

**Proper 18 Year B**

**9/5/2021**

**Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37**

**Rev. Mark A. Lafler**

I don't know about you, but I have for many years thought of Labor Day as a strange holiday.

Don't get me wrong... I enjoy and take advantage of a day off just as much as the next person...

But we aren't necessarily celebrating a special moment in the history of the USA or a religious day.

It just has always seemed strange to me.

Add to this that my sister was born on Labor Day of 1985, and I think of my mom and a whole different connotation of the meaning of labor.

Perhaps it's a celebration of our work ethic.

Which seems to say that *we celebrate our work ethic by not working.*

So, I looked up the history of Labor Day.

It really isn't too exciting...

But according to History.com... I will read you this:

*In the late 1800s, at the height of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, the average American worked 12-hour days and seven-day weeks in order to eke out a basic living. Despite restrictions in some states, children as young as 5 or 6 toiled in mills, factories and mines across the country, earning a fraction of their adult counterparts' wages.*

*People of all ages, particularly the very poor and recent immigrants, often faced extremely unsafe working conditions, with insufficient access to fresh air, sanitary facilities and breaks.*

*As manufacturing increasingly supplanted agriculture as the wellspring of American employment, labor unions, which had first appeared in the late 18th century, grew more prominent and vocal. They began organizing strikes and rallies to protest poor conditions and compel employers to renegotiate hours and pay.*

*In the wake of this massive unrest and in an attempt to repair ties with American workers, Congress passed an act making Labor Day a legal holiday in the District of Columbia and the territories. On June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed it into law.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/labor-day-1> accessed on 9.4.2021

So, in many ways...

Labor Day is a way of remembering the struggles of the American working class and the challenges of poor and wealthy Americans working together in this beautiful country.

And as I thought about this in light of our readings today...

A word jumped out at me...

It is mentioned eight times in our first and second readings.

It is the word – **poor**.

In our reading from Proverbs, we heard that the rich and the poor have this in common: *the Lord is the maker of them all*.

And then the writer says:

*Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.*

Same theme word from last week shows up, the word *generous*.

We are called to have a life of generosity.

And especially when it comes to the poor and those in need.

I was so pleased last week during announcements when...

It was mentioned about helping the food pantry...

It was mentioned about helping the foster care donations.

Opportunities for generosity.

I saw someone else make a Facebook post last Sunday about helping collect items for food pantries... simple things we can do.

Out of the abundance that we have received may we give to those in need.

Generosity is the language of God's love.

In our second reading today, from the book of James the author writes about the dangers of favoring the rich over the poor.

St. James writes:

*God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him.*

The scriptures speak of the poor throughout the Old and New Testaments...

Speaking of the plight.

Speaking of the struggles.

Speaking of helping the poor.

So today I would like to give a few suggestions for a beginning toward a good theology of the poor.

**First, we are called to help the poor.**

This seems rather obvious for any Christian who reads the Holy Scriptures...

Yet, how often do we help the poor?

Are we looking for opportunities to assist those in need?

When we see people in need, what is our response... our reaction?

I am not suggesting that some of the answers to helping the poor are not complex...

We are to use wisdom in our giving...

But complexities should not stop us from helping...

From poor people in our community to those in our state...

We should be mindful of how to help those in need.

Sometimes understanding who the poor are is important.

If you are an American, you are most likely among the richest 10 percent in the world.

This is even often the case among many who we consider to be very poor in the United States.

The more global we become the more responsibility we have for the poor around the world.

As a church we need to always be mindful of the needs in our community and around the world where we can help make a difference among the standard of living, speaking love to the unloved, ministering justice to those who have been treated poorly.

*We are called to help the poor.*

**Second, we learn the ways of Christ with the poor.**

If we rather live in a state of comfort where the plight of the poor is removed from our vision... we will miss seeing Jesus.

Mother Teresa who I quoted last week...

Such a saint to the poor...

She wrote:

*Jesus comes to meet us.*

*To welcome him, let us go to meet him.*

*He comes to us in the hungry, the naked, the lonely, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the prostitute, the street beggars.*

*He may come to you or me in a father who is alone, in a mother, in a brother, or in a sister.*

*If we reject them, if we do not go out to meet them, we reject Jesus himself.<sup>2</sup>*

Powerful words...

A powerful reminder...

That we actually meet Jesus in our time with the poor and needy.

In fact, in so many ways it is actually fashionable to talk about the poor... In our day to showcase a reputation for helping the poor is desirable for a job application or a scholarship.

It looks good to show what you have done.

And yet it is still not fashionable to talk with them.

Help them in ways yes...

Actually, fellowshipping with them...

Breaking bread with them...

That is a whole new challenge.

Instead of the poor being a problem to solve...

they are people in the image of God that we get to love.

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<sup>2</sup> Mother Teresa, *In My Own Words* (New York: Random House, 1996), 29.

In rubbing shoulders with those who are different than us...

Poorer than us...

Not just financially...

But socially, racially, ethnically, nationally...

The alone, the hurting, the grieving, the abandoned...

We can see Christ Jesus in a whole new way when we adjust the lenses of our glasses.

*We learn the ways of Christ with the poor.*

**Third, we must recognize that we are all poor.**

So much of our culture is about looking good...

Looking successful...

But the reality is that we are all broken.

Before God we all have the same problem...

We all fall short of the glory of God.

We all sin.

We are all spiritually poor.

In need of a savior.

And when we recognize that we are all poor before God...

We can properly respond to God's loving call.



Sin has created poverty...

Once again may we hear the words of Mother Teresa:

*Poverty has not been created by God.*

*We are the ones who have created poverty.*

*Before God, we are all poor.*<sup>3</sup>

And the greater we understand this...

The greater we will understand how Christ Jesus came to earth...

Born into poverty...

With a mission to save the world.

St. Paul wrote:

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8.9).*

When we come to Christ Jesus...

Humbly serving him...

Repenting of our sins...

Confessing Jesus as our Lord and Savior...

We become rich in him.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 30.

And it starts when by his grace we acknowledge...

*that we are all poor.*

That I am poor and in need of Jesus Christ.

Tomorrow we will commemorate Labor Day.

May we be thankful for our jobs, our incomes, the blessings of this life.

May we also ask our heavenly Father to show us how we can make a greater difference in the lives of the poor.

And may we confess that by the grace of God we have become rich in Christ because he became poor for us.

Amen.