

Co.Laborate

Everyone, I know, hates busywork. The fill this out in triplicate, and take it to this office between 10 and 2 on the third Wednesday of the month, if you know your party's extension please dial it now, policies and procedures kind of tasks that we accept as a necessary evil of modern life. Everyone hates it. I have an honest, bona fide, documented trauma response to it. Don't worry, I also have a therapist. For many reasons that she knows and you don't need to, busywork cripples me. That extreme reaction means I've had cause to spend a lot of time contemplating what is the work that actually matters, and to feel pretty passionate about focusing my time and energy on what causes life to flourish and minimizing what does not.

In this, my own personal ethic and the Gospel align with a great deal of ease. I love when things are easy. By modern American standards, Jesus had a terrible work ethic. He left the family business, healed on the sabbath and rested when everyone else was busy. While the whole town was punching in at the Roman company store, Jesus was at the synagogue. He was hardly a slacker, but he wasn't trying to pull himself up by the bootstraps or climb the corporate ladder, either. Jesus maximized the three years of his ministry by setting some clear (and unique) priorities and keeping to them.

Given that it is Labor Day weekend, I thought it was worth asking what is Good News in these bad times for workers? What does Jesus tell us we should focus on and work for? Are we doing that, or are we busy with lots of other things? And regardless of what we personally are doing, what is happening around us?

The national unemployment rate is super low: 3.7%. And that is a good thing. But if you listen to people, the bills aren't paid, nothing feels secure. When you look to the Labor Bureau for answers, you don't find much, but that is because they do not now and never have kept numbers on underemployment. Turns out, it isn't a new problem. For 30 years there has been about a 33% underemployment rate. The problem is, now it is up to 44% for people under 40. Nearly half of people under forty are spending their lives unable to live up to their full potential through circumstances largely not of their creation. And with no real sense that it is going to change. Wages are stuck or even going down. Costs are going up. Farmers are losing the markets for their crops and possibly the only labor they can afford. This isn't working for anyone, is it?

I feel like this, and so many other things these days, would sound familiar to Jesus. You used to have your own little farm, a couple of olive trees, a few goats. And then the taxes, and the other taxes, and the bribes, and you sold it off bit by bit. Where you had a little piece of Eden, you've barely got a meal. You work twice as hard for a whole lot less and have more people telling you how lucky you are to live in the mighty Roman Empire.

What is a person's time, talents and physical energy worth? What, exactly, is the American work ethic teaching us? What kind of work should we as Christians engage in and encourage? Are they the same thing?

The American work ethic tells us that if we work hard we will get ahead. That this is a land of opportunity and anyone who is motivated can get ahead, have a good life. That it is possible, here, to be a self-made man. Which, of course, means if you aren't getting ahead you aren't doing it right. Shame on you. Work

harder. Do anything. Go work at Walmart. Why? Does it lead to flourishing? For anyone?

I think it is good news that Jesus doesn't tell us to work, no matter what. Jesus tells us to work at something useful, for something meaningful, and with those around us. Paul and Calvin tell us to 'just keep busy,' but not Jesus.

I think Jesus would like Labor Day. It celebrates the collective energy of those of us who make things, useful things, things that make the lives of others easier and better coming together and saying that they as people are worth more than the things they produce and should be treated with human dignity. I think Jesus can get behind that idea.

Imagine what it might look like if we supported policies around work that Jesus would be good with: Some jobs are dangerous, but they shouldn't be any more dangerous than they must. People should receive a fair and dignified wage. Teachers shouldn't need second jobs. There should be plenty of time for beauty and contemplation, and as Jesus got around a lot, travel. Beauty, in fact, is worth making and not something frivolous and extra.

On Labor Day we celebrate that people have paid time off, collective bargaining, and that we no longer make kids work. We celebrate this, even as it is increasingly untrue. We celebrate the American worker by having sales so that we can buy things that have stripped the American worker of jobs at the cheapest possible price. Our very celebrations will show why we need to value labor because they will show how we don't.

What would Jesus approved good news in these bad times be for American workers? Let's imagine...a switch from coal jobs that cause black lung to wind and solar jobs? A four day work week, so rather than companies hiring fewer and

fewer people to do more and more work for the lowest possible salary and the greatest shareholder gain, more people had enough and fewer had a gluttonous over abundance? What would a CEO make? Would there be a CEO? A stock market? Somehow, I can't imagine Jesus being super excited about the free market economy, at least not as it is currently structured.

Somewhere along the line, we seem to have forgotten that money is supposed to work for us more than we work for money. We have become so obsessed with the idea that work for it's own sake is good and those who make more have actually earned more.

Are there ways in which we, as individuals, can live the Good News and not the common story? I think there are. Here are some of mine: I'm trying, as best I can, to buy local and independently made. I have decided, whenever possible, to throw meetings as if they are parties – we will have food, talk, laugh, joke, tell stories. I am finding that more gets done, the ideas are more daring, and people want to be there. Whenever possible, if I am meeting with one of you I schedule nothing for the 2 hours after – I don't want to have to rush if the Holy Spirit shows up. I am questioning the process for ordination – not whether or not to be ordained, but the how. Because it is hard in ways that accomplish nothing, prove nothing, and benefit the church in no way. Of all institutions, the church should practice only doing what leads to flourishing. Next on my personal list of ways to work in a kin-dom way is: to prioritize experiencing art and nature as a part of my call (one of many reasons I'm trying to work on the front porch), make time for my own creative efforts (I'm not doing so great at this one), and recognize that some of the moments in which I am pretty far from a clerical collar are my most pastoral.

I haven't figured out yet how to get rid of the really big systemic busywork, like finding a way to renew your insurance without a day of paperwork, or how to change all of my internet passwords at one time, or how to streamline the tax system – but that isn't the work of the one, it is the work of the many. And that is good news, too. It is a good and holy thing to Co-labor-ate.

If we want younger people, certainly millennials, to come to church, we need to have some Good News for them in these confusing economic times. We don't need to have all of the answers to what has gone wrong in America for those of working age, but I do think the better we understand it and practice looking for Jesus centered solutions, the better the chance that those who feel they are laboring in vain will find solace and purpose here. As a side note, millennials have been forced to get good at co-labor-ating. The community of Acts would look pretty familiar to them. They have this, and more, to teach us.

People are always hungry for meaning and purpose. Right now, I think lots of people are starving. When we glean, host soup, wrestle with tough topics that make us uncomfortable, we are performing a labor of God's love. When we knit for the mitten tree, clean the church, bake the communion bread, carry the chairs for a concert, write the liturgy, we are laboring to be the love of the kin-dom. When we volunteer at the ReUse Center, till the soil, pick the fruit, tinker with the plumbing, work at or go to Repair Café, we are laboring for everyone to need to do less labor.

Let's see if we can all ask ourselves if the tasks we have before us are leading to the greatest possible flourishing. If they are, let us together or on our own, labor in earnest. Co-labor-ate. Create the Co-labor-atory. If they are not,

well, give them to Caesar and go for a walk. In the name of God, you are not only forgiven, you are labor-ated.

Amen.