

***“Hard Labor”***  
***Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Matthew 16:24-28***  
***Salem United Methodist Church***  
***September 4, 2016***  
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Labor Day is not a religious holiday, but as Christians we called to labor as servants of Christ not just on the job, but in all that we do.

Some are more successful at laboring than others. Here is the story of one person who was not successful at laboring. His first job was in an orange factory, but he couldn't concentrate on the same old boring rind, so he got canned. Then he worked in the woods as a lumberjack, but he just couldn't hack it, so he was given the axe. Next he worked in a car muffler factory, but that was exhausting. He tried being a barber, but just couldn't cut it. So he decided to become a professional tennis player, but it wasn't his racket. He tried being an electrician, but found the work shocking. Then he took a job as an elevator operator, but found the job had its ups and downs so he got the shaft. He decided to become a banker, but he lacked interest and maturity, and finally withdrew from the job. His next job was working in a shoe factory, but his boss thought he was a loafer, and gave him the boot. So he became a barista in a coffee shop, but quit because it was always the same old grind. So finally he retired and found he was the perfect fit for that job! This humor is in honor of all who labor.

Laboring can be hard work. No matter if our job requires physical labor or mental strain; we can come home tired, ready for some fun and relaxation. Hard labor is the reason our nation has an annual celebration of laborers and their achievements. The history of Labor Day begins during the height of the Industrial Revolution in the late 1800s when the average American worked 12-hour days and a seven day work week just to be able to support their families. Children as young as 5 or 6 worked in the mills, factories, and mines for pennies a day. In addition workers did not have access to fresh air and sanitary facilities, nor were they given work breaks. This kind of work was and still is in parts of the world hard labor. In the later part of the nineteenth century, labor unions formed to work for justice in working conditions and higher wages. Different labor unions in different parts of the country suggested that there be a holiday honoring those who labor. Factories would close and labor unions would have parades and demonstrations. In 1894, Congress passed an act making the first Monday in September to be a legal holiday to honor all American laborers. One child when told that laborers were given the day off on this national holiday declared that the day then should be called Unlabor Day!

Laboring is not just for humans. As we have witnessed from our scriptures today God is a God who labors. We know that God created the universe and all that is in it. Perhaps this was hard labor, but according to Genesis 1, all God had to do was speak and creation happened. Yet, scripture tells us that after six days of speaking and creating, God rested on the seventh day. Even God needed a day of rest after laboring for six. In Psalm 139 we see God being constantly vigilant. Listen to these verbs that reflect God's work in our lives. God examines us, knows us, knows when we sit and stand. God comprehends our plans, studies our every move, is familiar with all our ways. God knows what we are going to say and do. God surrounds us. God is all around us, beside us, in front of us, bringing up the rear, underneath us, and above us. God places God's hand on us. God knits us together while we were in our mother's womb. Have you ever had to care for a baby, a loved one, or a pet 24/7? It is exhausting! Yet, God neither slumbers nor sleeps. God is constantly vigilant. That is hard labor!

Jesus gives us many more examples of hard labor. His teachings, his healings, and working with his disciples who had difficulty understanding all of their training was exhausting for the human part of Jesus. He often rested from his labors by stealing away to quiet places to reconnect with God. We even know of a time when he took a nap on the boat during a storm. The laboring of Jesus took him all the way to the cross where he did the hard labor for us. His job was to sacrifice his life for humanity. He

suffered excruciating pain so that our labor of sinning could be lightened and forgiven. His death and resurrection gives us an eternal reward for our labors on earth.

This is what Jesus was teaching his disciples in the Gospel lesson today. In the proceeding passage, Jesus is telling them of the labor of his upcoming death and resurrection. The disciples are having trouble accepting this. So Peter speaks for them by saying, "Never!" Then Jesus works at helping them understand that his sacrifice is necessary. In addition, he teaches his disciples that we also have a responsibility to labor. This morning we read from two different versions from Matthew so we could hear what our responsibility is as disciples of Jesus from these two different perspectives. Many of us have heard that we are to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. This could be interpreted literally that we are to make a life-sized wooden cross and carry it with us everywhere we go. That really would be hard labor. Some interpret this passage that when pain and suffering come our way it is the cross we are to bear. Neither represents what Jesus was working with his disciples.

Eugene Peterson gives us a different perspective in his interpretation, *The Message*. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am." Jesus is telling us we don't have to labor so hard. He's the boss. All we have to do is follow his lead. Then he states, "Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how." When we think we can't go on, Jesus is there to show us how to persevere and to make our burden lighter. Jesus continues, "Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self." We learn more about ourselves when we give of ourselves. Giving of one's self can make one tired, but it usually is a good tired. When we give of ourselves, our time, and our resources, we receive more than we give. Giving has its own rewards. Jesus states that when we don't give out of self-sacrifice, we will lose ourselves. He asks, "What could you ever trade your soul for?" We can work as hard as we want to acquire everything in the world, but none of it will help us. We are to give as Jesus gives without counting the cost. That's the hard labor offered to us, yet those who serve Jesus know that when we put him in charge, the labor is easy. But this kind of laboring requires on-the-job training. We learn as we do it and when we mess up, Jesus forgives and gives us another chance to get it right.

Several weeks ago I shared John Wesley's three practical rules that he developed for his small groups. These rules were to assist the participants in "working out our salvation." They were not working to earn their salvation which is a free gift from God through Jesus, but they were growing in their understanding how to live as disciples of Jesus. Our salvation is a free gift from God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. "Working out our salvation" means growing in understanding how we are to live as disciples of Jesus. The three rules are: "Do no harm. Do Good. And stay connected to God." I asked this congregation to write on posters how they can keep these three rules. Here is what was written.

Do No Harm: Watch your words. Respect all of God's creation. Treat others with respect. Hold your temper.

Do Good: Donate blood. Help a neighbor. Serve others. Help the homeless. Help others. Serve at The Lord's Table (soup kitchen).

Stay Connected with God: Prayer. Going to church. Fellowship (with other Christians). Bible Study. Doing Daily Devotions. Volunteering at The Lord's Table.

What else would you add to the lists? Some of these are harder to do than others. Each has its challenges. With each we can be tempted to do something else. Moses instructed the people before they entered The Promise Land that they had a choice between doing what was good and doing what was wrong. Each is labor intensive, but the outcome is far different. There is a quote that is attributed to John Wesley that encourages us to choose to do good. It states: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, as long as ever you can." Living these words 24/7 can be hard labor or easy labor. It all depends on who we put in the driver's seat! Ourselves or Christ?

