

“Labor of Love”  
Deuteronomy 32:1-4;  
Romans 12:3-18; John 6:27-38

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Tomorrow is Labor Day. I tend to forget holidays most of the time, but this time I remembered that tomorrow is Labor Day and it might be a good time to think about what work is all about. I think Labor Day is designed to remind us of the labor of those who have gone before us, on whose shoulders we stand. We lead the lives we have today in part because of the work they have done. We recognize that many people are laboring today to help us have the lives we lead, and that we engage in labor that enables our society to move forward.

I can't help but think about all the work that's done and recognize that sometimes we have misguided work, as well. Not all work that's been done has helped us move ahead. It led me to consider how we think about work and what it is, and how we can think about it in this coming year as we go forward. It is an appropriate time in some ways because, even if we're not going back to school or starting teaching again, we have that sense of fall starting. It's a time when we think about people going back to work, even if we don't have to ourselves. We come back off vacations, or off sabbaticals, or off a time where it feels like summer is a little more relaxed. If nothing else, we have to prepare for winter. We don't have to do quite as much as we used to—not everyone now has to make sure they have their wood in. But it's a time when we recognize a change in season. It's a time when we look forward and think about the work that's being done. So it's an appropriate day.

What is it about work? As I looked up the Greek word for work, it talked about how we use our energy, how we use our capability, what we do with what we have. Where is it that we give our energy, give what we have to give, give of ourselves? How do we decide what that is?

Some folks who have looked at this question before bring up the word “vocation.” So the idea is that as we begin to think about where we give our energy, we try to give our energy where it matches with the gifts that God has given us. In Romans, Paul talks about those gifts that are different for each of us and how we use them in a way that is good for the world.

Frederick Buechner has given us this famous quote about vocation: “Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need.” It gets me thinking about where it is that something arises out of me that matches the need of the world.

Thomas Merton, who was a contemplative monk, said this: “Discovering vocation means not scrambling towards some prize that's just beyond my reach, but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice out there calling me to be something I'm not. It comes from a voice inside calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original self-hood given to me by God.” In his

quote, there's a sense that God has given us this life to live, and there is a self-hood each of us has been given that we can live out.

Perhaps another way to look at it is to think about people in your life who you feel have shown you a sense of vocation. I remember, when I was growing up, I worked on my uncle's ranch. Sometimes it was a little rough because he was so into being a rancher. He was clear about that's who he was and it just made sense to him. And when it didn't make sense to us young boys it sometimes frustrated him. But it was clear that's who he was. He had grown up in a place where that's what he learned. He could have felt trapped in that, but I didn't see that in him at all. What I saw in him was a love of what he did. He engaged in it, always trying to figure out how to do it a little bit better. So he was one example for me.

Another person who came to mind was a friend of mine named Joe. His life was about education. Particularly he wanted to bring critical thinking into classrooms, starting in grade school and all the way up. That's just who he was. He was always speaking in ways that helped us who were around him think better.

Those are two examples out of my own life. I would like to invite you to think for a moment about who it is in your life, somebody across the span of your life, who has embodied a sense of vocation for you? What was it about them that helped you see that their life was a vocation?

When I was thinking back on people, it gave me a chance to think of people who, in a way, were inspiring in my own life because of how they embodied that sense of vocation. Their gladness was somehow fulfilling a deep need of the world. As we think about that idea of vocation, it may not surprise you that I began to think about the greatest example in my mind of one who had a vocation, and that would be Jesus. It would be a little strange not to think of him in this context. But think about what his vocation was. One place it is written is John 12:47, where it says "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world." Jesus is talking about his vocation, where his deep gladness meets the world's deepest need. He comes to the world to save it, to heal it, to redeem it. Then we can begin to think about what shape that takes.

One of the things that came to my mind is that in coming he revealed something about us. One of things he revealed about us is how hard a time we have dealing with someone who comes with a new message. In Matthew 11:12, it talks about how from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered under violence and the violent take it by force. It goes on to talk about how all the prophets have been thrown out or killed or somehow not listened to. The way they are not listened to is usually by trying to get rid of them. Isn't that the very same thing that we (humankind) ended up doing with Jesus? Caiaphas said it: "Do you not understand that it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed?" (John 11:9). There's a sense in which Jesus, in his coming to redeem us, helps us reflect on how we deal with the world and how easy it is for that to be the way of

violence. He invited us to do something different. A number of times he invites us to not try to destroy our enemies, but to love them, as it says in Romans. He comes, then, not only to reveal a way that we often try to deal with the world, but to offer us a different way.

I would be a little surprised if you couldn't tell me what I'm going to say is the different way. As often as we talk about love, it's almost impossible to talk about Christ telling us a different way without talking about love. He invites us to love. Paul says it again: let your love be genuine.

So when Jesus is teaching us and inviting us to follow him, I think he's inviting us to recognize that we have both the gift of capabilities that we can use in a vocation, that we can bring to the world to help make it a better place, and we have a way of doing that. I would call that way the Christian vocation. The way of following Christ is to let our love be genuine. He goes on through a list of characteristics of what that vocation looks like. It's not so much exactly what we do; it's how we do it that he's helping us see.

Jesus came and his labor of love was to save us, to reveal to us some of our own struggles, and to invite us into a new way of life. He goes on to say that by eating the bread and drinking the wine and taking him in, we are taking this new way of life in. I think in many ways it's something that's been deep within us anyway because that's what God created us for. He's inviting us to return to the very person God made us to be, inviting us to let our love be genuine by taking in who he is, the wonder of God's love for us that allows us to be.

At my daughter's wedding, I realized that one of the ways that it's so important for me to be able to think about loving anyone else, or for someone in a marriage situation to love someone else, is to know we're loved. It's the love of God given us in Jesus Christ that enables us to love one another and to show that love.

I've tried to say this a lot of different ways. Another way that it's said, and maybe a little plug for the book that we're going to look at on Sunday evenings, is from *Anam Cara* by John O'Donohue. He says, "If you can love what you do, then you will do it beautifully. You might not love your work at the beginning, yet the deeper side of your soul can help you bring the light of love to whatever you do. Then regardless of what you do, you will do it in a creative, transforming way."

It is as we allow the love of God to work in our lives that that love can come out and become a transformative and creative energy that transforms what we do. So as we think about work, think about what is our labor of love. How do we bring forth who God made us to be and do it in the way that Christ calls us to do it? It's an invitation to do exactly what Buechner is talking about—to have our deepest gladness meet the world's deepest needs. Amen.