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“WORKING FOR WHAT?”

John 6:24-35

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The United States Department of Labor describes Labor Day on their website as “a creation of the labor movement” that “is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.”¹

Apparently, however, there are differences of opinion regarding who originated the idea of Labor Day. It seems that “Some records show that Peter J. McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and a co-founder of the American Federation of Labor, was first in suggesting a day to honor those ‘who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold.’”²

On the other hand, some have challenged the notion that Peter McGuire was the first to identify the idea of Labor Day. The Department of Labor reports, “Many believe that Matthew Maguire, a machinist, not Peter McGuire, founded the holiday. Recent research seems to support the contention that Matthew Maguire, later the secretary of Local 344 of the International Association of Machinists in Paterson, N.J., proposed the holiday in 1882 while serving as secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. What is clear is that the Central Labor Union adopted a Labor Day proposal and appointed a committee to plan a demonstration and picnic.”³

In any case, after several municipalities and states began to celebrate an annual Labor Day, on June 28, 1884, an act of Congress made the first Monday in September each year a holiday.⁴

As we gather together on this Labor Day weekend giving thanks for those who labor in fields, factories, forests, farms, offices, and a variety of other locations throughout our nation to improve the lives of their families as well as for the common good, it seems appropriate that our scripture lesson reflects some words that Jesus speaks about labor and works.

In our lesson this morning, Jesus is addressing the crowds that had searched him out following the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, an act that may have left him in need of a break. Five thousand people, not including women and children, is no small dinner party. His dialogue with the crowds in the lesson seems almost as contentious as the history of who founded Labor Day.

If we read the beginning part of this chapter, John tells us that after Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish that a young boy had brought forward, the disciples got in a boat and headed over to Capernaum. When the sea got rough, Jesus met them out on the sea.

While the crowds see the disciples get into the boat and head towards Capernaum, they do not see Jesus get in. So when they run over to the other side of the sea and find him, they ask, “When did you come here?”⁵ They’re curious. Jesus’ sudden appearance must have left them wondering, “Hey! How did you get here? We saw the disciples leave, but you. . . .”

Jesus, however, turns the conversation around on them. You may remember that in John’s Gospel, miracles are not some magical works to be performed, but rather they are signs that point to deeper realities like God’s presence in their midst in Jesus Christ. In response to their questions about how he arrived, Jesus simply tells them that they didn’t come looking for him because of the signs that they saw, but rather because they ate their fill and were no longer hungry.

Jesus notes that they sought him out because their physical needs were met, almost implying that they’ve missed the spiritual message (food) when they were physically fed. So he instructs them, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”⁶

In other words, as they’ve chased Jesus around the Sea of Galilee because he filled their bodies, his real desire is to help them to experience the God who longs to fill their souls and spirits. He says that this food will be given to them by the Son of Man, by himself. The bread they ate was a sign of God’s presence with them. You see, then, this spiritual food (discovered in the sign of the physical bread they ate) will endure for eternal life. It is a gift of grace. It’s not something they can simply earn or attain.

Immediately the crowds want to know how they can perform the works of God like Jesus did. They want to know what they have to do. Jesus responds, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”⁷

Friends, do you see how this conversation is going? The crowd looks for Jesus who filled their stomachs. Jesus tries to point out that God is present with them. For Jesus, it’s about more than full stomachs. If they’ll take a second look, they’ll discover grace. The food was merely a sign of that grace. Yet, the crowds want to know what they can do to be able to do the same things Jesus does. Jesus is telling them that they can’t earn this food, this grace, or this work that he does, it is received by believing that God is indeed with them in Christ.

Finally, the crowds ask Jesus for a sign. They’re saying, “Give us a miracle so that we can believe in you if we are to believe in you. What work might you perform for us so we can believe?” They remind Jesus, “Moses gave us manna in the wilderness.” They don’t seem to get it, as they’re back to signs again.

Jesus reminds them that the manna, the bread from heaven that came with Moses in the wilderness, was from God. They've missed that the bread that they've just consumed was the sign that they might believe. They've missed that they've already had their sign.

How many times are we in the church so like these crowds? We want to know what more we have to do as we seek to be faithful. We wait around, hoping for the next big miracle that will help us to know that everything will be all right. Often, we think that the miracle, or God's acts of grace, might even depend on us. If only we were more faithful, or worked harder, or read our Bibles more, or prayed more often, or attended church more frequently, then everything would be better for us; we'd sense God's presence more; we'd always have our fill.

I can remember the story of a woman in one of my congregations whose husband had been diagnosed with dementia. Shortly after his diagnosis they did some traveling to some very holy places together. She later told me that they'd prayed at some of the holiest altars in the world, but he was never healed. Where is God when you're being as faithful as you can be in those moments?

Later we were able to talk about how God showed up in the grace of visits from church members who reached out to them and prayed with them. God was present when others told stories of how her husband had made such a difference in their lives. While the prayers prayed at high altars did not produce all that they had hoped for, she discovered the moments of grace that God had shared in the time that they shared until he passed on to eternal life.

In another story, The Rev. Dr. Ozzie E. Smith, Jr. tells of a young man and his sister who went to visit their grandma one summer. It seems that they were playing in the backyard one day as grandma watched over them. That day, the young boy was playing with a slingshot in the yard. After aiming at a few different things, he eventually took aim at his grandmother's only duck. He drew back and let his pellet fly. Sure enough, it hit the duck and the duck died. While he didn't think that grandma saw anything, there was only one problem that day: his sister saw it and knew all about it. She wasn't going to let him live it down, either.

After a little while, their grandmother called them in for a nice lunch. At the end of lunch, his grandmother said to his sister, "Sadie, why don't you wash the dishes?"

And she said, "Oh, no, my brother will gladly wash the dishes!"

And he said, "I didn't say that!"

She whispered to him, "Don't forget the duck. Don't forget the duck!" And so he went on to wash the dishes.

When the dishes were done, Grandmother said, "Sadie, why don't you sweep up the kitchen?" But Sadie said, "Oh, I don't want to do that right now. My brother will be glad to do that, Grandmother." He said, "I didn't say I would do that." She reminded him quietly, "Don't forget about the duck!"

This time, however, the young boy had had enough. So he went to his grandmother and said, “Grandma, I want to confess something. I shot your duck today with my slingshot, and Sadie has been reminding me about it all day long.”

Grandma said, “Honey, I know. I saw it. I was just wondering how long you were going to allow her to make a fool out of you about the duck.”⁸

Like the crowds that gathered around Jesus, or the church member who prayed faithfully for healing for her husband in the holiest of places, or the younger brother who shot grandma’s prize duck, all too often it becomes easy for us to believe that God’s grace, God’s love, God’s power, God’s goodness is available to us when we work for it. Do you know what it’s like to work harder and search the heavens for a sign that God is journeying with you, friends? Yet, Jesus reminded the crowds that God was present with them right then and there, as their stomachs were filled and even as they ran around the sea to find him. They didn’t have to work like crazy to attain grace, but God was always reaching out to them in love and care. God was with them, offering them more than food for bodies, but nourishment for their souls.

Jesus said, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” In that moment, it was like a lightbulb went off for the crowds. Rather than asking once more what they must do or demand proof (or signs), they simply asked, “Sir, give us this bread.”

And Jesus responded, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Today, we gather around the communion table once more to receive bread that is more than nourishment for our bodies. We gather to share bread and cup knowing that God in Christ is present with us whenever we gather around this table. We call it a mystery, acknowledging that we’re not completely aware how God is here. We simply have come to believe that when we share in this place, God is with us. It’s not about anything we do or don’t do, but about a God who promised to be with us when we break bread and share a cup. And the grace that God has for us in these moments is enough; enough to sustain us on the journey of our life and our faith.

Here, at this table, we are transformed, as were the crowds when Jesus spoke to them that day. As we come forward to receive the bread, someone will usually say, “The body of Christ,” to which we often respond, “Amen,” or “So be it.”

St. Augustine once said, “If you, therefore, are Christ’s body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying ‘Amen’ to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear ‘The body of Christ’, you reply ‘Amen.’ Be a member of Christ’s body, then, so that your “Amen” may ring true!”⁹

We come to this table by God’s grace as the body of Christ. Here in this place, we receive Christ’s presence with us that we may arise to live as Christ’s body, Christ’s presence, in the world, that our “amen” may ring true in our own lives. Are you looking for a sign that God is with you this morning? Here it is...as we gather around a table...as we break bread...God is with

us. As we partake of broken bread, may we rise to be the sign that God is present in the world for those who long to know that God journeys with them, as well.

¹ <https://www.dol.gov/general/laborday/history>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John 6:25, NRSV.

⁶ John 6:27, NRSV.

⁷ John 6:29, NRSV.

⁸ http://day1.org/504-what_do_you_want

⁹ St Augustine, Sermon 272. (<http://www.st-augustinechurch.com/eucharist/>)