

Faith in the Workplace
Genesis 1:26-28; Colossians 3:23-24

Rev. Dr. Nancy L. Lynn

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Did you know that the first ever public Labor Day celebration almost didn't happen? According to U.S. Department of Labor, the scene was lower Manhattan, the date September 5, 1882. Starting early in the morning, crowds began to gather along Broadway in anticipation of the first Labor Day parade - an event billed as a "Demonstration of Labor, Mammoth Festival, Parade and Pic-Nic." The plan was that laborers and tradesmen from throughout the New York City area would gather to march through the wealthiest and most powerful corridor of the City. William G. McCabe, a member of the Local No. 6 of the International Typographers union, had been chosen to be the Grand Marshall of the parade, but when the morning came, McCabe had serious doubts about the parade's success. The parade was scheduled to start at 10:00, but at 8:30, hardly anyone was there. Even his own union members hadn't shown up. Soon, the organizers were urging him to just cancel the whole event.

Nonetheless, McCabe was determined the parade would happen. He sent the organizing team into the crowds to convince others to join them. As parade time approached, McCabe had what he called a "straggling mob" of about 200 men ready to go, but no one was moving. There was no music to accompany them.

Then, just at 10:00, Matthew Maguire, one of the organizers, came running, shouting that 200 members of the jeweler's union from Newark would be there soon - and they had a band! Once the jewelers arrived, McCabe started the parade. It was not the grand event he had envisioned, and laborers, the very people the day was meant to celebrate, taunted and jeered at them as they passed. But then, after about a mile, four hundred members of the bricklayer's union merged into the parade from a side street. After that, group after group joined them. Richard P. Hunt writes, "The decorative masons turned out in yellow aprons; the journeymen horseshoers wore "gold-fringed silk aprons of various colors, in which red horseshoes were woven"; most of the longshoremen were in checkered jumpers; and the German framemakers union arrived with "huge axes on their shoulders and thick leather aprons over their thighs." Soon, there were thousands of marchers and multiple bands. The parade was a huge success! And that is the history behind the holiday we celebrate this weekend to honor American workers and the immeasurable contributions they have made to the U.S. economy and growth.

Some years later, at the 1909 convention of the American Federation of Labor, the Sunday before Labor Day was declared Labor Sunday - a day dedicated to the spiritual and educational elements of the labor movement. So, from very early on, we have had in our country an understanding that there is a relationship between faith and the work we do. And that is the real topic of today's sermon.

There is not a single one among us who doesn't do some kind of work. You may be employed in a factory or do research in a lab, volunteer for the church or go to school. Whatever you do, you are putting your hands and heart and mind into some kind of labor. So, how does our

faith shape our work? What can we draw from in our faith to give us a firm foundation for the work we do?

In a short article entitled “How Faith Affects Our Work”, Rev. Timothy Keller, a Presbyterian pastor and prolific author on this topic, identifies four ways that, if we are intentional, faith can impact our choice of work, how we work, and why we work.

First of all, Keller says, “the Christian faith gives us a moral compass, an inner GPS giving us ethical guidance that takes us beyond merely the legal aspects or requirements in any situation.” Right now, we are seeing practices in the social and political spheres of our lives that many of us find shocking and disturbing. Inevitably, those impact our work lives, as well. With so much upheaval, every day we are faced with questions we never expected to be asking. How do I respond to the conflict in Gaza? How do I expect my employer to respond? What is my ethical responsibility regarding the immigrants I work with or those who live next door? Do I support them or the decisions of my government? I have a colleague or friend who has a trans child and is very angry that U of M has discontinued gender-affirming treatment of minors. What do I think about that?

These, and so many other questions we have before us right now, come down to morality. Thankfully, while the moral framework that has provided stability for our society in the past seems to be slowly collapsing, as Christ-followers, we take our moral framework from the gospels. Love God, love your neighbor, welcome the stranger, feed the poor, care for the weak, lift up the marginalized, make peace, and seek first the kingdom of God. In other words, do good or, as we Methodists say, "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, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can".

So, when in the course of our work, whatever it may be, we are faced with difficult questions, challenging information, uncomfortable requests, what guides us in responding are God’s kingdom values as we see them in the life and teachings of Jesus.

A second way Keller names in which our faith shapes our work is that as Christ-followers, we are not dependent on external measures of success to assess our personal value or define our personal identity. We find our identities and our sense of worth in him. Excelling at work or school, climbing the social ladder, being wealthy, going to the best schools, being popular, and so on are measures of success that we don’t need to consider. Our worth is in all ways grounded in the fact that we are children of God, beloved by God.

We find this in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. The church there was being pulled away from Jesus’ teachings by two schools of thought. The Jews were very tied to the law. The Greeks were deep into philosophical ideas. Paul considered both false teachings and encouraged the Colossians to find their identities only in Christ. He was the source of life-giving hope for them, and if they stayed focused on him, other ways of thinking would lose their appeal.

Similarly, in the passage we just heard from Genesis, we are reminded that God created us in God’s own image to be co-workers and co-creators with God. So, one question we might ask is “how does my work align with or support God’s work?” To answer that question, we need to be able to articulate what God’s work is. How would you explain God’s work in the world? There

are many ways to answer the question, and it can be as complex of an answer as you want it to be. But, for our purposes, let's stay with something simple. We can say that God's work is loving and caring for the world and building a world community that is just and compassionate.

God does that work through us. Genesis tells us that God gave the care and keeping of all of Creation to us, making us stewards of every living thing, including each other. The work we do becomes part of God's greater work in the world when it is done with love and caring and contributes to the good of human beings.

Some work we do obviously fit that description - medical professions, food-related work, caring for someone who is lonely or grieving, teaching, raising children. Yet, you may be doing work that you don't easily see as contributing to God's work in the world. Maybe your work seems too analytical or too mundane, too isolated from others or too focused on serving a corporation's values rather than God's.

Virtually any work can support God's work for the greater good. What doesn't support God's work is anything that is destructive of life, of hope, of love. Work that spreads hate, that serves evil, that leads to death because God's work always affirms life, is life-giving, and is rooted in love and compassion.

If you are questioning how what you do aligns with God, consider asking yourself some fundamental questions. What is your purpose in what you do? Who benefits from your work? What is the purpose of human life? What makes for a good life? Your answers to these questions may help you to see the sacred value of the work you do or lead you to offer your knowledge and love to the world in some other capacity.

One more thought for this Labor Day. It's really a question. In what ways is your life enriched by the work of others? Again, consider this in the broadest understanding of what work is. We may not have thousands of people marching down Broadway to celebrate the people whose effort adds light and love and hope to our lives but today is a great day to stop and thank the workers who make your life better, happier and healthier. After all, since 1909, it's Labor Sunday.

May it be so. Amen.