

Have you ever wondered how Labor Day came to be? If you have, today is your lucky day! I have the answer. Almost 150 years ago the Central Labor Union of New York suggested a whole day to honor the workers of the state. They organized a demonstration and had a picnic. Twelve years later President Grover Cleveland signed a bill making the first Monday in September a legal holiday for the whole country, and called it Labor Day. And wouldn't you know? In spite of the fact that Labor Day is NOT a high holy day celebrated by the Church, we find the theme of labor imbedded in these lectionary texts from Luke and Jeremiah for today, the first Sunday in September. Jeremiah is the more obvious, so we'll start there.

Jeremiah saw God laboring in everyday life. Well, to be perfectly clear, Jeremiah saw a potter struggling with some clay centered on a wheel as it spun between his hands. Have any of you worked with clay on a potter's wheel? I have. I spent probably half a day seated on that tiny bench, trying to position a blob of clay exactly in the center of the wheel. So I know from bitter experience how easily the potter can spoil the piece. Lots of room for error! A little too much pressure from one hand, and not enough with the other; too much water or not enough, and pretty soon you have something that does not even look like a pot, or cup, or plate. Then you stop the wheel, pick up the clay, and start all over again.

So, when Jeremiah saw that potter struggling with the clay, he wondered if God had similar struggles with the Children of Israel. For Jeremiah, a potter's experience shaping a pot became an allegory, with God being the potter and Israel being the clay. And when the Children of Israel don't turn out the way God intended, God (aka *The Potter*) works to reshape them. When Jeremiah wrote the words that Sue read, he wanted the people to know that God saw bad things happening in Israel, and was warning them to straighten up.

That's the story in Jeremiah. The story in Luke has a similar labor theme, but his is not an allegory; this story is for real. The chapters preceding the one we're reading today describe Jesus recruiting volunteers to follow him. And after they've agreed to follow him, to work with him, he does what every good employer does – he tells them what to expect if they take the job.

- **Verse 26: *Put this job first; your family and friends come last.*** You may have winced as I read this verse from the Bible: *Hate your family!* How can we hate the very people God gave us to love? Doesn't make sense to me! Fortunately, a quick dive into the dictionary delivers the clarity we seek. The "hate" word we see in most English translations has two meanings: the first is *to detest; to have a strong aversion to*; and the second is *to consider less favorably so as to not give preferential treatment*. Now, THAT makes sense! If I had been on the translation committee, I would have urged something like "If you want to come with me, don't give preferential treatment to your family and friends. Put your work as a disciple above everything else in your life." *This job comes first.*
- **Verse 27: *You will be subject to transfer.*** Luke writes that Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." Most interpreters tie this sentence to the crucifixion to remind us of the day Jesus walked down the road carrying the huge cross upon which he would later die, and they suggest "taking up our crosses" refers to the suffering and burdens of the Christian life. I don't think that's what he meant. Here again the dictionary sheds light. The word translated "cross" literally means "stake" like the little stakes campers hammer into the ground to tie down the ropes that hold up their tents, or the taller "posts" they put in the center to hold up the roof. All the same word. I believe in this instance Jesus wants those who would follow him to know that they cannot expect to stay where they are forever. If you want this job as a disciple, you may be asked to pull up your stakes and relocate. It happens! Our Pastor Todd "pulled up" his stakes in Texas and relocated to Tulsa. *You will be subject to transfer.*

➤ ***And verse 28 tells us the third expectation: Think about it before you accept this position.*** At several points in the Gospels we read about people having second thoughts, some even doubting him. Have you seen people ask for volunteers and eager hands wave high before they find out what they're being asked to do? Little children are especially gullible before they learn. Jesus wanted none of that – he wanted them to think carefully before committing to be a disciple; he wanted them to think about the cost. Through the centuries, being a disciple of Jesus has cost Christians a lot . . . sometimes even their lives. I'm guessing we have all considered the cost, to some extent. After all, we're here in worship rather than being somewhere else. In the words of the old hymn, "we have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back."

However, in our world where profit often comes before people, working for Jesus can be dangerous. How we choose to work out our discipleship could put us at odds with family and friends – all that political stuff, you know! Or we could lose a promotion in our jobs if we're asked to do something at odds with our faith.

It's not easy to work for Jesus. We must put this work before our families and friends; we will be subject to transfer. That is why we gather here on Sundays to reinforce each other, to build each other up from the challenges of being a disciple in our chosen work.

And that is why we come to this Table every so often to be strengthened by these bits of grain of the field and juice from the fruit of the vine. Whether it is Labor Day, the first Monday in September, or any day that we labor as followers of Jesus, we find signs of God's love -- these gifts of God for the people of God.