectation color our relationships—our friendships? This was not our Lord's expectation—in fact, and as Matthew's gospel reminds us today—it was precisely the opposite: as Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem, he knew that his love would be unrequited—that his words—and his actions—would be even misunderstood and mis-construed. He knew his sacrifice would only be repaid with suffering.

Of course, whenever we think of our Lord, we are talking about the ultimate in behavior and action—the “gold standard,” as it were—but Paul does not set the bar lower for us here—he does not. It is irresponsible for us to read these words from Romans without calling to mind how Jesus put them into word—and action....

Is there any hope, then?

Is there any chance for us to truly improve? If Peter—as Matthew reminds us—could not get his act together—and he was with Jesus for years, saw his miracles, heard his teachings, was as close to him as it is possible to get—what hope is there—for us?

This hope: Jesus completed his labors—and the fruit of those labors, friends, is that you and I are held up by His grace....

Do we fail to understand our Lord?

Do we fail to do what we know is right?

Do we—like Peter—pledge allegiance to Jesus—only to take a knee when he calls us to faithful to Him?

Do we perhaps see our work for the Lord being limited in scope and in scale—as being something we do just on Sunday, perhaps, and, heaven help us, if we should bring our faith into our public life—into our politics....? Speaking personally, I know I do: I'd rather have Jesus think the way I do, friends—I'd rather have him also act like I do, too.... I'm a Peter...

And, yet, it is upon me—and also upon people like you (if you also tend to be like Peter)—that Jesus builds His church, and—through our labor—that Jesus aims to transform our society into the Kingdom of Heaven. A mind-bending thought, isn't it? I mean, for all the times that you and I get in the way of Jesus—like Peter did—you would think God would have given up on us, long ago....

*But here's the thing: God still invites us to get on the way—with Him. He still invites us to join Him on a journey—and—what is more—He is faithful to us along the way—yes, the most amazing things about our life with God—and with One another, friends, is this: **God's love is not contractual. It is not something we earn—or have a right to, either: It is something we are given freely by God instead.** That's what this Table is about: It shows us the labor contract God has with us—and it is one that is made binding by nothing more—and nothing less-than the work—and the blood--of The Son, the Lamb of God.*

But the fact that we come here—today—and as we do the first Sunday of each month—also shows us that God's faithfulness to us is not done—indeed, that it continues, through the bread and the fruit of the vine.

Let us come with the awe God intends us to have

And let us depart with the mindset God wishes for we continue to labor—in His name....

Amen.