

Labor Day

On this Labor Day Sunday, I want to read a portion of the story of the Garden of Eden. Usually I do not preach a Labor Day sermon. But I have been troubled by this text for a long time, and it seems that today is a good day to think about it for a few minutes.

The problem is, this story comes from the mythology of our religious heritage and the Church has tried to make it literally true – word for word – trying to suggest that God wrote the whole thing. But this is myth. It is interesting to decipher what a myth is all about. The kernel of the myth is true, but the actual story line, the narrative content, is only a vehicle. It is the wagon in which the truth is brought to you. So when we start talking about the Garden of Eden, it is not historical.

We all know that in the story, Eve ate the fruit and then Adam ate the fruit. And because they ate from the Tree which God commanded them not to eat, God lays a curse on the woman, and He has one for the man. And it is that curse I want to focus on this morning.

Here is the curse. The Lord said: “Because you have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat, cursed is the ground because of you. In toil, you shall eat of it, all the days of your life. ... So the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.”

My purpose here this morning is to talk about the implications of that text for this weekend.

My initial reading of this story tells me that in our religious mythos work enters our consciousness as a curse. Isn't that interesting? In our religious mythos, work is not a blessing; it is a curse.

And since the Garden of Eden is the place where Adam and Eve were in union with God, we can see that the world in which they now have been thrown out to work is essentially the world of evil. And indeed, you and I are now the inheritors of their work. For we went out, and with the sweat of our brow, we built a system where the workers would be remunerated based upon the sin the text suggests is in the world – the sin of greed. That is what is being talked about in the text. We have built a system in which we deal with each other based upon the knowledge that human beings have insatiable need for more and more.

We also wisely understood that it is important to define work in such a way that it energizes people. Understanding their sin is one thing, but understanding how to design systems that build upon that sin is another. And so we got busy. We put in place an economic order that is fueled by the insatiable desires of people for more; for control; for power – for the power which they poetically were being kept away from when God ran them out of the Garden, the power of all knowledge.

I could critique every economic order in the same way, but certainly capitalism got its motive force from the emphasis it laid upon the fruits of work.

First of all the emphasis was made upon work itself. Industry was a sign of integrity. It is interesting, isn't it? All of us were taught that; you must work hard! And that is very important when human beings were being used by other human beings as beasts of burden. It is important for them to understand that to work hard is godly. And so the system was designed with these ideas built-in.

The Church went on, and it then told us that work, and the fruit you got from it, the money, or whatever, was the way that you authenticated your holiness. Did not Calvin develop the ethic we now know as the Protestant Ethic?

He said: How can you tell those among your congregation whom God has chosen? Calvin said, you will know by checking-out what they have. If you have \$100,000 in the bank and he has got \$1,000, then you are the elect of God. The doctrine of the elect: How do you know? You know by what their work has brought them.

That is a long way from what we heard this morning. We built an economic order that just flipped over the mythos that began our religious consciousness. Work has become a scheme through which your greed, being satisfied, certifies that you are indeed of God.

But in the Bible story, work was a curse; and what that says to me is that work was defined as a necessary enterprise. Not an enterprise of opening to higher things, it was something you had to do. The scripture says that work is a necessary event. It is not a necessary route to God.

Now. Along came the Industrial Revolution. Here again was an idea that was a flip-flop from the idea in Genesis. They told the workers that they were making significant godly contributions. And nobody says anything about the fact that the people who started the enterprise were getting a lot more out of it than the workers. We just attribute that to the nature of sin in the world after the Garden. In fact, the conditions got so ruthless they began to misuse even children in the factories. Why not, if work is the way you rise? And yet, it was probably that abuse that opened-up, in the consciousness of the people, the notion that indeed the system itself was wrong.

The point that I want to make is, as the economic system was established, it put materialism in place as a by-product of work. And since materialism was the offspring of work, then materialism itself became a sign of goodness. And so for everything in life, we developed a material object. Why? Because we had to keep the fires of productivity moving.

And somewhere hidden in the back of our materialistically orientated society is our understanding that really, the more we have, the more money we can show, then the more our work is religiously justified and holy. We don't articulate it that way, but somehow I have the feeling there is a sense in which we feel it.

Now something else has happened because of this. Every one of us harbors an awful residue of guilt. Any time we think that we are not doing everything we can in the arena of work, we feel guilty. As a matter of fact, I have a problem if I attempt to take a day off. I have to first get rid of the tinge of guilt. You see, this is so much a part of our culture. You are supposed to be working! So it is difficult to steal a day on your own schedule. Even when people take a vacation, there will come a time when they have had enough vacation! They have to get back to something that is character developing!

If we look at the Biblical understanding, we might come up with some new thoughts. This coming year you are going to hear every politician tell you they want everybody to have a job. But the capitalistic order that we have developed is based upon everybody not having a job! I just wonder how long we can take all of this without becoming grinning idiots, because we act like we believe it. "Everyone a job", and you say, I am voting for her because she is going to get a job for everybody.

They say, "A job for every person," because they understand how much the goodness of work is in the minds of people. What they will be talking about is supporting a system where you work hard, and when you come home and fall out at the end of the day from your job, you feel that you are doing something good. But you are supporting an increasing number of people at the top who don't work at all! And in our current society, at the bottom. The only difference is that those at the bottom don't even have maintenance for life, and those at the top have much more than they can use in two or three lifetimes.

I maintain that unless work is rethought, we will continue to participate as a part of the sin-system that we have put in place – to satisfy the few – and the masses will continue to be taken advantage of because they think they are doing something good. That doesn't mean that work has to be bad, but work does not have to be understood as that which we do for somebody else's excessive profit.

Now, if you open this up, you realize that people do not have to be lying in the streets on this Labor Day weekend. But we have a system that suggests that they must lie in the street so others, even like us, can do very well. You say: there are no jobs. I say: create some. You say: they are unskilled, that is the reason they are in the street. No one is unskilled. God has not created an unskilled human being. The question is: What are their skills? What could they do in a human place like this, fraught with confusion over a distorted Gospel? What could they do to make this place more beautiful, more like the Garden they were kicked out of? What could they do here, east of Eden, that would make sense in God's design? There are a lot of human support services they could render without going to training school. You don't have to be trained to support another person; to express affection to them; to help them walk if they are weak in their limbs.

You tell me there are no jobs, and I say the reason for that is we have confused the understanding of work. Employment could be an activity which not only benefits you, and makes you feel like you are good, but it could be an enterprise that reclaims and redeems and reestablishes effective bonds between people; allows people a self-actualization through which they express the Love of God, as they have experienced it. You and I could sit here today and create all kinds of new jobs that have no "skill" connected to them except to be a human person.

Think about it this Labor Day.

Jesus didn't have a normal job. And more importantly, he took people away from the jobs they had. He called them to a task which he said was a higher calling. He said, "I call you to reclaim human life."

When I was a little child we used to sing, "Work for the night is coming." That was our Labor Day song. I have a feeling when we sang that song, we were doing a poetic transliteration of the text where Jesus said: "Do thou diligence while it is day, for night cometh." And that diligence was about pursuing God's Will, while I had time.

God cast us out of the Garden, and in so doing made work a necessary enterprise laid upon us in this life. But even so, we have to struggle to know more about God. That cannot be left out of our daily activities.

The way Jesus and his Disciples survived is they had an economic understanding that was related, not to their individual self-aggrandizement before God, but to their community's welfare and to its caring. People would beg alms for them, and that is how they would eat, or they would stay at somebody's home and be fed. The point is, they had a different understanding of how you organize economically.

Think about that, as you think about work. Let us rethink work. Let us create exciting new jobs for people to be employed at making the world a more sane place. They may never need a traditional kind of job. Let us create new opportunities for ourselves and for others to be employed in enterprises that affirm that we are all important in the sight of God, and important in making our community a more human place.