

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 2, 2018.

As a national holiday, Labor Day is 124 years old. National recognition followed by several years a number of state declarations. The intent of the national holiday, as with the state declarations, was to honor the contributions of workers to the health of our communities and nation. That intent remains, but has broadened in application.

The movement to establish a national holiday was led by a number of unions. The current version of Labor Day recognizes the contributions of all workers, whatever their skills, specialties and affiliations. In other words, the definition of work has broadened to include all labor. Home-makers and auto-makers and art-makers and all sorts of makers should feel honored this weekend.

Whether by design or accident, this morning's lessons speak to the expanded worker definition.

The first lesson is from the Book of Deuteronomy (**Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9**), the fifth book of the Old Testament. Think of Deuteronomy as a review of Books One through Four. The first four books set forth the Hebrew understanding of how things began and unfolded. The books deal with Creation and the special responsibility of the Hebrew people to care for the Creation. These books also deal with the mixed success of carrying out this custodial responsibility.

The goal of Deuteronomy is captured in this morning's Collect. "Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works."

To "bring forth the fruit of good works" was the assignment of the Hebrew people. It is our assignment too. This is basic, so reminders of this assignment are important. That's what we get in our first lesson this morning. "So now, Israel – substitute your own name – give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of our ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything

to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.”

Keeping the commandments is hard work, so there is a natural relationship between the Book of Deuteronomy and Labor Day. The role each plays in this relationship is different, however. Our Labor Day recognizes achievements. That’s a good thing. The Book of Deuteronomy, on the other hand, recognizes that sometimes we don’t achieve all that we are commanded and therefore need some help. And that help is a really good thing too.

This morning’s Psalm (**Psalm 15**) sets a very high bar in terms of obedience. First, there is a question: “Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle?” Followed by an answer: “Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, who speaks the truth from his heart.”

Well, there aren’t many who lead a blameless life, so, is “dwelling in the Lord’s tabernacle” a bar too high? No, consider the second part of this verse: “Who speaks the truth from his heart.” Well, part of the truth from your heart and mine is that we don’t always do the right thing. We need forgiveness.

Sometimes we do great things, and others times we don’t. Our contributions to the welfare of society - our labor, if you will – sometimes fall short. And God understands this. You don’t grant people free will if you’re not prepared to compensate for that free will gone astray.

This is the subject of the Letter of James (**James 1:17-27**), our second lesson this morning. It’s a powerful passage in its honesty, and a beautiful passage in its prescription for doing better. “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.”

Jesus is the “implanted word.” He is God Incarnate. His love is the antidote to our sinfulness. Our labor in obedience to God would have tough sledding without God’s forgiveness. In today’s gospel (**Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**), Jesus says, “Listen to me, all of you and understand.” He goes on to remind us that our

inability to behave is a function of our heart. Don't blame others. Look to our own heart. God is there. Forgiveness is waiting. Accept it with thanksgiving and move on.

Notice that the lesson from James ends with examples of "moving on." "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widow in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Labor Day. There is work that we are doing, and there is work yet to be done. And, as we offer and as we look ahead, we can be confident that God will receive our efforts and use that labor to further His purpose.

We are the Hebrew people. We have been given an assignment, with the expectation that we will pursue that assignment in good faith. But we also recognize that we will need reminders along the way. We will need a second reading of The Law and a third reading and a fourth reading and so on. We need Deuteronomy and we need James and we need Mark. And to the extent that we can honor these expectations and promises, we, in the words of Psalm 15, "shall never be overthrown."

Our final hymn today is "Come, labor on." Each of the five stanzas has a different focus. Stanza one describes you and me standing idle on the harvest plain. Stanza two speaks of the difficult assignment that we have, given the enemy that we face. Stanza three tells us to get up and work hard as an agent of God. Stanza four reminds us of the rewards of such labor. And Stanza five puts an exclamation mark on these rewards: "Servants, well done."

Here's a final thought. It is common these days to acknowledge those in uniform with a simple but heartfelt "Thank you for your service." Labor Day is a time to widen this net of thanksgiving. We meet people every day whose service we sometimes take for granted. Let's be conscious this weekend, and indeed at all times, of those whose work makes our lives better and whose efforts sometimes don't get the positive feedback they deserve and appreciate.

And to all of you for all you do in support of others, which I know is immense, "Thank you for your service." Amen.

