Invitation to the Table

In today's Lectionary reading from Mark's Gospel, Jesus says it is not what goes into a person, but what comes out of the heart that makes one pure or defiled. So, when we take the bread and the cup in communion, it's ritual, not of purification but of remembrance. We remember that Christ opened the way for us to be at one with God.

We remember, and in that memory gratitude flows from our hearts, and if we are truly present in the moment, out of gratitude flows love, which is expressed in who we are and what we do.

May the bread become to us the body of Christ, so that we may be the body of Christ for others.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy Creator, on this weekend work and labor are much on our minds. We're grateful that you are a God who works, a God who labored for six days to create this world. Thank you for inviting us to partner with you in this work, to manage and be accountable for your creation. You gave us purpose—you called us to work.

Guide us, that we might be diligent in the labor to which you call each of us.

You call some of us to labor in the classroom, to learn and grow with their students, in preparation to live lives dedicated to truth and service. For those you call to be students, we pray that they will be diligent in learning.

You call some of us to focus on being keepers of the home. Keep their hearts and minds oriented toward you, that they may not grow weary in doing good.

You call some of us to the noble and necessary work of public sanitation and utility; and others to the work of repair and maintenance—and some to custodial work in both the public and the private areas of life.

You call some to the work of production and distribution of goods and services, and some to work in the marketing and sale of those goods and services.

You call some to work in the many levels of administration and administrative assistance.

You call some of us to the work of protecting us: in our military, in our police and fire departments, and to the work of health care and paramedical service.

And you call some of us to the work of legislation and administration of justice, from the halls of congress and councils to the courtroom.

Bless each of these you call with honorable intentions in their work.

And, you've called some of us to retire after a lifetime of work and service and we pray for these that their retirement would be one of consecrated service to you.

Creator of us all, we thank you that you not only work but you also rest, and call us to be as diligent in our rest as we are in our work. Grant us grace to entrust ourselves to your provision by taking time to rest.

And, most of all, teach us to rest in you.

Amen.

Genesis 3:17-19 (NRSVUE)

And to the man he said,

"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
19 By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."

This text may be the reason "work" gets bad press: "If Monday had a face I'd punch it." "It's Monday already? I wasn't finished with Saturday!" "My week is like, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Blink, Monday…"

And "Friday!" "Friday the 13th is still better than Monday the whatever…"

And my personal favorite is "The worst day of fishing is better than the best day of working."

In the Hebrew creation narratives, the evaluation of each phase of creation is, "it was good;" until the 6th day, when humanity is created and pronounced, "*very good*." Humanity was placed in an unspoiled environment with every need supplied, and lived in a trusting, intimate relationship with the creator. The Judeo/Christian faith was anchored in that beginning image…

…until about the middle of the 5th century, when Augustine of Hippo, *et. al.*, fast forwarded through the creation stories and began at the brokenness initiated by the serpent. The serpent is not named but is a beguiling and convincing marketing agent and snake oil salesman who sold humanity on the idea that there's more. "You can't trust that Creator! He's withholding information you need for security. You need to equip yourself for autonomous living. You'll have to fend for yourself! Here: eat this apple (sic) and you'll know what to do; then, you won't need the Creator. You'll know as much as he does!" Thus, the trust vs. autonomy dichotomy was established, and humanity struck out independently.

Augustine began there. He ignored the creation narratives in which humanity was declared "very good," and fixated on the brokenness, and interpreted God's

response as punishment for "original sin." Original sin is from Augustine, not the Bible.

The narrative itself—just the story without embellishment or interpretation, leaves open the possibility of a much more nurturing and enabling response from the deity: "*…cursed is the ground because of you…*" On what basis is that declaration understood as angry confrontation rather than simply pointing out the natural consequence of human initiative? Other than a presupposition of human sin and guilt arising out of later theological reflection, on what basis is God's response considered a wrathful reprimand rather than a simple observation, like that of a good, nurturing mother when a child breaks a vase: "Uh-oh! You broke it!" Brokenness is acknowledged; but it is not irreparable.

And on what basis, other than later interpretation, must we consider the outcome punishment rather than repair: "Let's see how we can fix this."

"OK. You want to be autonomous? I'm cool with that. Here's what we can do. See, you can help me tweak my creation. Just be aware: there will be challenges ('thorns and thistles' verse 18) and there will be work involved ('by the sweat of your face…' verse 19)." What is there—*in the text*—to keep us from that understanding? Looking back through the lens of Jesus of Nazareth, it becomes possible.

If it were humanly possible to put away all our presuppositions and expectations regarding Scripture and approach the narrative fresh, as if for the first time, what is there *in the text* that requires us to interpret the story as an account of original sin rather than as an early account of divine/human covenant: "Let's work together?" Why are "toil," "thorns and thistles," and "sweat" considered punishment instead of simply a description of honest work as human partners in God's ongoing act of creation?

And who is to say that the image of God instilled in God's human creature does not include toil and challenge? Is it not possible that the Creator expends great energy? Is it unreasonable to consider that creating is hard work? After all, the creation narrative ends with the Creator *resting*.

But the anthropomorphic image of a vindictive God is already implanted, virtually irreversibly, in the human mind. I submit that neither that image nor the idea of original sin is required by the creation narratives of Genesis 1-11; in fact, that image contradicts the primary trajectory that runs through all the rest of Judeo/Christian Scripture until it finds its ultimate expression in Jesus of Nazareth.

Oh, that other trajectory is there, too; in fact, it's repeated over and over. But I submit that it is a deviation from the primary trajectory that leads to Jesus.

Somewhere along the line, in one of those deviations, work became connected theologically with punishment because of original sin. In the last few minutes, hopefully, I've at least raised questions about that.

In *The Search for Meaning in the Workplace*, Thomas Naylor, Will Willimon, and

Rolf Osterberg quote Walter R Coutenay, "God gave humanity work, not to burden, but to bless, and useful work, willingly, cheerfully, and effectively done, has always been the finest expression of the human spirit."

In that book the authors combine a spiritual journey inward with an outward quest for human connectedness. They conclude that finding meaning in our work is no easy task if life outside the workplace has no meaning, and the flip-side is that if most of each day is spent in meaningless work, then finding meaning outside of work may be equally elusive.

The secret of meaningful and enjoyable work may be found in the title of a book by Marsha Sinetar, *Do What You Love; the Money Will Follow*.

A favorite quote from Neil DeGrasse Tyson has nothing to do with his profession as an astrophysicist. He applies his same scientific way of exploration to human behavior, and his insight sometimes is uncomfortably accurate. But I resonate with this quote: "Pick something you'd do for free and make that your life's work. You'll never experience a sad day in your life." That's hyperbole, of course, but it's on track.

In a similar quote, Tyson said, "You have the power to add meaning to your life. Meaning is not found, it is created." Tyson says some people think the search for meaning in life is about looking under a rock or behind a tree, but he says, "You have more power than that. You have the power to create meaning in your life rather than passively look for it" and hope it somehow happens. But what is *meaning* for him? He defines meaning with a question: Do I know more about the world today than I knew yesterday? He says life's meaning is about using the powers and capabilities available to us to add value to the lives of others, to decrease their suffering and increase their joy.

Imagine: theological truth from an astrophysicist who does not deny God, but says, "There is no verifiable evidence for the existence of God."

Best selling American Author, Mitch Albom says, "The way you get meaning in your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning."

Theodore Roosevelt said, "Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."

Steve Pavlino said, "Hard work is painful when life is devoid of purpose. But when you live for something greater than yourself and the gratification of your own ego, then hard work becomes a labor of love."

Just some things to think about—things from one preacher's alternative way of looking at the 3rd chapter of Genesis; things from theologians and an astrophysicist, things from bestselling authors and a president—things that offer ways, ways I think are consistent with the fundamental message of the Bible, to find meaning in your work on this Labor Day weekend.