

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 17-Year A-The Rev. Jennifer B.
Cleveland 9.3.23

It is Labor Day weekend: a weekend that is most notable for barbecues and the last gasp of summer and sales and shopping before school starts up again; a weekend that for those on an island with lots of summer ferry traffic, perhaps brings a little sigh of relief at shorter lines; a 3-day weekend for some, but not all, who work. The history of Labor Day is a little fuzzier than some of our other national holidays: In the late 1800's, many Americans of all ages, including children, worked 12 hours per day, 7 days per week, in conditions that were often unsafe. On September 5, 1882, about 10,000 workers—mostly men—marched in the first Labor Day parade in New York City. According to a *New York Times* report on the event, the parade “was conducted in an orderly and pleasant manner...Nearly all were well-clothed and some wore attire of fashionable cut.” (Reprints in article by Karen Zraick, September 4, 2021, *New York Times*) Those who skipped work that day did so at the risk of losing their jobs.

Many local and state governments officially recognized Labor Day in the first years after that march. Labor Day wasn't the only day focused on defining basic worker's rights. In 1884, two years after that first parade in New York City, the labor movement called for people to strike on May Day (May 1) in a push for an 8-hour work day. It wasn't until 1894, ten years later, when the owner of the Pullman Palace Car Company lowered worker's wages without lowering rents in the company town of Pullman, IL (in the Chicago area). Workers who complained about their new, lower wages were fired, others walked off the job, protests were held, crowds were subdued with firearms, and President Grover Cleveland (no relation to me, to my knowledge) subsequently signed a bill June 28, 1894, proclaiming Labor day a national holiday.

I offer this bare bones sketch because labor—how we spend our days, how we make a living, what we are working for—is so central to the human experience. It is embedded in scripture. On this Labor Day Weekend, the readings actually have a lot to say about labor—God's and ours. In the well-loved excerpt from Exodus, the Israelites are suffering in their work. God has heard their cries of despair and, consequently, calls Moses into action. Over in the gospel, Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, describing the work ahead of him. That is what Peter questions.

We have been hearing a lot about Peter the past couple of weeks: how he stepped out on the water to follow Jesus, how he first recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Last week, Jesus named him *Rock* and gave him the keys to heaven. This week, the *Rock* becomes a *stumbling block*, a tripping hazard, because he doesn't get why Jesus might have to suffer and die. One minute Peter is full of insight, the next minute, not so much. Peter's response to Jesus, “This suffering and death must never happen to you!” is so familiar. When someone we love is ill or struggling or in pain, that's the response. We think, we say, we pray: “I will do all in my power to make sure that you do not experience this harsh difficulty.” We do not want those we love to have to work through suffering and hardship. Peter's wish is our wish, so why does Jesus react so strongly to Peter?

We have to go back to the beginning of Jesus's ministry, back to those days in the wilderness. If you remember, Satan says something similar: "If you are the Son of God, then surely you deserve an easier path. Save yourself" But Jesus's response then and now, to Peter, is, "No." And it isn't just that he says that he isn't going to save himself, but he affirms one of the most incomprehensible aspects of this life of faith—the part that has never been popular for real reasons—in saying, "Following me does not guarantee safety and protection. In fact, it means taking even more risks for love." Peter wants Jesus to be safe and secure (a natural desire), but for Jesus to be safe and secure, he would have had to let go of his passion for healing those around him. He would have had to give up on sitting at certain tables with certain people. He would have had to have been willing to change the way he lived.

Jesus is clear that he is going to die *not* because God had mapped out a questionable plan of atonement, but because his life work, his labor, involves nothing more, nothing less than birthing the fullness of the community of heaven into being on this earth. Jesus's labor, one with God's, was and is to birth restored, reconciling relationship into being. Here, in this gospel, he quite clearly also articulates the labor—or work or mission or way forward, if you will—of his followers: to join in that labor.

Back in Exodus, when God appears to Moses in the burning bush, God is very upfront with Moses about the work ahead: to bring the Hebrew people out of slavery into freedom. To liberate. God's labor is never work for the sake of work. It's not wasted or transactional. There's no "I'll do this for you, if you do that for me" or "I'll give you this in exchange for that." God is laboring for something bigger—restored relationship, full healing of the world—and it is into this big job, this big work, that Moses is invited, persuaded, cajoled, urged into joining. I tend to think he was happy enough tending to the sheep and living with his in-laws' family. He had made his home and, it appears, would have been content to stay there for the remainder of his days. I hate to suggest that God calls us all out of retirement, but it is Labor Day weekend, after all.

Moses asks an important question, perhaps one of the most important from our vantage point: Who am I to join in this work? What do I have to offer. God does not respond by listing all of the ways Moses is prepared to take this work on. All God says is, "I will be with you." It is a bit of a *non sequiter* and how we know that God's way of doing business is completely different from what we are accustomed to: because by relying on Moses and Peter and other humans over the years who gather for worship and prayer and then go forth, trying to figure it out and bring about the community of heaven in everyday ways, God seems hell bent on inefficiency. But that's how it is.

We are working our way through Romans and while today's reading is from Romans 12, back in Romans 8, Paul describes God's labor this way: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, and not only the creation, but we ourselves." Labor is work. Labor is joyous. Labor involves blood, sweat, and tears. Labor is hard. Labor and delivery, in actuality and metaphorically, are risky. A matter where life and death hang in the balance. So this weekend, perhaps our

charge is to remember and pray for the overemployed, the underemployed, the documented and the undocumented, wish one another a risky, joyous, hope-filled, generous Labor Day, filled with God's big vision for us and for this world—not just tomorrow, but the day after and the day after and the day after, and enjoy that barbecue.