

Sermon September 6, 2020

Pentecost 14, Proper 18

On this Labor Day weekend, I would like to offer a meditation on the hymn **Come labor on**, which in normal times we would be singing. As we continue to define what is normal, I wrestle with the hymn and its meaning for us today.

Come, labor on.

**Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain,
while all around us waves the golden grain?**

**And to each servant does the Master say,
“Go work today.”**

Work, what is the work that the Master is sending us out to do?

Our readings today give us some examples.

In our reading from Exodus, the text describes the Passover and how God wants it to be remembered. “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”

Ordinance is defined as a ritual or liturgy.

Liturgy is often called the work of the people.

Our work could be to do what we are doing here today. Our celebration of every Eucharist in which we proclaim:

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast

This is the Christian observation of the perpetual ordinance that God declared in the book of Exodus.

Ordinance is also defined as law.

What are our laws?

St. Paul in the letter to the Romans makes it clear:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Love has long been a word which we toss around casually, it's a throwaway word. I'd love to go dinner, I love that song, love that movie. Scripture which shows us the world as it is and the world as it could and should be, defines love much differently. I will cite one reference, that from 1st Corinthians 13 which you could no doubt recite with me:

“Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Our work, our labor in the harvest plain is to love one another.

Come, labor on.

**The enemy is watching night and day,
to sow the tares, to snatch the seed away;
while we in sleep our duty have forgot,
he slumbered not.**

Who is the enemy?

From the time we were little children we learned the enemy was the devil who goes by many names: Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, the Antichrist, Father of Lies, Mephistopheles, Prince of Darkness.

Every language and culture have its names and traditions for the enemy.

Popular culture has varied in its approach to the devil, to evil. Sometimes we fear it, other times we take it lightly, or make fun of it. Throughout most of my life I tended to scoff at preachers who spoke often of Satan. It seemed to me that those who gave so much attention to Satan were actually spreading Satan's lies at worst or had a childish knowledge of scripture at best. Perhaps.

Today popular literature, movies, music, and television, are obsessed with Satan, evil, and darkness. The children of light fighting the children of darkness. A quick scroll through Netflix, Amazon, or your television guide will bear me out. In these art forms it is often difficult to tell who is in which camp.

Is art mirroring life or life mirroring art? The perpetual question.

St. Paul tells us to “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...”

Can we identify the works of darkness, can we tell who is in which camp?

I think that putting people in camps is the beginning of the work of darkness. When we define people by race, creed, gender, gender identity, economic class, or any other of the myriad ways we humans separate ourselves from each other, we create the OTHER, the enemy. Those people, them, not our kind, un-American, not Christian, foreigners, straight, gay, liberals, conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, left-wing, right-wing. Putting people in camps leads to division, division leads to fear, fear leads to hate, hate leads to evil thoughts which lead to evil acts.

Every day brings new examples of evil acts. The pandemic, economic collapse, and racial tensions are like gasoline on a fire already out of control. Our nation argues about politics and religion. I think that instead of one informing the other it is our prejudices, preconceived notions, fears, and divisions that inform both our politics and our religion. The enemy is snatching the seed away. We have turned our back on true politics which used to be defined as the people’s business. Another fuller definition of the Greek word *leitourgia* from which we get the word liturgy is work **for** the people, or public service. Public service has been supplanted with what’s in it for me. Instead of listening to well-reasoned, logical arguments we have belief in every crackpot conspiracy theory that shows up on our so-called smart phones. No one is immune from these lies, the people who spread them are very clever and it is very easy to hit the share button or repeat the lie without verifying the truth. People make careers of spreading lies and others make careers of debunking those lies. Neither is the Church exempt. Too often we trade the hard truth of the Gospel for feel good religion that leaves us happy. Work is hard, love is hard, the Gospel is hard.

Come, labor on.

Away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear!

No arm so weak but may do service here:

by feeblest agents may our God fulfill

his righteous will.

How do we do away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear?

It involves confrontation something that most of us avoid like, well like a pandemic.

Church people are not good at conflict or confrontation. We are very, very good at conflict avoidance which only creates more problems. Today's lesson from Matthew's account of the Gospel shows us the way. Jesus says "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone" Note, Jesus doesn't mention public shaming, humiliating people in interviews or starting flame wars on social media. He says when you are alone and only if this doesn't work are you to bring one or two others as witnesses to the conversation. No group texts or "reply all" emails, no ganing up or bullying, but instead a personal conversation.

Our technology, wonderful though it can be, too often allows for thoughtless words and actions. We lob stones from the darkness instead of airing our differences in the plain light of God's new day. When we speak to one another as persons, rather than as members of one camp or the other, we cease to view each other as OTHER. When that happens, our doubts and fears dissipate, faith grows, loves grows.

Come, labor on.

Claim the high calling angels cannot share—

to young and old the Gospel gladness bear;

redeem the time; its hours too swiftly fly.

The night draws nigh.

St. Paul tell us that now is the moment for us to awaken from sleep. Our work is not the work of the angels, it is we who have been charged to bear witness to the Gospel, we cannot remain silent.

We tend to put politicians, sports figures, actors, or celebrities on a pedestal. Too often when held up to the standard of love as set in 1st Corinthians they fall short, as do we all. Sometimes though, people go about their business quietly, doing good without asking for public recognition. We only learn of their deeds when they are gone. That was true of Chadwick Boseman the actor best known for playing the Black Panther. He died August 28th of colon cancer at the young age of 43. I am not going to tell you about him now, if you don't know who he is, look him up as your homework.

In the closing credits of the movie Dark Panther, Boseman's character King T'Challa of Wakanda gives a speech to the United Nations General Assembly. During which he pledges to share with the world Wakanda's resources and technologies which had up till now been secret. He continues:

Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we, as brothers and sisters on this earth, should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe."

This speech brings to mind St. Paul's words in Romans 8: nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Come, labor on.

No time for rest, till glows the western sky.

till the long shadows o'er our pathway lie,

and a glad sound comes with the setting sun.

"Servants, well done."

Amen