

Back to Work

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

September 6, 2015
Labor Sunday

“So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” -- Genesis 2:3

If you were wondering whether the title of this morning's sermon is about me, the answer is no.

While it is true that I've been back to work since the beginning of this past week, I wasn't thinking of my own work schedule – or anyone else's – when I landed on this morning's title.

I was thinking, rather, of getting back to work in the sense that our reading from Genesis portrays it – way back, back at the beginning – and that's why I've taken as my text the third verse of the second chapter of Genesis, “So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

And as you heard me read earlier in the service, the preceding verse also speaks of God's work in creation: “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.”

Now, these two verses taken together are the basis for the observation of the Jewish Sabbath, that seventh day of the week – Saturday, not Sunday – on which religious Jews abstain from work. Once upon a time, we Christians also observed the Sabbath, and I know that most of you remember, as I do, what Sundays were like forty or fifty years ago. If you were a child, they were deadly dull. Nothing happened, nothing was open, and lots of things we were normally allowed to do we weren't allowed to do on a Sunday. If you were an adult, however, the Sabbath was blessedly quiet, peaceful, and restful – exactly as Scripture portrays it.

But as much as I'd like to preach this morning on the importance of Sabbath – another sermon for another day – I want instead to focus our attention on the reason for Sabbath, which is work. Right there at the beginning of the Bible – and the beginning of everything – is work. God's work, the work of creation. It's remarkable that at the very beginning of the most important story in human history – the story of salvation, which is what the Bible comes down to – is work. And that suggests to me that the writers and editors of Scripture were smart enough to put first things first, and among those first things is work.

So that's our theme on this Sunday before Labor Day. This Sunday used to be called Labor Sunday, and it was invented in 1909, a few years after Labor Day itself was invented.

And, like all holidays, they're both inventions. We made them up at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century because we sensed a need, which is where all of our holidays begin. We sensed a need to recognize that the world as we know it is largely the product of labor – God's labor, as Genesis tells it, and human labor, which we all experience – and that we need to pause, every now and then, to reflect on what it means to work: What is it? Who does it? What does it accomplish? What's it for?

Those are the sorts of questions Labor Day and Labor Sunday are meant to give us time to reflect on, and so I want to take a few minutes this morning and the next two Sundays to ask us to think about, feel about, pray about, and sing about work, because work is a very big deal.

For those of us who are still part of the roughly 155 million working Americans, work constitutes about a third of our lives. And when you remember that another third of our lives is given over to sleep, that means that work really constitutes half of our waking lives. So work isn't incidental to us; it's very much who we are, a topic I'm going to return to later in this series.

And there's growing evidence to indicate that work is claiming even more than half of our waking lives because more and more of us are devoting more than eight of our 16 waking hours a day to work.

Consider commuting, for example. Employers, of course, insist that commuting is not part of work, but for those of us who have to get to and from work, commuting is indeed part of work; it's one of the many demands that work makes on us. The average one-way daily commute in America today is 25.5 minutes. That's 51 minutes a day most of us spend just getting to and from work. So that's the greater part of another hour claimed by work. So now we've got just over seven hours of our day left for ourselves, our families, our neighborhoods, and God.

How long does it take you to get ready for work? Rolling out of bed, getting showered and dressed, feeding the kids, the spouse, and the dog, getting everyone out the door, in the car, or on the bus – another hour, at least? That's more time largely given over to work because the routine is very different on our non-working days. So now we've got six hours left for the rest of our lives.

And how many of us bring home work from the office, work late, or work overtime to earn a little extra cash? A recent study showed that more and more of us Americans are choosing to work extra hours rather than take vacation time, largely because wages have stagnated relative to the cost of living, and we need that extra money to stay afloat.

So maybe four or five hours a day are left to us after we're done with the work someone pays us to do, and then we've got to do the work of keeping ourselves and our families fed, in clean clothes and a clean house, and the weeds somewhat under control.

So is it any wonder, then, that we fall into bed exhausted after a couple of hours of TV at night? Is it any wonder that many of us resent the demands our jobs make on us, and the toll those jobs take on our bodies, our spirits, and our relationships?

It's certainly no wonder to me, and it's easy to see, I think, where our negative attitude toward work might come from. Work, in our society, with all its so-called labor-saving devices, has become a dirty word; and we need to get over that, because work is too important to be held, as far as possible, at arm's length.

Once upon a time, most of us worked for ourselves. Even serfs in the Middle Ages knew that a percentage of the crops they were growing and the herds they were tending would support themselves and their families. But that changed when machine power replaced muscle power as the primary source of energy, and more and more of us work for others now who tell us what to do, how to do it, and for how long. The work we once did and took pride in has been alienated from us, which was one of Karl Marx's principal critiques of capitalism – it alienates a worker from the work, thereby stripping human beings of an essential part of their ability to shape their own lives according to their own lights. Gotta get a job, gotta get a job, gotta get a job – any job, so long as it makes money – that's what I hear from young people who are sounding increasingly desperate to me.

But imagine, for a moment, if you will, in the light of this morning's reading, what it

might mean to strip God's work from God's identity. Who would God be if we alienated God's work as creator from the God we know and love? That's essentially what Big-Bang science does. It says that the world is no longer creation; it's nature or the environment or the cosmos and it just happened. It – whatever it was – went bang, and where there was nothing before now there's something. I don't know about you, but that sounds more like magic than science to me. It simply replaces poof with bang.

Our religion teaches something else. It teaches work. It teaches that everything we know and experience, including ourselves, is the result of work, and that that work is good. There's nothing magical about it. The world may be a place of enchantment, but its presence is not the result of magic. God worked to get us here, God works to keep us here, and it's our job, having been created in God's image and likeness, to live as God's co-creators, and we do that through work.

Work, as I said earlier, is not a dirty word. It's why we were put here on earth, and it's only when we become alienated from our labor – alienated not by God but rather by social, political, and economic systems that we create and sustain – that our work becomes pointless and wearisome. And for people to live over half their waking lives alienated from over half their waking selves is to produce a damaged and conflicted world. Peace, as the Hebrew word *shalom* indicates, means “wholeness,” and there will be no wholeness, no peace until we address the injustices of alienating work.

This past Wednesday, our reading group here at church had a lively discussion about the autobiography of Iris Origo who, with her husband, Antonio, and about 50 tenant farmers and their families, turned a neglected, barren river valley in Tuscany into a fertile and productive estate. One of the many changes those farmers had to live through during the early decades of the last century was mechanization, and although productivity went up and manual labor went down when machines replaced human and animal muscle power, one farmer, at least, recognized that something important had been lost in that transition. Here's what he said about the old ways of farming: “We worked from dawn to dusk, and sang as we worked. Now the machines do the work – but who feels like singing?”

That's what true work is supposed to do – make you feel like singing. Perhaps that's why the church's liturgy – which means “the work of the people” -- has always been accompanied by singing. This work that you and I are engaged in on any Sunday morning – preserving and telling the old, old story – is that not joyous work? Is it not a glorious and wonderful task to remind ourselves, week after week, how much God loves us and all creation, and to have the privilege of bearing that message into a world that is so desperately alienated from God and from itself? I believe it is, or I wouldn't be in this line of work. Then, as the old gospel hymn puts it, How can I keep from singing?