

WGUMC September 3, 2017 "The Labor of a Christian"
Romans 12:1-21

One of the newspapers Hank gets is called *The Catholic Worker*. It was started back in 1933 in the depths of the Depression by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. The intent of the newspaper was laid out in the first issue:

For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight.

For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain.

For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work.

For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight - this little paper is addressed.

It is printed to call their attention to the fact that the Catholic Church has a social program - to let them know that there are men of God who are working not only for their spiritual, but for their material welfare.

It's time there was a Catholic paper printed for the unemployed.

The fundamental aim of most radical sheets is the conversion of its readers to radicalism and atheism.

Is it not possible to be radical and not atheist?

Is it not possible to protest, to expose, to complain, to point out abuses and demand reforms without desiring the overthrow of religion?

In an attempt to popularize and make known the encyclicals of the Popes in regard to social justice and the program put forth by the Church for the “reconstruction of the social order,” this news sheet, *The Catholic Worker*, is started.

On this Labor Day weekend, I find myself thinking about Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement she started because I want to know if there is a particular Christian approach to work. Day and Maurin certainly thought so. In their struggle for worker's rights, they were determined to follow the advice of Saint Paul, to not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds so that they could discern what was the will of God, what was good and acceptable and perfect. [Rom 12:2]

And so they founded a counter-cultural movement on the principle of "active love," which Saint Paul would call "genuine love," a love that requires a life-long commitment to doing works of mercy. For all who join the Catholic Worker movement and live in one of their many communal residences, there is a

lot of work to do. There are "corporal works of mercy," such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the imprisoned. And there are "spiritual works of mercy," such as admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, and comforting the sorrowful.

The distinguishing marks of the Catholic Worker are deeply rooted in Scripture and they line up very well with what my Bible calls the "marks of the true Christian" in Romans 12. In these verses, we learn all about the labor of a Christian.

The list begins with "Let love be genuine," in other words, real, alive, active. Genuine love is a love that will get us out of our arm chairs. After Neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville, spewing hatred in every direction, thousands of Christians nationwide left their sanctuaries and took to the streets to witness to the truth that only love can drive out hate.

Charlottesville reminds us that Christians are needed as much as ever today because we know that hating the haters only

perpetuates the hate. This country needs followers of Jesus who can show that it is possible to hate what is evil—racism, for instance—without hating the people who have embraced it, the poor souls who have been ensnared by it.

The labor of a Christian is to hold fast to the good, no matter what, and to love the unlovable, until they are capable of loving, too. Considering how wounded, how spiritually and psychologically damaged much of the world is, this is going to be a very long labor, so we can't afford to lag in zeal. We must always be ardent in spirit. And to sustain our spirits, we must first love and serve the Lord. So I commend you for coming to church on Labor Day weekend, because our labor starts here, in praise and prayer.

This is where we get the grace to "rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." This is where we get the strength to "contribute to the needs of the saints; extend

hospitality to strangers...live in harmony...associate with the lowly...[and] feed [our enemies]."

But how are we to do any of these things, let alone all of them? Paul teaches us that we are saved by our faith, not by our works, so why do we have to do all these good deeds?

The Methodist answer to that question is that though we are not saved *by* our works, we are saved *for* them. It is because God has loved us so much that we not only *can* but genuinely *want* to love others. So why do we so often fail at loving? If these are the marks of a true Christian, why do our own lives bear so few of them?

The truth is that not every one of us is going to exhibit all the marks of a Christian. As Paul points out, we all have different gifts and different measures of grace. No one promised us that we would get all the gifts, all the grace. In fact, it seems to me that God often puts us in situations where we can't use the gifts we think we have. Have you ever

wondered why you end up in a job or in a relationship that exposes all your weaknesses rather than your strengths? Is this God trying to be funny?

Case in point: I was incredibly shy growing up. I wasn't comfortable talking to strangers. So what was I doing going to seminary? I had a brain injury and a bad memory. Why did God give me a job that would expect me to keep track of a lot of names and faces? I was an introvert, probably better suited for a life in academia. What was God thinking when God called me into the ministry?

Ministry isn't the only vocation that requires a lot of different kinds of gifts. Any job worth doing requires more gifts than we've got. But that's just God's way of reminding us, in Paul's words, not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Being human is very humbling, and what we humans ought to think is that none of us can have it all. None of us can be it all. And none of us can do it all. Doing what is

good and acceptable and perfect is not something that any one of us can do by ourselves. To be "perfect in love," as Wesley used to say, is a group project. We may each have a few marks of the true Christian, but we need the whole Church in order to be remarkable.

One thing I've learned in the ministry is that introverts need extroverts, because extroverts do not lag in zeal and they are ardent in spirit as they serve the Lord. They find it easy to reach out and extend hospitality to strangers, and they are quick to rejoice with those who rejoice. Extroverts love to party.

But extroverts also need introverts, because introverts are determined not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. They find it easier to reach in. They excel at thinking with sober judgment. They are usually good listeners. They are patient with suffering and comfortable around people who are hurting. They will weep

with those who weep. Introverts will pass on the party, but they yearn for deep intimacy.

For the Body of Christ to be healthy, we need every body. To do the labor of a Christian, we need everyone's gifts, everyone's graces. I definitely need you, because I don't have all the gifts I need to do what God has called us to do. Can you remember names and welcome newcomers or help us update our pictorial directory? We need you. Can you run a meeting, lead a small group, or plan a party? We need you. Can you sing in the choir or band, teach a Sunday School class, mentor some youth, or provide hospitality to homeless strangers? We need you. Can you read a spreadsheet, refresh a website, make a slideshow, or run the projector? We need you. Can you change a lightbulb, climb a ladder, or weed in the garden? We need you. Can you pray for the sick or visit the shut-in or make a meal for a single mom? We need you.

You may say to me, "I don't have the gifts (or the time) to do what you are asking me to do." And that may be true. But I'll want to say back to you, "What makes you think that God isn't calling you anyway?"

Friends, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. [Luke 10:2] It's time to harness up. So better come to the table. We are laborers in God's field. We are God's farmworkers. And we won't be strong enough to bring in the harvest for God unless we gather as often as we can around this table to share in the cup and to eat of the Bread of Life. So our slogan today is: Christian workers of the world, imbibe!