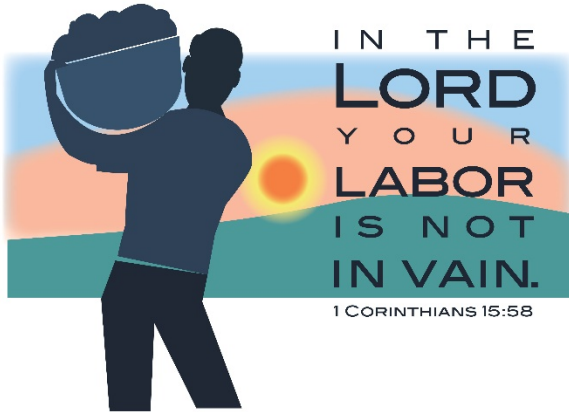


A “Clean” Four-Letter Word



This clean four-letter word will often get you dirty. Gussed it yet? The “clean” four-letter word I’m looking for is **WORK!** We have finally come to the unofficial end of summer that we call the Labor Day Weekend. But there are those who see WORK as a “dirty” word. What about you? Do you see work as a necessary evil or a blessing? Are you a “workaholic” or a “work-avoider”? Greatly due to the COVID pandemic, we live in a country that is very much confused about what work means and what it should look like. In America,

"labor" and "management" are adversaries. Labor wants the most money for the least amount of work; Management wants the most work for the least amount of money.

Thomas Edison said, “**Opportunity** is missed by most people because it looks like work.” Work is a four-letter word, but it isn’t a bad word. The Christian cannot separate their work life from their spiritual life. The Christian, the child of God, the follower and bold witness of Christ, can see work as a gift from God to match skills and talents He has given to us to labor to provide for one’s family while they share the Gospel. I pray that you have a blessed and rest-full Labor Day weekend. **Read this article** to discover how WORK is not only a clean word, but a blessing for your life as a Christian witness.

Labor Day weekend is a very strange holiday. If it’s the unofficial end of summer, then why are schools starting two weeks prior to Labor Day? We call it “Labor Day” and yet it seems as though the weekend is all about doing as little labor as possible. Working people have the day off?! No wonder, work and labor have become dirty words. Labor Day is a national holiday and yet I didn’t receive one “Happy Labor Day” card. (I refuse to call it a holiday unless Hallmark has a card for the occasion.) I didn’t even get one Labor Day gift. My wife never gets out the “Labor Day” decorations but skips right over to Thanksgiving. Labor Day seems to be an “excused” absence from worship since everyone is traveling everywhere but to church.

Labor Day can mean varying things depending on your work or vocation. The pastor gets to preach about the value of labor as revealed in Scripture. (Yes, that’s still coming.) The hospitality industry doesn’t get the weekend off so they use it as an opportunity to raise prices. For our police officers and first responders, it’s a weekend of extra work, snarling traffic and alcohol and drug abuse arrests. And for sports enthusiasts, it means college football season is finally back.

Yes, “work” seems to be dirty, four-letter word to some and yet work often becomes the place to find some “rest” after an activity-filled Labor Day weekend. Go figure! The reason I used

the teaser of a four-letter word is because of an illustration I sometimes used at weddings: As soon as the newlyweds returned from their honeymoon, the young bride called her mother, who lived a couple of hours away. "How did everything go?" her mom asked. "Oh, mother," she began, "The honeymoon was wonderful! So romantic, we had a terrific time. But, mother, on our way back, Andy started using really horrible language. Stuff I'd never heard before. Really terrible four-letter words. You've got to come get me and take me home. Please, Mother!" the new bride sobbed over the telephone. "But, honey," the mother countered, "What four-letter words?" "I can't tell you, Mother, they're too awful! Come get me, please!" "Darling, you must tell me what has gotten you so upset...Tell mother what four-letter words he used." Still sobbing, the bride said, "Mother, he used words like dust, wash, iron, cook, WORK!"

How do you feel about work? Has COVID changed your opinion or feelings about work? Do you resemble the bumper sticker that says, "Work fascinates me. I can sit and watch it for hours"? Or how about this one: "The worst day of fishing is better than the best day of working"? We all tend to resemble this one: "I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go." Do you think work should be in-person or is work better accomplished at home? On the news the other night, I heard a person say that COVID has led them to the reality that there are more important things in life than work. But this person didn't share any means for securing an income for such other important things.

Do you know how Labor Day started? Most of the world celebrates Labor Day on May 1. The September date was chosen way back when because it was halfway between the 4th of July and Thanksgiving. September 5, 1882 saw the first American Labor Day parade. It was held in New York City with 20,000 participants carrying banners calling for eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for recreation. (Too bad that never took hold, right?!)

You've heard the name George Pullman? His company made the sleeping cars for the railroads, the "Pullman sleeping car." In 1880, George designed and built a town near Chicago - Pullman, Illinois - to provide a community for his workers that would be protected from the seductions of the big city. The town was strictly organized: row houses for the assembly and craft workers; modest Victorians for the managers; and a luxurious hotel where Pullman himself lived and where visiting customers, suppliers, and salesman would stay while they were in town. The residents all worked for the Pullman company, their paychecks drawn from Pullman bank, with their rent, set by Pullman, deducted automatically from their weekly wages. The town, and the company, operated smoothly and successfully for more than a decade.

But in 1893, the Pullman company was caught in the economic depression that gripped the entire nation. Orders for railroad sleeping cars declined, and George Pullman was forced to lay off hundreds of employees. Those who remained had to take pay cuts, even while their rents in Pullman-owned homes stayed at previous rates. So the employees walked out, demanding lower rents and higher wages.

The American Railway Union, led by a fiery young socialist named Eugene V. Debs, came to the cause of the strikers, and railroad workers across the nation boycotted trains carrying Pullman cars. Rioting, looting, and burning of railroad cars soon ensued; mobs of non-union workers joined in. The strike instantly became a national issue. President Grover Cleveland, faced with nervous railroad executives and interrupted mail trains, declared the work stoppage a federal crime and deployed 12,000 troops to break the strike. Violence erupted, and two men were killed when U.S. deputy marshals fired on protesters near Chicago. Finally, on August 3, 1894, the strike was declared over. Debs went to prison, his union was disbanded, and Pullman employees signed a pledge that they would never again unionize.

As you can imagine, Labor was not happy. Protests against President Cleveland's harsh methods made the appeasement of the nation's workers a top political priority; after all, 1894 was an election year. In the immediate wake of the strike, legislation was rushed through both houses of Congress, and the bill arrived on President Cleveland's desk just six days after his troops had broken the Pullman strike. The President seized the chance for conciliation, and Labor Day was born. The ploy did not work - he was not reelected. In a final irony, ever since then, Labor Day has been seen as the unofficial start of the campaign season. (Lord, say it isn't so....)

So how does "work" become a clean word, a blessed endeavor? We go to God's Word about the subject. It is important to know that it's sin that has transformed work into a toilsome struggle rather than one more opportunity to praise God. He has given us a purpose and opportunity to join Him in work. Yes, Labor Day gives us a reason to praise God and thank Him for the opportunity to put our gifts and talents to fruitful use. Labor Day is an opportunity to pass on the heritage of the work that has been forged before us to give us the opportunities we enjoy now.

We tend to celebrate some work as being particularly heroic - the work of firefighters, police officers, first responders, nurses and hospital workers. This past year, we lifted up praise for all the front-line workers who stocked the shelves at grocery stores, the servers at restaurants that stayed open, and all those who enabled us to have a "normal" life amidst all the chaos. At the same time, many of us have occupations that don't seem quite as heroic, the kind of work that doesn't make headlines or call for a standing ovation. We may feel like our line of work is often taken for granted or belittled by others. We say things like, "Somebody has to do it." or "It's a living." If we truly consider our work, our vocations, then we understand that much of our labor is actually necessary to the process of what God has given us to do in this life. But work is to be celebrated - to the point that it has a special holiday (holy day) called Labor Day weekend.

God has always honored and provided work. In Genesis 2:2 we read, "*And on the seventh day God finished His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done.*" God is a worker Himself and appreciates rest from that work. He created

us in His image and gave us work to do. We read in Genesis 2:15, *“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”* Prior to sin, work was simply a gift from God. It was the fall into sin that turned fruitful labor into the drudgery of work.

The very same God who was at work in the creation of all things is also the God at work for our salvation. He redeems everything we might call work because He has redeemed us and the entirety of our lives. In one of my favorite hymns, we sing, “Not the labors of my hands; can fulfill Thy Law’s demands...Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling.” (LSB, #761, vv. 2-3) The work by which we are saved is solely the work of our God done for us in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved...”* (Ephesians 2:4-5). Now that’s work - heroic work, life-saving, life-giving, life-restoring work - and it’s all the work of God alone.

But that doesn’t belittle the work each one of us does on a daily basis. The Apostle Paul writes later on in Ephesians 2: *“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:10). Why did God go to all the work of making us His forgiven, redeemed children? Why does a clockmaker make a clock? Yes, to tell time - but so it will work to tell time. Why does a machinist work on a machine? So it will work! Why does a parent or grandparent fix a toy? SO IT WILL WORK! Are you seeing a theme here? Why does God work on us with His forgiving Word and life-changing mercy and grace in order to call us His redeemed people? SO WE WILL WORK! St. Peter writes in his first epistle, *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may declare the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”* (1 Peter 2:9).

When Jesus came from heaven to earth, He honored work. Jesus’ birth was first told to working shepherds. Jesus Himself learned the trade of a carpenter. Jesus chose working men as His disciples. Jesus called them from their labors to become “fishers of men.” That’s the blessed opportunity we have in Christ. Sharing the Gospel as we go about our daily work, vocation and even our rest is quite a work order. But the work our Savior did on our behalf makes it all possible. Passage after passage from the Bible reveals the blessedness of the work God has given us to do: (This is certainly not an exhaustive list.) Exodus 35:35; Colossians 3:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; and of course, 1 Corinthians 15:58, *“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*

Simply put, work gives us many opportunities: to use our gifts and talents to the glory of God, to make a living for our family and to help others, to further the purposes of God in our lives and to turn our labors into a daily ministry. It gives our work new meaning, significance and fulfillment. Our Christian lives are not lived only one day a week, but throughout the work week

as well. In Christ, our work is never in vain. In Christ, work is a celebration of all the work God has done, continues to do and will do for eternity in our lives.

This Labor Day weekend, join me in praying for the rest that comes from the Lord in Word and Sacrament but also in the blessings He has given us from recreation to football games and even Hallmark movies. We celebrate in prayer the work God has given us to do, but we lift up those who are unable to work, those who are unemployed or underemployed, those who are challenged by their work and looking for different jobs, those with disabilities and those retired from their labors but continuing to minister in their vocations. God designed work to be a labor of love as we imitate Him - the One who has worked for us to enjoy eternal blessings with Him.

So consider this your "Happy Labor Day" greeting card and gift. If you have a prayer request concerning your work, share it with us at the email evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org We will pray with you and for you. Work is a gift from God's hand and it is never in vain. May all your labors be a labor of **love** (also a four-letter word). And may your work serve as a blessed ministry for sharing the Good News of God's saving work for the world.

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20