

Faith Mennonite Church
August 31, 2008

The Divine Rhythm of Labor and Rest
Genesis 1:26-2:3; Matthew 11:28-30

The national holiday that we will celebrate tomorrow, Labor Day, has its roots in the growing labor movements of the late 19th century. What began as a New York City event, organized by the Central Labor Union in 1882, soon spread to other industrial cities, states, and eventually to the whole country. Labor Day was to be the “workingman’s holiday” and traditional celebrations included speeches by labor union officials. In election years, like this one, those speeches are often used by candidates to gain union support and vice versa.

As the global economy has changed and as labor organizations have weakened and diminished, Labor Day has become much more an end-of-summer, one last long-weekend holiday. I’m not sure how many folks actually pause to consider the origins of the day or to acknowledge the important role that labor unions played in this country in protecting workers against excessive hours in poor if not dangerous working conditions for which they received sub-standard wages.

The original day was about dignity – recognizing the value of every worker regardless of how menial their job might be, and the value of rest, particularly for those in physically demanding, repetitious jobs. I doubt that there has ever been a time in human history when labor hasn’t meant drudgery for some parts of society. And drudgery has often been paired with misery and brutality when persons enslave fellow human beings to do the most burdensome work. But the industrial revolution and advances in mechanization, paired with a capitalist economic system, took a particular toll on laborers, causing what Wendall Berry calls “radical disconnections between body and soul, husband and wife, marriage and community, community and the earth.”¹ Our modern economic system all too often separates workers from the creative aspects of labor and treats them as mere “factors of production.”

The biblical tradition offers a positive holistic view of work and of laborers. Our first encounter with God, in the creation accounts of Genesis, reveals a God at work. God is creating order from chaos, giving shape to what was void. Some might see early evidence of mechanization and specialization in the Genesis 1 account of creation. This poetic view of creation has God working a day at a time, bringing forth the creation in a sort of assembly line. And yet God pauses at each stage to bless the work and call it “very good.” And when we transition to chapter two, we encounter a more impulsive, playful God, mucking in the mud as God goes about creating the first humans.

According to Genesis, we humans were created “in the image of God.” And God immediately calls the newly-created humans to take part in the care of the rest of creation. God promises provisions—food from the plants that they will tend. What a beautiful picture, echoed centuries later by the prophet Micah: “but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid” (4:4).

Today we give thanks for the many and diverse ways persons in our faith community are able to work creatively to bring about things that are “very good.” Some of this takes place in the context of work we do for pay; some of it is in the form of volunteer activities, and much of it takes place in the context of our homes, in the care of ourselves, our families and our dwelling places and in our hobbies.

But all too often we lose our sense of the “very good,” of the creative and re-creative aspects of work. We lose the rhythm of work and rest in a 24-7 economy, and find ourselves constantly tired. Those working in human services do not always have the satisfaction at the end of the day of knowing whether their work has made a difference because the needs are ongoing and overwhelming. Those whose primary activity is homemaking and childcare can weary of the day-to-day repetition, their work so quickly consumed at the end of each meal.

No matter what our occupation, our biblical texts today call us to two important tasks: First we must bless all that we do by naming it “very good” and then we must regularly rest. How do we do this blessing of things that lack a creative element? The changing of diapers, the scrutiny of numbers in escrow accounts, emptying the laundry basket, returning phone calls and replying to email? Brother Lawrence, a monk in a Carmelite monastery back in the 17th century, is remembered for his “spirituality of the kitchen,” the place he was assigned to work. Brother Lawrence didn’t just pray before and after work, but as he wrote:

...as I [work], I would continue to hold familiar [conversation], offering to [God] my little acts of service, entreating the unfailing succor of [God’s] grace. When I had finished, I would examine how I had performed my duty: if I found well, I gave [God] thanks; if ill, I besought [God’s] pardon, and without losing heart I set my spirit right, and returned anew into [God’s] presence, as though I had never wandered from Him. Thus, by rising after every fall, and by doing all in faith and love, without wearying, I have come to a state in which it would be as little possible for me not to think of God, as it was hard to discipline myself thereto in the beginning.²

A more contemporary author, Brenda Peterson, provides another perspective: “When we clean up after ourselves, whether it’s a spilled jar, a broken chair, a disorganized study, or a death, we can see and reflect upon our own life and perhaps envision a new way that won’t be so broken, so violent, so unconscious. By cleaning up our own homes we take responsibility for ourselves and for preserving what we love. [. . .] The . . . attitude of getting down on our hands and knees to scour—and at the most primitive level look at what needs cleaning—deserves our attention. For in this gesture of bended knees is some humility, some meditation, some time to recognize the foundation of our homes.”³

We bless all that we do by valuing all that we do and by being fully present in each task, thinking of how it is connected to something larger, how it contributes to the good of others.

And we must take time to rest. We tend to associate rest with vacations, with getting away from it all. But the example we find in Genesis sets up a more regular rhythm of work and rest. God didn’t work feverishly for six months to take off a week, but rather six days, followed by a day of rest.

There's so much wisdom in this pattern yet we find it so hard to follow. That's probably why the ancient Hebrew people created strict guidelines for Sabbath observance, which are followed to this day in many Jewish homes. But, ultimately, rest is a sacred act of trust in God, of believing that while we are God's hands and feet in this world, we are *not* God. If God, ruler of all, takes time to rest, we certainly have permission from God to do so.

Resting is also a matter of valuing—valuing our health and wellbeing, valuing our need to commune with God, to listen to God, in quietness. Of course there are times when rest becomes burdensome—when we are struck by illness and confined to a hospital bed, or when a job abruptly ends with little if any notice. These are reminders that we live in a fallen world. Although God calls us to live in a new creation, we walk in overlapping realities of old and new, of broken and healed.

However you are planning to spend Labor Day tomorrow, be it walking in a demonstration, going for a bike ride, having a cookout, or finishing up one of those summer projects, I hope that you'll take a few moments to think of all that you do and to bless it as "very good." And, consider your weekly rhythm of work and rest. Are you able to stop and truly rest? Finally, listen to the words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Joetta Schlabach

¹ Wendall Berry, "Health and work," in *Work and the Life of the Spirit*. Edited by Douglas Thorpe. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1998.

² Brother Lawrence, "Gathered Thoughts," in *Work and the Life of the Spirit*. Edited by Douglas Thorpe. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1998.

³ Brenda Peterson, "The Sacredness of Chores," in *Work and the Life of the Spirit*. Edited by Douglas Thorpe. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1998.