

Worship at home
September 6, 2020
Labour Day Sunday

Call to worship: Psalm 124:8

Prayers of praise, confession, and supplication:

Holy One,
God of grace and glory,
Your creative power is beyond imagining.
Your love is wider than the whole universe;
your mercy, greater than the heights of heaven;
your wisdom, deeper than the sea.
Maker of all things,
you became one of us in Jesus Christ,
and through your Spirit you are present with us in every place and every time.
We worship you, Creator, Christ, and Spirit,
one God, now and always,

Although Christ is among us as our peace,
We confess we are a people divided,
within ourselves and against each other.
We cling to the values and habits of a broken world.
The profit and pleasures we pursue harm creation and the lives of others.
The fears and jealousies we harbour set neighbour against neighbour,
and nation against nation.
The freedom and abundance we enjoy belong mostly to a few,
when they are God's gift to all.

Have mercy upon us, O God.
Heal us, forgive us, and set us free to serve you in the world
as agents of your reconciling love in Jesus Christ.

Assurance of pardon:

The apostle Paul declared that the night is far gone, the day is near. So, let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Know that you are forgiven by God's grace and be at peace with God, with yourself and with each other.¹

Hymn #328 "This is my Father's world"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXtgrsv6uQg>

God's Word read and interpreted:

¹ Prayers of praise, confession, supplication, and the assurance of pardon from worship resource for September 6, 2020 <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

Labour Redeemed

READ GENESIS 1:1-3, 13; 2:8-9, 15.

Our second reading is from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus was teaching about the consummation of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. He began by telling a story about some bridesmaids. Some of whom took both lamps and extra oil to the wedding. Some brought their lamps but didn't think to bring extra oil. The latter group burned through their fuel and had to go buy more. As a result, they missed out on the wedding banquet. The point of the story is clear: "keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." It is a story to encourage diligence in discipleship. And then he told the following story:

READ MATTHEW 25:1a, 14-40.

In modern usage, a talent is a skill; an ability to perform certain tasks. You might have a talent for baking or farming; meaning, that you might possess the skills needed (or, you have the inclination to acquire the skills needed) to bake a cake or to grow food and care for livestock.

This is not the meaning Jesus intended when he told this story. He used a different word when he spoke about the servants' abilities than when he spoke about the master's talents. In its ancient Greek usage, a talent was a measure of weight. The purchasing power of silver or gold depended on its weight. Not unlike in the Yukon gold rush where you could buy boots by weighing out a specified weight of gold. Talents were not abilities or learned skills; talents were measures of wealth.

If the servants piled all the silver or gold, the pile would weigh 8 talents. Such was the wealth of the master's estate.

This is, of course, a well-known story and the interpretation is pretty straightforward: The master is Jesus. The talents are the wealth of the Kingdom of Heaven. The servants are his disciples in any era.

Lest we are tempted to monetize the Kingdom of Heaven, it behooves us to take a minute and reflect on the nature of our Master's talents. What is the wealth of the Kingdom of Heaven? In the stories of creation and in the later half of our gospel reading, scripture describes pretty clearly what are the talents of the Kingdom:

Rocks and trees, skies and seas;
the birds, the morning light, the lily white;
vegetables, animals, and minerals;
earth, air, water, and fire,
stars, the moon, and the sun.

And people.

The hungry, and the thirsty;
the strangers, and the naked;
the imprisoned.

In all forms.

And life.

Work and play;
art and agriculture;
music and industry;
teaching and healing.

And faith.

God's Word, the sacraments, the church;
grace, forgiveness, righteousness.

This is the list that came to my mind. Perhaps you can think of others.

The master entrusted his wealth to his servants, who he knew possessed certain abilities. The abilities differed, yet, no one was incapable of promoting whatever part of the estate was entrusted to them.

The first two servants are positive examples of kingdom labour. They received the talents and used their abilities to promote the master's wealth. They handled their master's treasure with respect and used their skills as diligently as they were able. And they enjoyed communion with their master.

The third servant is the negative example of kingdom labour.

What mattered in the eyes of the master was not how much of an increase was accrued, but the spirit with which the work was done. This servant approached his work from a position of fear, perhaps jealousy, and perhaps misunderstanding. Instead of using their abilities to promote the master's treasure, they spent their energy digging a hole and burying it.

Instead of understanding their work as a partnership in running the estate with a master who knew the value and abilities of all the people in his household – servants included, the third servant saw only a harsh master who, in the servant’s eyes, treated his staff unfairly. However, the master’s response in verse 26 should be read with a sarcastic tone of voice because he wasn’t going on the journey to lie on a beach somewhere, in Jesus’ day trade was booming and it wasn’t uncommon for heads of households to travel for business. For an organization to run, everyone needs to attend to their particular jobs. Not everyone can be CEOs!

The servant also misunderstood that “What is yours” included the original capital as well as the expected increase that, had it not been buried, the talent would have accrued. Even at the small rate of interest the bankers could supply! The master was thus owed the original talent plus the expected increase: “from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” In other words, with no increase, the servant must make up the difference from their personal possessions.

And the partnership was severed.

Imprisoned by fear, jealousy, and misunderstanding, the servant missed sharing in the joy of the Kingdom’s life and beauty.

Tomorrow is Labour Day. Labour Day and, when they still happen, the associated parades, remembers the marches, protests, and strikes of the 1870s in Hamilton, Toronto, and elsewhere that led to the 8-hour workday, fair treatment and payment of workers, and labour unions.

Sadly, such protests and marches were needed in the midst of industrialization to try and counteract the sin which had corrupted the beauty, holiness, and purpose of the act of work itself.

In our story of creation, we begin to know a God who works diligently to create a world of order and life marked by the sacred rhythm of holy work and holy rest.

In the second creation story of Genesis 2, we begin to know a human race that participates in God’s good creative labours. Adam and Eve were tasked with caring for the Garden of Eden. They were to cultivate and plant crops. Prune the fruit trees. Promote the life and dignity of the animal kingdom. In the garden, Adam and Eve worked with God to protect and affirm the goodness of God’s talents.

Work that highlights God is good. It is the necessary corollary for people who share in the joy of the Master by nature of His grace and their faith. This is the promise of the Garden of Eden. It is the promise of the resurrection life when Christ returns.

As the story unfolds, and as most of us can attest by experience, the joy of the divine commission to work for the good of creation and the glory of Creator has been perverted by sin. Instead of promoting beauty, thriving and harmonious life, and God, labour is in danger of becoming a tool of greed and pride. It becomes the means to acquire possessions and status – often at the expense of the world’s resources and the well-being of the population.

Through the ministry of Jesus Christ, God has not only reclaimed His people, God redeems all aspects of creation and life. Through the ministry of Jesus Christ, God redeems labour.

The Master has gone on a journey. By his ascension Jesus lives and continues to work on our behalf through his intercessions at the altar in the heavenly temple. Yet, by his grace exhibited through the cross and in the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit, he invites those who are willing to trust and see with the eyes of faith, to share in the inheritance of the Kingdom.

There is a Latin phrase that comes to us through the Benedictine monastic tradition: *Ora et labora*. It means, “Prayer and work.” St. Benedict understood that, because of the Christian identity as redeemed children of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit, there is no real distinction between sacred and secular. To separate worship from washing the dishes or prayer from teaching a class is to create a false dichotomy. The triune God who has created all that is, is the one in whom we live, move, and have our being. Worship and prayer cannot truly be distinguishable from vacuuming the carpet, planting seed, or programming code. What does separate work and worship is whether or not we are willing to partner with him in the redeemed work of Kingdom labour; to discern what abilities He has given to us and then to use and learn to use those gifts in whatever arena or stage of life God has placed us, to diligently promote the beauty and the goodness of God’s talents. For the good of God’s world and for His glory. Amen.

Hymn #802 “For the fruits of all creation”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbBUFSOkbdM>

Prayers of intercession:

“O God, whose Son worked at a carpenter’s bench in Nazareth, we lift up our prayers in His name for all who labour:

- for those who labour but do not enjoy their work;
- for any engaged in hazardous occupations;
- for those whose work is without meaning to them;
- for the makers of decisions, the creators of ideas, and the managers of industry and business upon whom the welfare of others rests;
- for those whose work is the healing of bodies and the relief of suffering;
- for those whose work takes them to the lonely outposts of sea and land;
- for all who, even as we seek for peace, must learn war until such time as the world is delivered from hatred and fear;
- for those who labour on the land;
- for those engaged in the work of entertainment, the arts, the world of communications and advertising;
- for those whose task it is week by week to minister the Word of God to attentive hearers and to explain something of Thy purposes in the midst of our changing times;
- for those in the world of work who have no work to do.”²

Hymn #648 “I’m gonna live so God can use me”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXRIMKqi8b0>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABUTPedTr_A

Benediction:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and the love of the Father be with you now and forevermore.

Amen.

² A prayer for Labour day, *The Book of Common Order of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 1964, pg. 287.