



CELEBRATION OF VOCATIONS (LABOR DAY)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. What We Celebrate

What we celebrate this Labor Day Sunday is the work and worth of our vocations. Dictionary.com defines vocation as a particular occupation, business, or profession to which a person is qualified or suited. So vocation can be the work that we do for a living, but often it is deeper. For people of faith, vocation is a calling to divine service. We see this often in our congregations, as people fulfill their vocation and ministry as deacons, trustees, choir members, ushers, etc., on Sundays and go to work on Mondays.

We have particular reasons to celebrate this day as African Americans. Despite coming up on the 'rough side of the mountain,' the achievements that we have made in all arenas are a source of pride and thanksgiving. Today we celebrate the gains received from the work of our ancestors on plantations, as well as the vocations of this sampling of a few of the African Americans who came after them:¹

- Percy M. Julian, Ph.D. (1899-1975), whose major achievement was the synthesis of cortisone we now use to treat arthritis and other inflammatory conditions
- Patricia Bath (1942-), is a co-founder of the American Institute for the Prevention of Blindness. Bath is best known for her invention of the Laserphaco Probe for the treatment of cataracts.
- Rebecca Cole (1846-1922), who at age 19 was the second black woman to graduate from medical school, and who taught hygiene and childcare to families in poor neighborhoods in New York with Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first white female physician²
- Rosina Tucker (1881-1987), founder and secretary-treasurer of the International Ladies Auxiliary and a force in the establishment of its parent organization, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Tucker told her story, and that of the work of the brotherhood and the auxiliary, in the 1981 award-winning, hour-long documentary, Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle, produced and directed by Paul Wagner and Jack Santino and aired on public television. In the documentary she also sang "Marching Together," which she wrote in 1939 in honor of the Pullman porters. She is one of the featured images for this lectionary moment.
- Vinnette Carroll (1922-2002), author of *Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope* and *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*, and the first African American woman to direct on Broadway
- Elizabeth Catlett (1919-) expatriate American sculptor and printmaker known her depictions of African American women
- Guion 'Guy' Buford (1942-), the first African-American astronaut to travel in space
- Oscar Peterson (1925-2007), called the Maharaja of the keyboard by Duke Ellington, and widely recognized as one of the greatest pianists of all time.
- Mabel Keaton Staupers (1890-1989), Caribbean-American nurse and labor organizer, who fought for elimination of segregation in the Armed Forces Nurses Corps during World War II
- Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915-1973), the first major recording star in gospel music, whose music attained popularity in the 1930s and 40s with its mixture of spiritual lyrics and jazz accompaniment.

YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeaBNAXfHfQ>

YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVTthSWOmU>

It is important this day not only to celebrate the vocations of these well known African Americans, but also the not-so-famous whose labor has enriched our lives personally. One of those persons was my maternal grandfather, James Bridgeforth (1896-1988). He was a sharecropper, principally a tobacco farmer in the Southside region of Virginia. He could neither read nor write, but he made a living for his five children, the youngest of whom is my mother. I would not be able to write this unit except for the faithfulness of my grandfather to both his vocation as a farmer, and to his family. My grandmother, Elvetia Toy Bridgeforth, was no less incredible, working with my grandfather in the fields while rearing five children. They were married an amazing sixty-nine years, working hard, loving family, and thanking God for everyday they lived.

II. About Work and Rest

The verses that form the basis of this lectionary unit from the book of Proverbs and Deuteronomy extol the virtues of both work and rest. Work is defined in thermodynamics as the transfer of energy from one object to another. When we direct energy into anything, we are working. Work is basically what occurs when a constant force applied over a distance displaces an object. Work, any work, is energy that generates change, scientifically termed displacement, to that object. Work results in the creation of something new in its fabric. The book of Genesis explains that creation itself was the result of work on the part of God. Work, whether physical labor or the energy found in spoken or written word and music, results in the creation of something new. According to the wise teacher in Proverbs, there is profit in some way from any work we do, whether in a corporation, in school, at home, or at church. We gain from that expenditure of energy whether financially, emotionally, professionally, or spiritually. “In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (Proverb 14:23).

There are also gains to be had from rest. As a spiritual practice, I use Sundays as “Sabbath time” that I spend with my family and friends. Yet it is important to carve out Sabbath time whenever possible for whatever period of time possible. It is a time to find that space for the still and quiet, all too elusive in our busy lives, that allows the Spirit to speak to us. Sabbath time, whenever and however we can get it, is precious time. Wayne Muller writes:

Sabbath time may also be a Sabbath afternoon, a Sabbath hour, a Sabbath walk -- indeed, anything that preserves a visceral experience of life-giving nourishment and rest.... Sabbath time is time off the wheel, time when we take our hands from the plow... while we drink, if only for a few moments, from the fountain of rest and delight³

III. A Working History

Work is one of the first assignments given to human beings in Scripture. The Lord placed man and woman in the Garden of Eden “to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Later, in the account of the first sin and humanity’s fall, work is part of the punishment God metes to Adam and Eve for their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The ground is now cursed because of Adam, and in toil he “shall eat of it all the days” of his life (Gen. 3:17). Toil contains a unique curse in our history and culture as African Americans; slavery. Slavery was at its core the source of cheap labor, the lynchpin of economic profit for slave owners and for the United States in general. Arguments of inferiority based upon race were justification for the continuation of that profit. To that end, work for slaves was not a vocation; it was the vehicle through which a system of institutional oppression could be maintained.

IV. Prose Concerning Labor

Before the Emancipation Proclamation, Ann Plato, a woman of color born to an African American mother and a Native American father published a series of poems and essays. Plato was a school teacher/head mistress at the Black Zion Methodist Church School in Hartford, CT. In 1841 she published her only known book, entitled Essays: Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Poetry, where she offers the following prayer for herself and many African Americans who would follow in her profession:

A Teacher's Prayer

Teach me, O! Lord, the secret errors of my way,
Teach me the paths wherein I go astray
Learn me the way to teach the word of love
For that's the pure intelligence from above
As well as learning, give me that truth forever-
Which a mere worldly tie can never sever,
For though our bodies die, our souls will live forever,
To cultivate in every youthful mind,
Habitual grace, and sentiments refined.
Thus while I strive to govern a human heart,
May I the heavenly precepts still impart;
Oh! May each youthful bosom catch the sacred fire,
And youthful mind to virtue's throne aspire.
Now fifteen years their destined course have run,
In fast succession round the central sun;
How did the follies of that period pass,
I ask myself – are they inscribed in brass!
Oh! Recollection, speed their fresh return
And sure 'tis mine to be ashamed and mourn
“What shall I ask, or what refrain to day?
Where shall I point, or how conclude my lay?”
So much my weakness needs-so oft thy voice
Assures that weakness, and confirms my choice
Oh, grant me active days of peace and truth,
Strength to my heart, and wisdom to my youth
A sphere of usefulness-a soul to fill
That sphere with duty, and perform thy will.⁴

V. Vocation/Work Songs

The cause for celebration of our vocations as African Americans exists in that, in the face of the direst circumstances, there was profit to be gained of a different kind. Despite the degradation that our ancestors experienced, slaves developed through their faith a sense of community expressed in song, which sustained them during this oppression, and gave impetus to the social action which resulted in their eventual freedom. Work songs, spirituals, and chain gang songs lifted the morale of slaves and enabled them to get

through the repressive working day. “No More Auction Block for Me,” is one of these well-known work songs.

No More Auction Block for Me

No more auction block for me
No more, no more
No more auction block for me
Many thousand gone

No more peck of corn for me....

No more driver’s lash for me...

No more pint of salt for me...

No more hundred lash for me....

No more mistress’ call for me...

Spirituals (Work Songs)

The following songs are from www.negrospirituals.com, which has an extensive list of lyrics of spirituals.

Mos’ (Almost) Done Toiling Here

Mos’ done toilin’ here
O brethren Lord
Hm, I’m mos’ done toilin’ here

I long to shout, I love to sing
Mos’ done toilin’ here
I love to praise my heavenly King
Mos’ done toilin’ here

I ain’t been to heav’n, but I been tol’
Mos’ done toilin’ here
De streets up dere are pavid wid gol’
Mos’ done toilin’ here

Members Don’t Get Weary

Members, don’t get weary
Members, don’t get weary, for the work’s ‘mos’ done

O, keep your lamp trim’d and a-burning
O, keep your lamp trim’d and a-burning, for the work’s ‘mos’ done

I'm going down to the river of Jordan
O, yes, going to the river of Jordan
O, yes, going to the river of Jordan
When my work is done

O, I'm going to sit at the welcome table,
O, yes, sit at the welcome table
O, yes, sit at the welcome table
when my work is done

O, I'm going to feast on the milk and honey
O, yes, feast on the milk and honey
O, yes, feast on the milk and honey
When my work is done

O, I'm going to march with the tallest angel
O, yes, march with the tallest angel
O, yes, march with the tallest angel
when my work is done

The song Work for the Night is Coming was inspired by John 9:44 which says, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work." Verses one through three, were written by Anna Louisa Walker Coghill in 1864. Coghill was only 18 years old when she wrote this hymn. Verse 4, is attributed to Basil Manley.

Work for the Night Is Coming

Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work 'mid springing flowers;
Work when the day grows brighter,
Work in the glowing sun;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man's work is done.

Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the sunny noon;
Fill brightest hours with labor,
Rest comes sure and soon.
Give every flying minute,
Something to keep in store;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man works no more.

Work, for the night is coming,
Under the sunset skies;
While their bright tints are glowing,
Work, for daylight flies.
Work till the last beam fadeth,
Fadeth to shine no more;
Work, while the night is darkening,
When man's work is o'er.

Work, for the day is coming!
Children of light are we;
From Jesus' bright appearing
Power of darkness flee.
Soon will our strife be ending,
Soon all our toils below,
Not to the dark we're tending,
But to the day we go.⁵

VI. Labor and African Americans – Post Slavery

A. Although the Emancipation Proclamation granted freedom from slavery, it did not grant total freedom from oppressive working conditions. Jim Crow laws enabled employers to discriminate against African Americans with respect to pay, promotions, and working conditions. It was during this era that America celebrated its first Labor Day. The holiday was created in 1882 by the Central Labor Union, and legislated as a national holiday in 1894. Created to be a holiday for the 'working man,' this holiday was not one that celebrated working women although women were part of the labor force by this time thanks to the advent of the Industrial era, and estimates are that one in thirty-four women belonged to a union during the nineteenth century.

In July 1881, the year prior to the establishment of Labor Day, 20 African American laundresses in Atlanta formed a trade organization, the Washing Society. They sought higher pay than the \$4-8 per month they were earning, and with the help of black ministers throughout the city, called a strike for higher pay and better working conditions. Called "Washing Amazons" by their opponents, they organized a remarkable door-to-door campaign which within three weeks grew the society from 20 to 3000 members, including some white laundresses. Standing strong in the face of police arrests, firings, and other threats, other workers, including housekeepers, cooks, and hotel employees went on strike as well. Faced with the prospect of a total city shutdown, the demands of the strikers were met, resulting in higher wages. Moreover, the Atlanta Washerwomen's strike established ex-slaves in this city as part of the economy of the antebellum South.⁶

B. Perhaps the Atlanta Washerwomen's strike was an inspiration to A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979). A 'must' as part of any celebration of African American vocations is the commemoration of the work of this man, perhaps this country's most well known African American labor activist. The son of a Methodist minister, Randolph organized the

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to improve labor conditions for Pullman porters. The Pullman Company was a major employer of African Americans, working as porters on passenger trains. Pullman porters were dependent not only on tips for the majority of their income, but also on the whims of white passengers, who uniformly addressed them as "George," after the founder of the company. In addition, Pullman porters were unpaid for some of their time, had to pay for their uniforms, meals and lodging, and were ineligible for promotion to conductor despite performing many of their duties. It was Randolph who organized the union in 1925 with the motto, "Fight or Be Slaves." Twelve years later, the union negotiated a contract with the company which gave the porters \$2,000,000 in pay increases, a shorter work week, and overtime pay. Randolph went on to fight for economic justice for all African Americans, working as one of the chief architects of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Thanks in no small part to A. Philip Randolph and those who marched, Title VII of the Civil Rights' Act prohibiting employer discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin was enacted.⁷

VII. Today's Celebration and Challenge

A. Sunday, August 31, 2008 is almost forty years to the day of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. A. Philip Randolph's life in labor activism demonstrates that it is important to remember today. For although there are many vocations and contributions by African Americans to celebrate on this day, we still have a long way to go. The following statistics demonstrate this:

- As far back as 1980, a 20-year old black man was almost twice as likely to be unemployed than a white male of the same age.⁸
- Even during the economic boom of the 1990s, the annual labor force participation rate of African American males over the age of 20 dropped from 75 percent in 1990 to 72 percent in 1999, and it remained between three and four percentage points below that of white males with few exceptions.⁹
- As of January 2008, the unemployment rate for African Americans was 9.2 percent compared to 4.4 percent for whites, 6.3 percent for Hispanics and 3.2 percent for Asians.¹⁰
- In 2005, employed blacks earned only 65% of the wages of whites in comparable jobs, down from 82% in 1975.¹¹
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that African Americans suffer disproportionately with respect to layoffs and job eliminations in economic downturns, with the black underclass being hardest hit.
- A study conducted by the Pew Charitable Trust showed that almost half of African-Americans born to middle class parents in the 1960's were at or near poverty as adults.¹²
- In 2006, the median income of African American households was \$31,969 compared to \$50,673 for white households, \$64,238 for Asian American households, and \$37,781 for households of Hispanic origin.¹³

- According to Earl Graves, founder and Publisher of Black Enterprise Magazine, African Americans still hold less than 1 percent of the tens of thousands of senior-level, corporate posts at America's 1,000 largest public corporations.¹⁴

The above statistics show that opportunity to work and find fulfillment in one's vocation is still an issue of justice and equality for African Americans. Many of us are: still not working; crashing against glass ceilings; and still experiencing oppressive working conditions that adversely affect the needed balance between work and rest. There is still much work to do for African Americans on this Labor Day.

B. The story of Betty Dukes and her courage is a case in point. She was the lead plaintiff in *Dukes vs. Wal-Mart Stores Inc.* the largest class action employment discrimination suit in history against Wal-Mart. An ordained minister, she was hired at a Wal-Mart in Pittsburgh as a cashier in 1994. Despite previous experience, she was denied opportunities for promotion and filed a complaint with the Equal Opportunity Commission after being demoted from customer service manager to a cashier. She considered this retaliation after her efforts for promotion and training went unanswered. She stated, "That was the straw that broke the camel's back. I felt that they had singled me out because I'm African American, and they were retaliating because of my complaints about my supervisor. It was like a lynching, but I survived, and I became determined to see justice done."¹⁵

Dukes' motto "Never allow fear to get under your feet," is an important one for all African Americans in workplaces and in general.¹⁶ Labor Day is not only cause for celebration of our vocations, our work, and our contributions to our well-being and that of the United States as a whole. As African Americans we must make no mistake in acknowledging that Labor Day is also cause for a call to action to work further in the cause of economic justice and equality.

VIII. Gospel Selections for Labor Day

Numerous songs exist that establish the right spiritual, cultural and sociological mood for Labor Day celebrations. Here are the titles of a few, and more can be found in the Worship and Music Resources unit for this moment on our liturgical calendar.

Working on a Building, sung by Albertina Walker, Composed by Cain and Whitsett

If I Labor, composed by Estella Boyd and Marvin Winans

May the Work I've Done Speak For Me, composed by Sullivan Pugh

Be Ye Steadfast, composed by Arthur Jones

IX. Multi Media Suggestions

Display on screens during worship or during study sessions:

- Scenes from the Robert Townsend film 10,000 Black Men Named George, a film based on the life of a Pullman Porter, whose title was based on the demeaning norm that all Pullman Porters were addressed as “George”
- Scenes from The Jackie Robinson Story (1950), the film chronicles the legendary player’s struggles as the first African American in Major League Baseball, with Robinson playing himself in the title role
- Scenes from Eyes on the Prize Episode 10 – The Promised Land depicts the struggle of sanitation workers in Memphis TN, the cause which brought Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to that city on April 4, 1968

Notes

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4. Plato, Ann. “A Teacher’s Prayer.” Reprinted in Washington, James Melvin. Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African-Americans. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1994. p. 38
5. “Work for the Night Is Coming.” Lyrics at: Precious Lord Take My Hand. <http://www.preciouslordtakemyhand.com/christianhymns/workforthenight.html>
6. “Atlanta’s Washerwomen Strike.” American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations. http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/ww_strike.cfm accessed 3 March 2008
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15. Hawkes, Ellen. "MS Women of the Year winter 2004: Betty Dukes." MS Magazine. <http://www.msmagazine.com/winter2004/womenoftheyear.asp#dukes> accessed 3 March 2008
16. Ibid.