

September 5, 2021

*“Labor Day Thoughts”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Genesis 3:17-19

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Whew! Those certainly are some very harsh words from God to Adam and Eve about how hard they were going to have to work because they ate from the tree God told them not to eat from. About how they, and subsequently we, will have to toil and sweat in order to plant, to gather, to earn, to eat, to get through this life, until that time we die and return to the ground from which we were formed. Now perhaps God could have softened what he said with something like, “Okay, you two I'm giving you both a time out. Then we're going to discuss what you did wrong, and what your responsibilities are going to be in order for you to pull your weight around here from now on.” He could have said that. But he didn't. The end result, however, is the same. We all have to work in this life. But still, I thought these verses appropriate for Labor Day Sunday. Why? Because I truly believe our hard work matters to God.

For just consider all that God has done and what he has created. The flowers and fauna, the sea and sky, the animals and all things on the face of this earth and beyond. Wow! What a master craftsman, what a master artisan! So since we are made in the image of God, I suspect he would like us to work in a similar fashion. Doing our best no matter what our station is in this life. Because, providing we work with this goal in mind, we all contribute to the common good. The scientist, the delivery person, the store clerk, the waitress, the firefighter, police officer, the laborer, the retired person volunteering, the single mom raising up her children the right way, even those addicted or lost who are working to change for the better. And speaking of dedication to the common good, I want to pay tribute to those Marines who died in Afghanistan for a humanitarian cause in the service of our country. Their work, hopefully, was not in vain. (Pause)

So like I said, we all have to work. Or do we? How many of you have heard about the Book of Wisdom? It's not in our Protestant Bible, but it is in the Catholic Bible. Tradition says it was written by King Solomon, as was the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs tells us that “wisdom” was there with God at the very beginning of Creation. So let's hear what the Book of Wisdom says: “Short and sorrowful is life. We were born by mere chance and when we die we will return to ashes. Our allotted time is like the passing of a shadow. So come therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist. Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes. In doing so, let us oppress the poor man, let us not spare the widow, nor regard the gray hairs of the aged. But let our might be our law of right.”

What this passage is saying is why not simply play and take everything we can get out of this life with no regard to our own future well-being, or that of others. I'm sure many of us probably know some individuals like that. But – this passage really is meant to be mocking. For in the next few verses, it defines this attitude as ungodly. It says that those who think this way will grow old without honor and have no hope on the day of judgment, for their labors will be unprofitable and their work, useless. It speaks about how the offshoots of the ungodly won't take deep root or establish a sure hold. That they will be shaken by the wind and uprooted. But a righteous person, through his hard work and honest labor, even if he dies before his time, will be at rest and considered honorable. His name will be remembered by God. And his labor will bear fruits of great renown, a testament for future generations. So the Book of Wisdom is telling us, as well, that our labor matters.

So with that in mind, I'm going to tell you a story by author James Lane Allen, about a William Solomon. Solomon was a real-life figure who lived through the cholera pandemic that ravaged America in the 1830's. I'm sure over time facts may have been stretched, but the bulk of this tale is true. Solomon was a native of Virginia, but he moved to Lexington, Kentucky in the 1790s. He was a tall muscular specimen and earned his living by digging cellars. But he also had a passion for liquor. In the early 1830's Solomon would've been in his fifties and by then, he had become known as the town drunk. Either unable or unwilling to work, and homeless, he wandered Lexington in rags and slept in doorways. At the time, Lexington was a center of culture, education, and aristocracy and was frequently referred to as the “Athens” of the West. It was also the hometown of Henry Clay, who was one of America's greatest attorneys and statesmen. The locals were embarrassed by Solomon's presence and for fun they took to calling the hapless drunk, King Solomon. In 1833, the Lexington Court declared him a vagrant with no means of support, and the sheriff publicly auctioned Solomon off as an indentured servant. The highest bidder would have Solomon's services as a laborer for one year. A crowd jeered him as he stood on the auction block. Legend has it that a law student shouted that a rag picker should buy Solomon to get his clothes. A medical student bid a \$1.50 remarking that the old drunk would likely die within the year and the student could use his body to practice dissecting. As the bids escalated, an elderly free black woman known as Aunt Charlotte pushed her way through the crowd. To the crowd's astonishment she began bidding and won Solomon for the sum of \$13. Solomon a white man, was bought by Aunt Charlotte, a former slave. But you see, she had actually known him many years before when she was enslaved herself in Virginia, and Solomon was a playmate of her master's son. This must have deepened Solomon's shame, if he had any shame left. Aunt Charlotte

purchased Solomon because she couldn't bear to see him sold into the bondage that she had known once too well. And, when the crowd drifted away, she quickly set Solomon free.

Soon after his auction, cholera erupted in Lexington and people began dying gruesomely by the dozens. Nearly everyone in the city panicked. They packed their wagons to flee the city, desperate to escape the disease. Among those who departed were all the city's gravediggers. Aunt Charlotte and King Solomon were preparing to flee as well when they learned that bodies were piling up in the cemetery because no one remained to bury them. Now what changed Solomon isn't told. Perhaps he realized the brevity of life and the need for repentance? Perhaps he realized it was time to do something toward the common good. Perhaps the spirit of "wisdom" whispered in his ears? Whatever it was, Solomon gathered up a set of cellar digging tools, walked to the cemetery and started hollowing out graves. When he finished one grave, Solomon dug another. No one had to ask for his help, he just gave it. Aunt Charlotte stayed in town to look after Solomon, though unfortunately, she too died of the disease. All that summer, at the risk of his own life, he dug grave after grave. Often he worked through the night. Exhausted he would collapse into a half finished hole, sleep for a few hours, then continued his labor. Frequently, he was the only living person present for the funerals of those who died. Some of those he buried were men, or families of men, who earlier had ridiculed him. Eventually, the cholera epidemic subsided. People returned to Lexington and society returned to normal.

That fall, the courts opened again. On that first day it was rumored that the famous Henry Clay might argue a case, an event that always drew a packed house. As told, King Solomon was among those who pressed into the courtroom. He took a seat in the back against a wall. The court room fell silent as the judge entered and sat. For a moment he studied the crowd, and then he spied Solomon. The spectators were waiting for the trial to start. Instead, the judge rose and stepped into the crowd. All eyes followed him. He walked to the back, to Solomon, and stood before him. Then, solemnly, the judge shook his hand. You see, old King Solomon had buried his wife and daughter one clouded midnight with no one present but himself. The judge tried to speak, but was too overcome by emotion. As he walked away, an elite member of the bar stood and like the judge, strode to the back of the courtroom. He, too, shook Solomon's hand. In turn each lawyer in the room also stood and went to grasp the gravedigger's hand. Then the spectators lined up to follow the lawyers. Men from every stratum of society filed by. Solomon at first appeared confused. Then, as he recognized he was being honored, he started to weep. Soon everyone in the entire courtroom was crying. The author concludes his version of the story with

this comment. “Such power has one single act of mortal greatness to reverse the relations of men, lifting one up, and bringing all others to do him homage. It was the coronation scene in the life of old King Solomon of Kentucky.” Solomon died in the poor house in 1854. Citizens of Lexington brought his coffin and laid him to rest in the splendid Lexington Cemetery. In 1908 they erected a prominent monument to him there. You can see it there today. Its tourist appeal perhaps ranks only second to Henry Clay's massive monument. And its inscription reads, “For had he not a royal heart.”

For us, the lesson is clear. Our work, our labor, matters greatly – to God and to others, regardless of what our station may be in this life. As St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as if working for the Lord, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Jesus Christ you are serving.” Amen.