



CELEBRATION OF VOCATIONS (LABOR DAY)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, August 31, 2008

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Lections - Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Proverbs 14:23 (New Revised Standard Version)

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

(v. 12) Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. (v.13) For six days you shall labor and do all your work. (v.14) But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. (v.15) Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Proverbs 14:23

(v. 23) In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Labor Day was first recognized as a Federal holiday in 1894, not twenty years after the end of the Civil War. It started after the economy of the United States shifted from being largely agricultural to being industrialized. Mainly, as a result of this shift, labor unions were formed. These unions were an attempt to organize the voices and efforts of workers, and to increase their wages, while decreasing the number of hours they were required to work. It is one of these early unions, the Central Labor Union, which is credited with originating the idea of a holiday for the “working man.” This holiday celebration involved street parades and festivals in many urban areas, and later included speeches by prominent individuals. By 1909, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) passed a resolution adopting the Sunday before Labor Day as “Labor Sunday,” a day dedicated to highlighting those elements of the Labor movement that were spiritual and educational in nature.¹

Probably the most well-known African American labor organizer was A. Phillip Randolph. He had no connection to the origins of Labor Day, but he realized that by offering blacks the lowest wages and the worst working conditions, it was clear that Labor Day advocates had conveniently forgotten those on whose back much of America was built. Their blood, often beaten out of their bodies, not only flooded the fields where southern crops grew, but it also saturated the once-marshy, disease-infected, soil out of which New York City, Chicago, and other major cities would later arise. Therefore, any recognition of labor in the United States ought to first honor the legacy of those whose labor was neither appreciated nor compensated, by offering respectful labor conditions and wages to their descendants.

This liturgical moment acknowledges our unsung ancestral laborers who toiled through sweat and tears to provide us a better tomorrow, as well as those who continue to labor for their families, their communities and the country. Last but not least, this moment celebrates a God who never sleeps or slumbers, but always labors on our behalf. On Labor Day, we cannot help but remember God’s ongoing intensive labor for us!

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Proverbs 14:23

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Part of our Labor Day reflections should not only be remembrances of the nameless laborers who were seen as 3/5 human, but also celebrate the fact that despite the brutalities of slavery and abandonment by the labor movement, black workers, black businesses, and eventually black banks grew through the turn of the century. Much like the black church, segregation forced black business owners and workers to gather together and develop communities of support, fellowship, and hope.

Being from Mississippi, currently and for many years the poorest state in America, I am all too aware of the legacy of poverty wrought by the unwillingness of labor unions to allow entrance to blacks. What this meant over time was that wealth in the form of home ownership, stocks, a college education, and inheritances were rarely available to blacks in

Mississippi. Although greatly weakened today, American unions have helped many realize the American dream. Now that blacks have greater access, as afore said, unions have been greatly weakened. Blacks, and now most other blue collar workers, have been deserted by the modern American economy. As CEOs collect salaries that could not have been imagined just 20 years ago, the average blue collar laborer struggles to maintain wages that keep pace with inflation and afford one reasonably priced healthcare. Only a few even dare think of pensions.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The children of Israel had just been emancipated from the remaining vestiges of slavery and the oppressive regime of Pharaoh. The Pharaoh of the Exodus was probably Menephtah I., the fourteenth and eldest surviving son of Rameses II. After liberating them, Jehovah ushered these people into the wilderness to prepare them for a land of promise. In Exodus 20:1-17, Jehovah gave Ten Commandments (also known as the Decalogue) to govern Israel's behavior toward the Divine, and other human beings. The Deuteronomy passage that is one of today's lection texts mirrors part of the Decalogue, in that it reiterates the fourth commandment God gave the Israelites. This repetition gives insight into the prominence God gives to rest and the Sabbath.

“The fourth commandment starts with the notion of Sabbath observance. The Sabbath combines two features.... The first of these is the importance of the recognition of time within a sacred calendar, so that the division of time into weeks, months, and years is seen as part of the sacred order of life. At the same time, the importance of rest and relaxation, especially in periods when work is a particularly heavy burden serves an important purpose for human well-being.”²

This understanding of Sabbath shows that there is a call from God, not only to work but also to rest. Scripture clearly states in many instances the need for rest. The day of rest, a time of Sabbath, from the Hebrew word “Shabbat,” meaning “to cease,” is considered no less sacred than work. This rest is not only important for the body. It is important for the mind and the spirit as well. Perhaps this is why God requires rest for the entirety of God's people Israel: adults, their children, livestock, resident aliens, and also male and female slaves. The fourth commandment is the first directive that is positive in nature. It is the Creator's clear indication that humanity requires the balance that comes from work and rest, and that this balance is high on God's list of priorities. Idleness was to be abhorred, but persons were also commanded to avoid being what we would today call workaholics.

By keeping the Sabbath, Israel not only rests, but is enabled during moments of solemn reflection to remember who brought them out of Egypt to become a new people, and upon whom they are to be dependent for sustenance, guidance, and redemption. When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, they could not determine their moments of rest, those few they received. They toiled just as early African Americans in America who were made to work from sun up to sundown, or as my grandmother used to say, “From can't see to can't see.” After such a harsh experience, God wanted Israel to take time and rest,

and remember with thanksgiving their deliverance from the shackles of slavery and the manacles of misery.

Our Proverbs text shifts our focus. It is a call to action. The cliché, “Idle hands are used in the devil’s workshop,” comes to mind. Proverbs 14:23 is set in the larger context of 14:19-24 that addresses the socioeconomic differences between the rich and poor and the moral and immoral. The social context is an agrarian society where people work with their hands for a living. Mere talk would not put seed in the ground or reap a harvest, and the poor were despised and poverty was considered a judgment of sin. It is a sad commentary that poverty would be considered a judgment for sin; as it was in the days when this proverb was written. As we well know, the poor often work harder than those who are well off. This is a critical message to those who would rob persons of opportunities to earn a decent living. For in doing so, persons are not only stripped of earning what is needed to provide themselves and their families with the necessities of life, but they are also deprived of the dignity that comes with being a contributing member of a society. This not only harms the poor, but weakens the social fabric of the communities in which the poor reside, and ultimately weakens an entire nation. If you do not believe me, just look around.

These two passages of scripture make clear that God requires balance in our lives. We must rest and reflect, but work is also important. Those who offer their best as they labor are to be commended. Whether one is a garbage collector, plumber, electrician, teacher, lawyer, nurse, preacher, homemaker, etc., honest labor is honorable. Laziness is not an attribute to covet.

Challenge

God requires balance, rest and work. Those of us who are able to engage in both, must also never forget those who are restricted from enjoying much of either. Our lives will never gain total balance until we help others gain the ability to rest and work.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: God commanding rest on the Sabbath, the sounds of Egyptian slave masters preventing rest;

Sights: Poverty, sons, daughters, slaves, resident aliens, God’s mighty hand and outstretched arm; and

Smells: Odors of oxen, donkeys, and livestock.

III. Quotes for the Sermonic Moment

- We are demanding that this city [Memphis, TN] respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. Let me say to you [sanitation workers] whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building up of humanity, it has dignity, it has worth.³

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

- No race can prosper till it learns there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.⁴

--Booker T. Washington

Notes

1. U.S. Dept. of Labor. "The History of Labor Day." Online location: <http://www.dol.gov/opa/aboutdol/laborday.htm> accessed 13 January 2008
2. Dozeman, Thomas B., R. E. Clements, Peter D. Quinn-Miscall, Robert B. Coote, Dennis L. Olson, Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, and Bruce C. Birch. The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume 2, The Book of Numbers, the Book of Deuteronomy, Introduction to Narrative Literature, the Book of Joshua, the Book of Judges, the Book of Ruth, the First and Second Books of Samuel. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. p. 331.
3. Newman, Richard. African American Quotations. New York, NY: Oryyx Press, 2000. p. 390.
4. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Quotations. Merriam-Webster Publishers, Inc., 1992.