

August 31, 2014 - Matthew 17:21-28  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

## Labor of Love

Libraries and post offices are closed tomorrow, banks and some other offices, too. The national holiday known as Labor Day goes back to the late 1880s, as unions and activists brought attention to the working conditions and well-being of laborers. Labor Day offers a day of rest for many in this country.

Or at least it's supposed to. For me, the arrival of Labor Day doesn't bring restful feelings, but rather a ramping up of intensity and stress, a time to struggle into a new schedule and be on top of all kinds of things. Perhaps these feelings about Labor Day come because I have children. Labor Day, or a day near it, marks the beginning of the school year. Or maybe it's what the word "labor" connotes in connection with children. Labor is what you go into after nine months of waiting, the arrival of labor day is an intense and stressful time, the ramping up of contractions, the struggle that is birthing a child.

Labor Day is the day after which everything will get busier—for parents, and not just for parents. After Labor Day there is an increase in intensity for all kinds of people, for church budget and program planners; for elected officials—and people wanting to get elected; for the entertainment industry, with a new fall television and sports seasons; for retailers, maybe offering a final summer sale tomorrow, but certainly looking ahead to the holiday season, such an important time for profit.

Jesus asks, "What will it profit them..."

How did we get so busy, have so much to do and buy? How did we become so stressed and scheduled? Technological innovations probably have something to do with it. Computers and handheld devices can instantly connect you with amazon and e-mail. With access to the word-wide web you can shop and work anywhere, anytime, almost anywhere in the world.

Jesus asks, "What will it profit them, if they gain the whole world..."

In light of Labor Day, in light of modern life, I am struck by Jesus question, by Jesus ancient, and timeless, question. "What will it profit them, if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?"

In our days of labor, we can become so intent upon all we must do, so focused upon all we hope to gain, so caught up with the busy-ness of life, that we lose sight of life—the life to which Jesus calls us, the life Jesus offers us, the life Jesus asks us to take up.

A national holiday is nice, but it's just a day. Jesus offers something more than a day, a way, a mindset, a "setting our minds on divine things." Jesus offers not just a day, but a way—a way of life that follows him, the one who is the way, and the life.

This is life, Jesus says today, this is the way to find your life: Take up your cross.

To modern ears that sounds strange. To find your life, take up your cross? Undergo suffering? To ancient ears it was strange, too; it was strange for Peter. When Peter hears about the suffering Jesus will undergo Peter says, "God forbid it! ... This must never happen." Perhaps even more strange is Jesus' response, "Get behind me Satan!" Wow. That's some rebuke. Every time I read it I'm surprised that Jesus says it! I even feel a little bad for Peter.

I think the strength of Jesus' response is a sign of how very important what he's saying is, how crucial the cross is to Christian identity. I think the strength of Jesus' response signals how carefully we need to attend to his call to take up our cross and follow.

We need to be careful—because there are ways in which this call has been contorted. There have been situations in which people who are being abused have been told, “Well, that’s your cross to bear.” Jesus never said, or would say that, to anyone being abused. I think that statement itself is a form of abuse. Rather, in so many places, the Bible gives voice to the suffering we experience. Like in Jeremiah, the first reading today. Much of that long book is a cry of anguish. It is Biblical to cry out in anguish. Christ himself cried out from the cross.

Christ is on side of those who suffer. He himself suffered. He does not sanction abuse. Jesus would not tell someone that suffering was just their lot—but Jesus also knew that somehow, in the midst of suffering, through it, one could find life. Another kind of life. Christians believe in that other kind of life—another kind of life beyond, and even now.

I think of an article I read about Josephine Finda Sellu, a nurse in Sierra Leone, one of three women on an Ebola nursing staff who did not become infected, who watched colleagues die, and who are still carrying on. Josephine says, “Since the whole thing started, I cried a lot.” But even though neighbors and family members urged her to abandon the hospital, she wouldn’t. She is a force of encouragement and endurance, holding the hospital together. She explains it, “You have not options. You have to go and save others.” She says her job as a healer “is the calling of God.” Or, there’s Kandeh Kamara, a young man who volunteered with Doctors Without Borders. He’s helping fight Ebola, he’s joined the campaign against that terrible disease by doing the dirtiest job: cleaning up the corpses. He says of himself and his fellow-workers, “There are no other people to do it, so we decided to do it just to help save our country.”

Or I think about terrible diseases here in this country, and the people who have them, and the people who care for them, relatives, hospital or home care workers. I think of all the dirty work that is so much a part of all the work we all do, whether you are a volunteer, or a nurse, or a janitor, or a manager, or a parent, or all of these and more, there are things you do that are difficult, but that are also a calling. Like Josephine, and Kandeh, the suffering you choose to take up is saving work.

And in it, even in the midst of the stress and anguish, you can experience that other kind of life. I have heard this, heard people say things like, “Even though everything was so uncertain, I learned about trust.” Or, they’ll say, “There were times it was awful, and yet I experienced a peace that I didn’t even understand, a peace that surpassed understanding.” Or, “In my deep, deep grief, I knew a love that had no bottom.”

This is the way Jesus calls us to take up, this is the life Jesus wants us to find. The gospel is not about telling people they must suffer. Rather, the gospel tells us about Jesus, who knows about suffering, and who invites us to follow him through it, to another kind of life. Like labor, and childbirth, and the new life that comes after. Like the labor movement, whose birth includes the Pullman Strike and the Haymarket Massacre, whose work continues to promote safety, protect the vulnerable, advocate for a living wage.

Jesus offers us a way of living, a way of working, that is a labor of love. It’s much more than a day of rest. God is all for that, too, and not just once a year. God says, observe a day of rest, and do your work, do it with your mind set on divine things. It will make for a busy life—a life that is busy with the imperatives of Romans twelve. Here is our work: hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Take up your cross, and find life.