

September 1, 2019

“According to His Purpose”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Romans 8:28

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

It's Labor Day weekend – I can't believe it! Seems like summer just got started and now it's over. And even though this makes me sad, I've heard it said that Labor Day is really the best American holiday because the children and grandchildren are going back to school. They actually thought of calling it Independence Day or Thanksgiving Day, but those names were already taken. And, if you remember, Staples had one of the best advertisements of all time for Labor Day using a very familiar song, “It's the most wonderful time of the year!”

Well, this is also the last Sunday for our beach services and the last of our sermon series on the promises of God and Christ Jesus. So today, I'm going to share with you my favorite promise of God. It's from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and are called according to his purpose.” “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and are called according to his purpose.” In a sense, this promise is perfect for Labor Day – the day we honor the laborer, the worker. Why? Well, first because work is a principle that is held high throughout the Bible. And it starts with God. Genesis tells us, “On the seventh day God rested from all the work he had done.” So it makes sense that God puts us to work as well. Genesis also tells us, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work and keep it.” Ecclesiastes tells us, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should find enjoyment in his toil.” Colossians tells us, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” And the psalmist tells us, “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands, you shall be blessed, and it shall go well for you.” So by working... at a job, volunteering, learning, or contributing in some way to the common good, we are, in effect, fulfilling God's purpose.

And second, because work is what has built our country. If you look at our history, the truth is that our progress and advancements, our way of life, our fundamental democratic ideals, have been inspired by the American laborer: the farmer, the factory worker, the wage earner. Because it has been through honest hard work, that our ancestors provided for their families, and worked to raise their standard of living. And the cycle continues, doesn't it? Don't we all want a better life for our children and grandchildren? Yes, our work allows us to participate in our own small way in God's continuing creation and reflects our human dignity and purpose.

There's a wonderful poem that speaks to the importance of honest work by the poet Kahlil Gibran, called *The Palace and The Hut*, written over a hundred years ago, halfway around the world. Listen carefully because I have a question for you at the end. “Part 1. As night fell and the lights came on in the great house, the servants stood at the massive door awaiting the honored guests. Magnificent carriages drew into the palace park and the nobles entered dressed in gorgeous raiment, decorated with fine jewels. Instruments filled the air with pleasant melodies while the dignitaries danced to the music. At midnight the finest and most palatable foods were served on a beautiful table embellished with all kinds of the rarest flowers. The revelers dined and drank abundantly. At dawn the throng disbursed boisterously, after spending a hollow night of intoxication and gluttony, which hurried their worn bodies into their beds with unnatural sleep. Part 2. At eventide, a man attired in the dress of honest labor stood before the door of his small house and knocked. As it opened, he entered and greeted the occupants in a cheerful manner, and then sat down between his children who were playing at the fireplace. In a short time, his wife had the meal prepared and they all sat at a wooden table enjoying their food. After eating they gathered around the oil lamp and talked of the day’s events. When early night had lapsed, all stood and surrendered themselves to their bed with a song of praise and a prayer of gratitude (to God) on their lips.” Now, in your heart of hearts, which part of the poem is most appealing to you? That’s what I thought. So happy Labor Day!

Now let's get back to the promise. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and are called according to his purpose.” I mentioned this is my favorite promise – because when I see the words, “all things...God works...good,” it gives me a feeling of hope and assurance. It tells me that in all things – all things, even the hard things, the troubling things, the unsettling things, God is at work for good in my life. And believing that, then no matter what happens, I can live confidently and joyfully. And the same can hold true for you! That’s why it’s such a wonderful promise! But, did you notice – this promise is conditional. The verse is rather specific as to the two things we must do in order to claim the promise. One – we must love God, and two – we must work for his purpose. On the surface, this sounds more than reasonable and it should be easy. But let’s look at each condition. First – love God. My guess is that all of us would say we love God. Yet so often our love for God gets sidetracked. Because as we labor through this life, our culture entices us to measure what our purpose should be and what’s good and what can make us happy by worldly standards: things like prosperity and material possessions, personal gratification, power and more. We work hard for these things, and it takes up so much of our time, our energy, our attention, that we become focused on

ourselves. Consequently, our love for God can often degenerate into self-love – or pride. Now pride is when we are more concerned about what we think of ourselves, or what others think of us, rather than what God thinks of us. Pride is when we take too much credit for our lives and our achievements because we look at our lives as products of our own work rather than as gifts from our Creator. And Jesus takes issue with this. In fact, he once told a parable in this regard. He spoke of a great banquet, and described all the maneuverings that people went through in order to sit up front, to gain a place of honor and prestige. They were absorbed with self. And in the parable, Jesus cautioned as to how easy it is to lose this seat up front. His point is that we instead, are to be humble before God. Because humility is a rich soil in which love for God will easily grow. Not so with pride! And so we need to stay focused on loving God.

The second condition to the promise that God will work all things to our good, is that we are to work for God's purposes. And we know what those are - it's the same things Jesus worked for and showed us - love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, justice. Yes, we are to be about God's work every day, in all we do and in the way we think about the people and the world around us. I want to go back to Jesus and his parable. Because he takes his banquet table illustration one giant step further. He tells us that when you and I give a luncheon or dinner, we are to invite to our table not our friends or relatives, but the poor, the crippled, and the blind. What Jesus is saying is really a metaphor. What he's really taking about is that love for others, especially those less fortunate. And let me share an appropriate example here on Labor Day. Appropriate because one of the biggest issues facing us in this country today is the question of illegal immigration and who is invited to the table. It seems to me it should be pretty straightforward to put in place laws and structures that will keep criminals, drug cartels and violent gangs from coming across our borders. But our politicians are failing us on this. Because I believe that the overwhelming majority of immigrants are not here to commit crimes or steal our social services or take our jobs. Instead, they're working. They're cleaning our toilets, doing our laundry, collecting our garbage, mowing our lawns, picking our crops, and working in our factories. Ironic, isn't it, that they are doing jobs that so many Americans don't want to do because it's not considered honorable or prestigious. Most come here just so they can feed their families and build a better life and earn even the most humble seat at the table of life in the richest and most affluent country in the world. It should make us ask the question – what is God's purpose in this situation?

“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and are called according to his purpose.” To claim this wonderful promise of God, we must love God, and work according to his purpose. As Rev. J. Ellsworth Kalas writes, that means we are to rise above cynicism and indifference and recognize that since God cares and loves all of us, we ought to care and love in the same measure. Because God, indeed, has a purpose for our world and for each and every one of us. And that purpose is good. Absolute, perfect, and glorious good! I can’t promise that any of us will escape life's futilities and sorrows. But I truly believe that all these sometimes unpleasant elements of life will work toward a good purpose. Nor can I tell you that God can bring the good to pass unaided. God is counting on our cooperation, yours and mine. We are to be a people of purpose, God’s purpose. And then God, who has worked with us at all the various and sundry places in our lives, will shape them together with his divine touch until all comes together for good. Some of them in this world, and some in the world to come.¹ Amen

¹ Promises That Keep Us, J.E. Kalas