

**“Let’s Go to Work!”**  
(Labor Day, *communion observed*)

Texts: Proverbs 24:30-34  
John 5:17

Preached: 9/6/15

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Many will enjoy this holiday weekend with an extra day off – although some, ironically, have to work! – even on Labor Day. What is this odd holiday, anyway?



Labor Day has been around a long time, beginning with the first Labor Day parade held on September 5th, 1882 in New York City

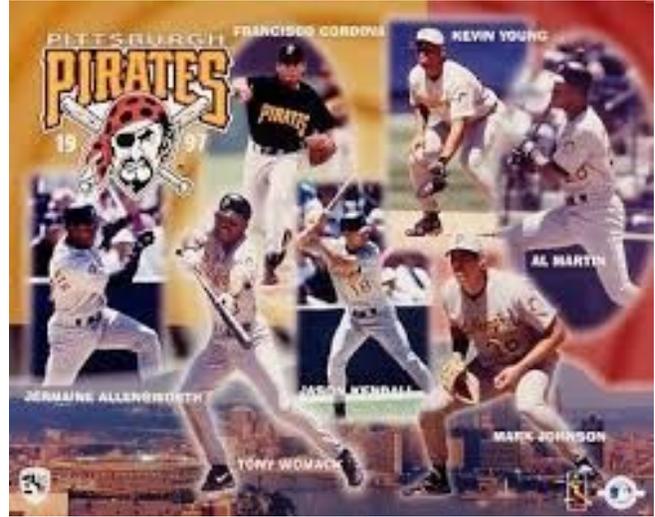
- 20,000 workers carried banners that said - Labor Creates Wealth,  
8 hours for work, 8 hours for sleep, 8 hours for recreation
- This was the desired situation for all people
- After the parade, there were picnics offering up Irish stew, bread, apple pie
- the day ended with fireworks

The celebration was copied by communities across the country and two years after that first parade, in 1894, on was copied by communities across the country and two years after that first parade, congress made Labor Day a Federal Holiday – a day set aside to recognize the value and dignity of work.

Most of us probably are not thinking of that history this weekend. We’re just glad to have an extra day without work. Grateful for a little more time to transition from summer into the fall routine.

Maybe like me you are looking forward to watching a few baseball games, as the Pittsburgh Pirates continue their amazing run this season.

I can remember many years where watching the Pirates was a disheartening affair... take for example 1997. Back then – 17 years into a losing streak, the Pirates launched a rather pitiful promotional campaign. LET'S GO TO WORK! That's all they could come up with. Our Buccos were so bad, even the PR guys couldn't imagine a winner! So their slogan was, "Let's Go to Work!"



There were vignettes of the players picking up lunch boxes on their way out of the dugout, juxtaposed with real working men on their way to the job, carrying their own lunch box. I imagine a lot of Pittsburgh workers could have related back then, construction workers, steam fitters, steel workers, all sorts of blue-collar folks – locked as the city was in an economic downturn.

Many people spent their days going to what they probably perceived as dead-end jobs. Still, the promo was somehow inspiring. I remember it after all these years. There's something satisfying about genuine hard work. I still have that slogan in my head and it pops out once in a while. Sometimes I say it to begin a day I know will be long and grueling, whether I will be spending long hours here at the church, or I'm beginning some demanding project at home. If you can't expect to be done by the end of the day, it's good to be content with the work itself.

We Christians come from a tradition that has always had respect for good, old-fashioned hard work, because we are grounded in biblical texts.

God tells Noah, for example, that he will be saved from the flood, but it is Noah who has to build the ark. Work, if not itself a religious act, comes close to being a condition of the religious life, in the very story of creation: *"Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God."* — we serve God through work as well as rest. Ancient Hebrew rabbis insisted that, "By our labor we become partners with God in the work of creation."



So on this Labor Day weekend, I want to pause a few moments and consider our work, the work we do in our jobs or vocations, and our work as Christians called together in this place, here at East Union. I want to muse a bit on God's vision of work. Long before New Yorkers had a parade, the Bible lifted up the value of labor and warned against the dangers of lackadaisical idleness. God, himself, works hard on our behalf, on behalf of creation. And God gives us work to do. Shouldn't our work be meaningful?

Psychologist Michael F Steger Ph.D. studies what makes work meaningful?

He introduces his research by telling an intriguing story:



Three men are found smashing boulders with iron hammers. When asked what they are doing, the first man says, "Breaking big rocks into little rocks." The second man says, "Feeding my family." The third man says, "Building a cathedral."

As an occupational consultant – Steger calls what the third man does “meaningful work,” although all three men are doing the same thing. The third man was the only one of the three who interpreted each hammer blow as contributing to the construction of a cathedral, a home for human dreams and sacred aspirations.

Our work matters to God, whether we are a common laborer working for the general contractor building a large cathedral, or we are engaged in some other task, no matter how mundane.

Steger says meaningful work consists of three central components.

- First, the work we do must make sense; we must know what's being asked of us and be able to identify the personal or organizational resources we need to do our job.
- Second, the work we do must have a point; we must be able to see how the little tasks we engage in help build, brick-by-brick if you will, an important part of the purpose of our company or organization.
- Finally, our work must benefit some greater good; we must be able to see how our toil helps others, whether that's saving the planet. Many studies now have hard data to show that meaningful workers are happy workers, more committed workers, and, in some tantalizing ways, better workers.

The cornerstone for the famous Cathedral Notre Dame de Paris was laid in 1163, and work finally wrapped up in 1345. For those of you keeping score, that's 182 years.

Funny thing is the life expectancy back in the Middle Ages wasn't much more than 40. That means that it would have taken between four and six generations of laborers working their whole lives to construct Notre Dame. If you were in Generation 1, your job, literally, could have been breaking big rocks into little rocks.



But you also would have been building a great cathedral... a cathedral that your grandchildren's grandchildren would enjoy going into for the first time.

Viewing our work in this way holds the hope of transforming our working lives into a way in which we live more meaningful lives, lives that honor God and bear witness to the presence of Christ.

Many of us have stereotypes about the kinds of work that can be meaningful. What kinds of workers have meaningful jobs? What about you...do you engage in meaningful work. Will you make a difference when you return to your job on Tuesday? – whether you go to an office, or a factory, or a school, or you are retired and do odd jobs. Whatever kind of work you do, know that it is spiritual work, even if it doesn't feel that way.



Building sacred spaces and saving the planet might stand alongside nurses, EMTs, soldiers, police, teachers, counselors, social workers and the other, typical, helping or saving professions. But meaningful work isn't restricted to these kinds of professions. Here's a testimonial drawn from Dr. Steger's research:



"I am a data analyst. The part of my job that is most meaningful to me is that I take large - confusing amounts of data and produce reports that allow my co-workers to make sound business decisions. I like that I help make sense of what we are doing."

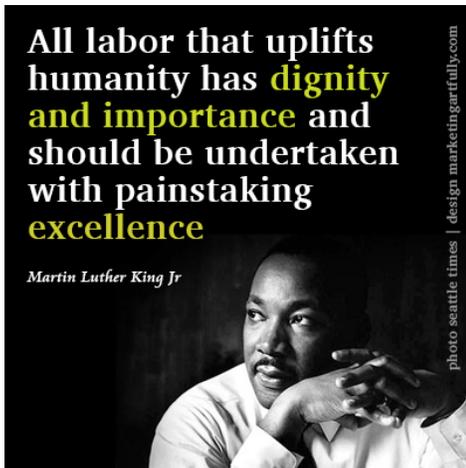
You probably wouldn't include data analyst on your list of meaningful jobs, but this worker sees how tasks are more than their simple mechanical description. Other people might take the same job and find it dehumanizing. It's easy to imagine a cynical, harried drone from the movie "Office Space" snarkily describing her job as "Turning big numbers into little numbers."

What work comes to mean to you is a matter of perspective. And our perspective begins with God and God's work in creation and continues to God's work in and through us.

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther preached that all tasks, jobs, all work is service to God.

He said: "The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays -- not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on his shoes, but by making good shoes because God is interested in good craftsmanship."

Four hundred years later, another preacher with the same name preached the same thing:



"All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence."

Whatever you are called to do...do it well. You will be praising God. If you are a student, you serve God by learning, studying, doing your best. If you are a teacher, the same applies. If you work at a computer – even your data entry, your programming can be a holy thing when it is done with care and purpose.

God has given us much work here at East Union – what an amazing difference your work here makes, to God and to this community and to people far and wide, to those who need a place for recreation like the EUCC, to special needs folks and their caregivers, to those who are hungry and homeless, to those who are starting over after a fire or some crisis, to those who crave clean, potable water, to children just starting out. In the coming months we'll highlight the ministries and missions that make a difference here – the very work that you support.

It's a blessing to do that work together – and it's also a blessing to have times of rest – to regroup and remember who we are and whose we are. So let enjoy our time off, and then we can say with gusto, "Let's go to work."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

