



## Sermon for the 13<sup>th</sup> Week of Pentecost, Labor Day Weekend, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Ecclesiasticus 38:27-32a](#)

[Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17](#)

[Philemon 1-21](#)

[Luke 14:25-33](#)

Good morning, dear friends in Christ Jesus.

Welcome to St. Luke's on this Labor Day weekend. We are so grateful for this beautiful day, the cooling weather, and a holiday weekend to enjoy our surroundings. We're hopeful for continuing relief from the smoke and the wildfires not far away.

For many, especially for families with children and teens in school, this weekend is kind of a "last burst" of summer fun, before school gets going and the season changes to fall and the days get shorter. The lakefront is full of activity. The woods and hills are full of campers and hikers. Back yards and parks are full of good smells from grills. And the stores and internets are full of sales! It's time to rest, celebrate, relax, and enjoy bursts of fun.

On these holiday weekends, it can be easy for us to forget why we have the holiday. Memorial day, the Fourth of July, Presidents' Day, Martin Luther King Day, Labor Day – all of these (and others) mark something in our life as a nation, as a people together. We remember and honor those who have helped make this nation what it is and contributed to the world's betterment (we hope), through service in wars and battles, governance, striving for civil rights, and work. This weekend, we remember and honor those whose labor makes life possible – and we honor those who have strived and continue to strive for the life, dignity, well-being, and just care for all workers.

So, today, we sing today of labor and work and purpose. We pray today for all workers.

And our readings help us reflect on the life and world of work, our purposes in work, our care for and relationships with those in our world of work, and our ultimate allegiances in all our purposes and efforts.

So, let's begin with this wonderful reading from the inter-testamental book, Ecclesiasticus. This book is a collection of wisdom written in the period between the Old and New Testaments, and is part of a set of respected books called the Apocrypha. These words are beautiful in helping us see just how much care people take and how much effort and talent and learning they put to use in their work.

There is a highlighting here of three workers – the artisan, the smith, and the potter. Each of these produces beautiful and enduring things.

Their work takes talent, yes. But even more than that, what we hear lifted up in this passage is their steady commitment and focused attention, and their skilled movements and savvy moment-by-moment decisions that only develop with practice and committed learning.

Also, we hear how each worker – each artisan, metal worker, potter – finishes the work.

The writer offers these examples to us as a way of showing how each worker – no matter what the work – does their work to participate in the larger fabric of creating a beautiful society that is knit together by each other's efforts to build up the whole.

Imagine writing poetry like this from Ecclesiastes about every different type of worker you know. Imagine if we took just a bit of time, and wrote notes of thanks to people that recognize the work they do and the dedication and skill they bring, thanking them for the way they help us all as a community and society. Imagine if we took just a bit of time in the stores and schools and hospitals and roadways, looking someone in the eye and thanking them for their work.

Today, St. Thomas' Catholic Church is having a coffee hour that honors workers in protective services. What a wonderful idea. I've often hoped to bring together some churches to offer a celebration and thanksgiving for people whose work can often go unnoticed – people who collect garbage, who work in water and sewage treatment, who are in shipping, who do in-home care...the list goes on. Because workers at all levels can be taken for granted, not held in the honor they deserve, even manipulated. And it is important for us to remember, to notice, to hear their stories, and to honor them.

So, we also hear today the whole little letter from Paul to Philemon. This little letter is packed. It is a letter of appeal to an owner on behalf of a slave. Paul is appealing to Philemon to release Onesimus, a slave, or at the very least to accept him back as so much more than a slave.

I want to walk through this letter quickly with you. But I invite you to take some time to read this letter this weekend. It's only about a page in your Bible. But take time with it and note how Paul approaches the situation as he sends Onesimus back to Philemon.

So, just to note some things together now:

- Paul appeals to and reminds him of his love for ALL the saints, and of his reputation for love – and praises him for that love.
- Paul calls Onesimus “my child” – showing a depth of loving and tender relationship.
- Paul notes just how valuable a person Onesimus is, as friend and helper and companion in faith.
- Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus just like this – as one like others in the fellowship of Christ, all of whom Philemon loves. So, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a slave but as much more, as a companion, a partner, a beloved brother.
- Paul says he does not want to order Philemon, even as someone with authority in the Christian faith, but asks him to choose out of love. So, Paul approaches all of this with the equalizing language and spirit of the love of Jesus.
- Paul says that if anything is owed by Onesimus, to charge it to Paul's account – but then reminds Philemon that the salvation of his own soul is something that could be said he owes Paul. So Paul is saying, let any debts be forgiven, just as you have been forgiven.

By sending this letter – this personal letter – Paul is igniting a match that spreads through the Roman world, that calls for a completely different way of living among the early Christians. Person by person, community by community, the world changes because we are invited – urged – to operate from the Way of Love that even shapes how we approach relationships between owners and workers.

Now, a word about the passage we heard today from the Gospel of Luke. This is a challenging set of sayings by Jesus to the crowds. Maybe the crowds were giddy with the promise of the feast Jesus described in his parable, to which everyone is invited. Maybe they were excited about the miracles and the new life that Jesus brought to so many. But giddiness is not dedication. So Jesus offers some hard words. “Whoever comes to me does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his

own life, cannot be my disciple.” And then, he talks about a cross – an image of oppressive, cruel public killing by the empire.

So, a word of explanation. The Greek word for “hate,” *miseo*, is much more often used in the New Testament to describe how other people hate or despise or reject Jesus and the followers of Jesus. And then, for followers of Jesus, it is used occasionally to describe hating and rejecting evil – like how we renounce sin and evil at our baptisms. But here it is used about people. This is very unlike Jesus, who almost everywhere else emphasizes loving. Love God with everything you’ve got. Love your neighbor as yourself – and your neighbor means even your enemy.

What’s happening here is Jesus making an exaggerated kind of contrast. Matthew puts it softer – “Whoever does not love me more than mother or father, etc., cannot be my disciple.” In other ancient Greek literature, love and hate were used to make contrasts in alliance and commitment – so, it is less an emotional thing than a matter of purposeful decision. And hate in this way means to set to the side, to make less important, to give one’s full allegiance to another place and to reject what pulls away from one’s first love. That is what Jesus seems to be getting at here. “To follow me, truly, means to give yourself fully – even setting aside your own family ties, your own projects, your own sense of importance. This is now the most important thing guiding and shaping your life. Don’t run away to distractions. Stay with the game. Finish what you start with me.”

None of us succeed fully. We fall again and again, get lured off course again and again, give our love to distractions again and again. But Jesus calls us back, forgives and holds us, and asks us again, “Follow me. Take up your cross. Let’s finish together what we have started.”

So we have Jesus’ analogy of building a tower. Finish the work. Don’t abandon, even if you get tired of it or get mocked or hit a roadblock or a supply chain problem. Stay with it.

Like Noah. Finish the ark you have begun to build.

Finish the tower.

Finish the signet, the metal, the pottery.

Be wise, steady, and committed. Dedicate yourself to completion.

Because, Jesus calls us to follow him – Jesus who stayed the course, who followed the long road to Jerusalem and to the cross which was the culmination of all his work of giving himself to the world.

So it is with Jesus, God-with-us, whose life work was and is and always will be to save, to lift up, to heal.

So it is with God our Creator, who fashions us from the dust, who sees us as we are knit together and formed bit by bit in the womb, who traces our journeys and our resting places, who is acquainted with all our ways. God is the master craftsman, pressing each of us behind and before, hands upon us to guide, shape, and direct us – holding and watching all of the variable elements of this world and universe, with love and adoration for each part. Each of us, God’s creature – each when we have a glimmer of consciousness of the wonder of our own being, crying out with the Psalm-writer, “I thank you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well.”