

Proper 18A
September 4, 2011—Labor Day Weekend
Family of Christ Lutheran Church, Chanhassen, Minnesota
Pastor Kristie Hennig

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20 “What’s in Your Closet?”

Labor Day has become an odd jumble of things over the hundred plus years of its time on the American calendar.

Did you know...that in 1894 President Grover Cleveland signed the bill that made the first Monday in September a national holiday to honor working people?... after the workers of the Pullman Railroad Company clashed with U.S. Marshalls and military personnel in a violent confrontation over workers’ rights -- a little-remembered moment in history.

Labor Day marks the unofficial end of summer, too, of course. This is the weekend when we are all about squeezing the last good bits out of the short season we spend the rest of the year longing for.

Labor Day is the traditional day to put away those white shoes – symbol of leisure for the wealthy, who can lounge around in tennis outfits while others (like football players) get their hands dirty.

And, speaking of leisure, Labor Day is the last day of it for school kids.

Labor Day has come to be the day we celebrate the blessings of work...by not working!

And this year, of course, the economy being what it is – and isn’t – Labor Day is about *un*-employment, too.

Last week we received the disappointing news that there were NO new jobs added nationally last month...

Not the direction we wanted this leading economic indicator to be taking.

Here in church, the weekend we’re honoring the working man and woman is a good time to talk about *vocation*, the work a person is called to by God. Literally, vocation means “calling.”

And it’s not just for people who end up being nuns and monks and pastors.

One of Martin Luther’s greatest contributions to the church was his conviction that God calls **every** Christian to a variety of roles and responsibilities.

Today the word *vocation* is often equated with occupation.

But it is much broader than that, Luther said.

People without occupations – such as children and retired and unemployed persons – still have ways they can serve God by serving their neighbors from where they are.

If you are married, marriage is one of your vocations.
If you are a parent, parenting is one of your vocations.
If you are a sister or brother, daughter or son, uncle or aunt, grandparent or neighbor...
you have multiple vocations, lived out in your relationships.
Multiple places God calls you to help God's kingdom come on earth.

There are lots of voices calling us, of course,
and it can be a tricky thing discerning just who or what is behind them:
When is it *God* we hear,
and when is it society or self-interest or family "tapes" or something else that is talking to us?

Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner is helpful with this, I think.
You've heard this before...

"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's great hunger meet."¹

This summer I've been reading the memoir of Ashley Judd,
Hollywood actor and human rights activist.
It's called *All That is Bitter and Sweet*.
Early in the book, she tells the story of beginning to heal after a severe bout of depression.
After many months of seclusion,
she took a trip to L.A. to attend *Vanity Fair's* Oscar party.
She wore Valentino that night –
the designer came to her room to personally tie the sash on her dress –
and she felt "special" as she faced the bank of cameras on the red carpet.
But at the party she felt lonely and isolated.
A friend led her across the room and sat her down next to "an elegant man with a strong
presence...Bobby Shriver."

"We sat there and chatted," she writes.
"He was drawing little sailboats on his paper napkin,
and I assumed he was one of the idle rich.
So I asked him, somewhat facetiously, with a little aggression, 'So do you have a job?'"

He went on to talk about his legal work; his businesses;
the records he was making with Bono, Madonna, and Stevie Wonder
to benefit Special Olympics, the organization his mother, Eunice, had started.
Then Bobby asked Ashley, "What's *your* job?"

And she said, "'Well, acting is my job, but it's not my vocation.'
'So what's your vocation?'" he asked.
And she looked him in the eye, this stranger, and said,
"'My vocation is to make my life an act of worship.'
He pushed back from the table, excused himself, and went to the bathroom.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 119.

Ashley writes that while she believed what she had said, at that point it was more of an aspiration than a reality. She hadn't yet begun her work in the brothels, hospices, and orphanages of Africa and Southeast Asia. But already God was the central fact of her life, the principle around which she tried to organize everything. Her anchor in the storms of a chaotic childhood.

Later, Bobby told her that he hadn't gotten up to use the bathroom; he had to compose himself because he was so floored by her response, "which he thought was the perfect answer... He proved to be the perfect friend," she writes, "and always encouraged me to give more of myself to the sick and suffering, emphasizing that such work is not about pity, it's about justice."²

Maybe acting isn't Ashley Judd's vocation...but it could be. Just like any of the real-life roles and relationships we find ourselves in. It's all about what's in our closets and what we put on each day, wherever we go, whatever we do.



Some wear Versace or Vera Wang...



Some wear meat...

² Ashley Judd, *All That is Bitter and Sweet*, 49-50.



Others wear their hearts on their sleeves...

But Christians wear Jesus –
choosing to love even when it isn't convenient or socially acceptable.
Loving those who don't have a place at the party, inviting them in –
like the Gentiles and tax collectors of Jesus' time,
who were outside the kinship circle of law-abiding Jewish people...
the ones Jesus invited in anyway.

From the very beginning,
Christians were radicals in the love-your-neighbor department.
For the common person in the Roman occupied lands of the ancient world, life was brutal.
There was little respect for the rights and dignity of the human being,
and no notion of community,
of people working together for the good of all.
Jesus taught and modeled a different way – valuing the neighbor as much as the self -- and his
followers, having received this grace, radiated it.
“See how these Christians love one another,” the pagans of the time were heard to say.

I wonder, do our neighbors know *we* are Christians by *our* love?

On this Labor Day weekend, as summer takes a bow,
And we give thanks for the work God calls us to,
Take a moment to consider...
Where is your deep gladness?
What is the world's great hunger?
Where do these two meet?

It's a brand new day.
Go to your closet.
Put on Jesus.

Amen!