

First Trinity Lutheran Church
Labor Day 2012
September 2, 2012

For most Americans tomorrow is a holiday, a day off of work for Labor Day. The purpose of Labor Day is a celebration of the unique rights and freedoms that we, as workers, enjoy in our nation. It is a time to be thankful that we have jobs but also recognizing that today many don't have job, and some of you have worked most of all your lives but now are retired. Nevertheless let me ask you a few questions "Do you really like your job? How many of you look forward to going to work on Monday mornings because you really miss seeing your boss? How many of you miss your fellow workers so much that you can hardly wait to get back and see how they're doing?" Now if you answered "Yes" to any of those questions, then you're in the minority. Surveys reveal that 65% of American workers are unhappy with their jobs. Many of them go to work simply because they have no other choice. They have bills to pay and responsibilities so it's off to work they go.

One of our problems is that we divide everything into secular and sacred categories. We say that over here is the secular, and over there is the sacred. And we spend the best hours of every day in the secular world. We say, "We'd really like to serve God, but we have to spend so much time on our secular job." So we give God a few hours on Sunday morning. Maybe another hour or so on another day of the week.

On the O.T. you can see that sacred and secular pattern. The O.T. says, "Over here is the sacred with its temple and priests, and everything else is secular." The N.T. teaches that we're all priests, and our body is a temple, and that God's Holy Spirit lives in us, and every day is holy. The N.T. tells us that we can take God with us wherever we go, and that God is a part of everything we do.

We know very little of the first thirty years of Jesus life but I suspect that he spent

much of his time helping his father Joseph in the carpenter shop. Why? Because work is important. Because people need houses, because people need chairs on which to sit, and tables on which to serve their food. The point here is that we can serve God in the way we work and where we work every day!

Martin Luther and other Christian reformers in the 15th century came up with the doctrine of vocation that dared to assert that all labor done in faith is pleasing to God, as pleasing, in fact, as "spiritual" or "religious" work. In our "Life in Balance" Group on Thursday evenings we have talked about how St. Benedict viewed work. Benedict believed that idleness was the enemy of the soul so manual labor was as important as prayer. But both are required to lead a balanced life.

But we have a problem, for many Christians there is a huge gap between their experience on Sunday and the rest of our weekly lives. It's like a huge chasm exists between the Church and "the real world" of family, work, volunteering, politics, commerce and the rest. Unfortunately more and more people are asking the question whether church is worth it mainly because the church seems to be less and less relevant. Some time ago on an airplane flight two passengers seated next to each other were having a conversation when the topic of church came up. The one passenger asked the other if he goes to church. "Funny you should ask," the other passenger responded. "My wife, our eight and ten year-old sons, and I recently sat down after dinner to talk about whether to still go to church. We decided that none of us get much out of it, so we're not going anymore."

Unfortunately this is happening in communities all over America today. And it makes me sad because I feel that Sunday worship should deeply affect and inform our everyday lives? Called has called all of us to work for the health of our families, communities, and world through our daily labor. And the church needs to help people

connect what we do on Sundays with what we are doing on Monday through Saturday.

The separation between Sunday and the rest of the week doesn't have to be this way. There are multiple opportunities in Sunday worship to highlight the calling of all of us to be God's partners in sustaining and caring for this world that God loves so much. I believe we exercise our faith in our volunteering, in our voting and other civic responsibilities like paying our taxes and demanding that those taxes are spent well, in our family responsibilities, and through our daily work at home, school, and our jobs. Seeing how God is at work in all these ways can at times be difficult, but it's a whole lot easier if we have a community of faith encouraging us to look in the first place and offering help and support in doing so.

Labor Day also remind us to advocate for the working poor and for those who are working in unsafe and slave labor type jobs. One creative writer who helped to bring this issue into a new light recently is Barbara Ehrenreich. One day Ehrenreich and her editor were discussing the working poor, welfare reform and the like, when she wondered aloud how an unskilled but fully employed worker could survive on low wages: "Someone ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism—you know, go out there and try it for themselves." When Ehrenreich's editor called her bluff she began an economic experiment that resulted in her bestseller book, *Nickel and Dimed; On Getting By in America* (2001). For six months she lived the life of an unskilled but fully employed wage earner. In Florida she worked as a waitress on the 2:00-10PM shift, then as a house cleaner for Molly Maid. In Maine she worked as a "dietary aide" at a nursing home and as a hotel maid. In Minnesota she clerked at Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the nation with 825,000 people on the payroll. Although she admits that her experiment was artificial in many ways, Ehrenreich lived in budget motels and dangerous trailer parks, she ate only what she could afford (which tended to be fast food), she discovered that she really needed two such unskilled jobs just to squeak

by, and overall found herself physically and emotionally drained. And God help her if she ever got sick or needed health care.

The unskilled wage earners that Ehrenreich imitated are the fully employed, not the lazy, the destitute, the unemployed or those who abuse welfare. They constitute about 30% of the American work force who earn less than \$10 per hour. They are the people we pass every day who make our American way of life possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, sew our garments, handpick our fresh produce, and mow our yards. Even though these people work long and hard, they barely make ends meet. In fact, Ehrenreich's colleagues routinely worked more than one job, slept in cars, and crowded multiple people into small living quarters.

With the federal minimum wage at \$7.65 per hour the challenges that the working poor face are immense, complex, and interrelated. In his similar study of the same people, Pulitzer Prize winner David Shipler avoids blaming politics of the left or the right and instead notes how poverty is both a cause of problems and the result of problems: “A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child’s asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother’s punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing”.

The Apostle Paul was a relative latecomer to the Gospel in comparison to Jesus’ disciples because he converted on the road to Damascus about the year 35 after Jesus had ascended into heaven. Paul traveled to Jerusalem about fourteen years after his conversion in order to present his credentials to the original group of Apostles. He knew that he needed their blessing, and indeed he received what he calls “the right hand of fellowship” from the

movement's leaders. Later, when he recalled this trip in his letter to the Galatian believers, Paul wrote something revealing about the first followers of Jesus. What did the leaders of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem require of Paul? "All they asked was that we should remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." (Galatians 2:10).

Each week we are drawn into worship

- to confess the disappointments, confusions, and failures of the previous week,
- to receive absolution and be encouraged in our lives of faith in the world,
- to have our sense of calling clarified and deepened, and
- to be commissioned and sent again into the world as God's partners.

In this way, the faithful are regularly gathered to the word and sent back out to the world and this dynamic, weekly movement in and out, back and forth, between God's church and God's world is, at its best, the respiratory system of the body of Christ.

Amen