

The Dignity of Labor

Psalm 90:17; 1 Corinthians 7:17

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • September 4, 2016 (KSYC)

This Labor Day weekend, the nation's airports and freeways will be full of travelers as usual. This is the last three-day weekend of the summer, and for most, a last chance to enjoy a short vacation, go to the beach or park, visit or invite family and friends and grill out. But very few know what they are celebrating other than a vague notion that it is about people who work.

But what really does Labor Day mean, and how did it began? The first labor day event was held on September 5, 1882 in New York City as a parade of local labor unions. It was in the early days of the Industrial Revolution when the labor unions were beginning to fight low wages and miserable working conditions. In 1894, President Grover Cleveland sent federal troops to break up the national railway workers' strike against the Pullman Company, killing more than a dozen railway workers in Chicago. In a conciliatory reaction, President Cleveland signed a bill declaring a federal Labor Day holiday every first Monday in September.

Today, the connection between a dozen dead strikers and Labor Day is obscure. But Christians can celebrate this holiday by honoring the “work of our hands” (Psa 90:17).

The Bible often addresses work. In creation, God himself worked for six days, and rested on the seventh day. This established the natural, universal pattern of a week: six days of work and one day of rest, which was called the Sabbath day. God even commands us to “*remember the Sabbath day, to make it holy*” (Exo 20:8).

In the garden of Eden, God commanded Adam to “*work it and keep it.*” He was to tend it with care, making it productive. Was this command wearisome for Adam? No, because it came even before Adam sinned, so work was not God's punishment for his son, but done with joy. Being productive and busy at work is part of God's good purpose for man and all his good creation. But after Adam sinned, God condemned him, “*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.*” There will still be joy of work, but now it will be accompanied by hardship and frustration, thorns and thistles (Gen 3:18-19).

So how do we still find joy and fulfillment in our labors? The Bible has another word related to work: vocation or calling. The idea of life's vocation or calling comes from 1 Corinthians 7:17, “*Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.*” The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word for “calling.” This means that every human being, not only Christians, is assigned by God to his course of life. So God assigns everyone to different ways of service.

God works through man.¹ As Providence, he governs and upholds his creation, and works through his creation, and specially through man's vocation. He gives us food through farmers, truck drivers, factory workers, and grocery workers. He grants us healing from sickness through doctors, nurses, and research scientists. He clothes us through his forests, designers, and garment workers. He gives and maintains our homes, roads, airports, and buildings through construction workers, engineers and architects. He pleasures our senses through

¹ Some of the following are summarized from “In Praise of Work” by Gene Edward Veith, *The Lutheran Witness*, Sept. 2010.

artists and musicians. He protects us by means of soldiers, police officers, and firemen. He keeps order in society through civil authorities and lawyers. In short, God is so gracious and merciful that he gives us all kinds of vocations to make our lives easier and pleasurable, even after we sin against him.

Martin Luther, the great 16th century church Reformer, said that vocation is a “mask of God.” Hidden behind every shopkeeper, truck driver, web developer, plumber, teacher, restaurant server, and high-tech engineer is God himself working through them. God actually never rests from working.

Man works for God. Luther says that everyone has multiple callings in three different “estates of God”: the household, the civil society, and for a Christian, the church.

God has called us to serve our families into the vocations of the household. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters all have callings in the household. Spending time together as a family is a very important vocation in life.

Everyone is also called into a community and a nation, with its own culture, language and boundaries. We may call this the vocation of citizenship. Therefore, every Christian has a dual citizenship in two kingdoms: a citizen of the kingdom of heaven first, and the kingdom of man second. He must exercise his right to vote, obey civil laws, pay required taxes, and obtain licenses and permits. He is also called by God, not in isolation, but to friendships, interactions, and to contribute to the betterment of his community.

Every Christian also has been “called by the Gospel” to become a part of the church of Christ. Pastors are called to preach, teach and shepherd the flock. Elders and deacons maintain order in the church. Members are given various spiritual gifts to serve each other in the church: singing, serving on committees, preparing food, teaching Sunday school, giving a portion of their resources, preparing and printing bulletins, greeting people on Sundays, and involving themselves in the church's ministries. But above all these, presence in regular Sunday worship services, Bible studies, and prayer meetings are most pleasing to God.

But what is the purpose of every vocation? Luther says it is to love and serve one another. Christians are commanded to love God above all, and neighbor second. Every calling has its own neighbor. In marriage, we are called to love, cherish and serve our spouse. Parents are to love, teach and discipline their children. Children are to honor, obey and serve their parents.

In the workplace, all are called to serve one another: employees, supervisors, officers, owners, customers. They are to serve and honor one another in whatever box in the organization chart they are placed. In the civil society, authorities are not only to exercise their power, but above all, love and serve their people. Citizens are called to love and serve the authorities and also their fellow citizens.

Christians are put on notice by Jesus when he said, *“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant”* (Mark 10:42–43). Many people today turn authority into seats of power and fame, but the Christian in authority has a greater calling: to turn authority into a means to love and serve those under him.

The Priesthood of All Workers. Work is also part of what is called “the priesthood of all believers.” Many Christians think that this means that every Christian is a minister who can preach, teach and administer baptism or the Lord's Supper. This is a gross misunderstanding of Peter's call to Christians to be “*a royal priesthood*” (1 Pet 2:9). This term is attributed to Luther, though what he actually said was:

A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work of office must benefit and serve every other...

What 1 Peter 2:9 says is that all believers are called to serve God daily by proclaiming His “excellencies” to His glory, just as priests served God in the temple. Whether we're auto mechanics, lawyers, chimney sweeps, photographers, or doctors, all Christians are to serve God in our vocations. No vocation is superior or more “sacred” than any other. We are to work our vocations “*as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man*” (Eph 6:6-7).

So Dear Friends, delight in this Labor Day weekend. Enjoy family and friends with barbecue and games, catching up with what's happening in their lives. Enjoy the sun at the beach or campground. Gaze at the beauty of God's creation in the hiking trail.

But be mindful that you are celebrating and commemorating the dignity of labor. The Preacher says, “*There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God*” (Ecc 2:24). Give thanks God for his provision of work so we may love and serve our neighbor. Centuries before there was a Labor Day holiday, Luther wrote:

If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools— at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure—and you will read this statement inscribed on them... All this is continually crying out to you: “Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.

Let us pray: Our Providential God, whose Son Jesus Christ in his earthly life shared our toil and hallowed our labor: Be present with Your people where they work; make those who carry on the industries and commerce of this land responsive to Your will; and give to us all a pride in what we do, and a just return for our labor. We remember before You those who suffer want and anxiety from lack of work. Guide the people of this land so to use our public and private wealth that all may find suitable and fulfilling employment, and receive just payment for their labor.

We now give You thanks as well for the beautiful summer that we have enjoyed; for the wonder of creation that we gaze upon daily; for safety in all our travels and vacations. We pray these in Christ's name. Amen.