



## **The Labor of Love**

### **Romans 12:9-21**

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The Church is a global community, comprised of all who declare the glory of God in Christ. Considering our focus last week looking at Revelation, we can claim that the Church's direction is toward a future where every nation, tribe, and tongue are gathered as one body praising God. Such a future is not the hope envisioned of any empire or nation, at least as far as I can see. For that reason, I don't often give much attention to our national holidays from the pulpit. While we may be a church in America, we are not an American church. We are United Methodist Church, under the greater umbrella of Christianity, and our work in this building is focused on the greater glory of God over and above any singular national entity.

That said, I want to spend some time today looking at the national holiday that is celebrated in America this weekend – the holiday that is celebrated every year on the first Monday of September – Labor Day.

Labor Day has been an official national holiday for our country since it was signed into law by President Grover Cleveland on June 28, 1894. The back story to Labor Day, how this national holiday came into being, offers an interesting connection with our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the 1880s, during the Second Industrial Revolution, there was a movement among laboring communities to fight for better working conditions during the national boom in industrial growth. Workers began to advocate for themselves, asking for shorter workdays and better working conditions. Labor unions united in calling for better pay and employee care.

On September 5, 1882, in New York City, what is believed to be the first Labor Day parade took place as tens of thousands of labor union members joined together in a march. The day included fireworks, picnics, speeches, and other festivities as the myriad of laborers took a day of unpaid leave to advocate for better labor practices.

The Central Labor Union of New York City held its second Labor Day holiday the very next year, again on September 5, 1883.

After a few years of organizing and campaigning, New York became one of the first states to recognize Labor Day as a state holiday, along with Oregon, Colorado, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. By 1894, when President Cleveland signed Labor Day into law nationally, 28 states had already adopted the holiday.

That same year, in 1894, New Zealand became the first nation to set a national minimum wage. America, though it had adopted the Labor Day holiday as a national day to recognize the importance of

labor rights, would not adopt a federal minimum wage until 1938 (some 44 years later) through the passing of the Federal Labor Standards Act, or what many may know simply as FLSA.

Labor Day began as a day to advocate for the rights, the standards, and the lives of American laborers. It did not begin as a day of celebrating our labor, or simply enjoying a day off of work (remember, it was an unpaid holiday for the first few years before it was deemed a state or federal holiday). Labor Day was organized by labor unions as a way to march against unfair labor practices. It began, in the early 1880s, as a day of *protest* – not as a day to *rest*.

I want to reclaim that initial intent today, the need for protest and the hope of change, as the scripture invites us not to rest in our labor, but to push for even greater changes in the way we live in the midst of community.

Romans is a theologically rich letter of pastoral guidance from Paul to the newly formed Christian community in Rome. Centered in the heart of the Roman Empire, the converts to the Christian faith were surrounded by some of the most ardently opposed to Jesus Christ and the ancient faith of the Hebrew people. It was, according to Roman Law at the time, only acceptable to proclaim Caesar as lord.

This scriptural passage in chapter 12 picks up on some of the challenges of living in the center of Caesar's power and influence, while having faith in the Hebrew God and in Jesus Christ as Lord.

The first few verses frame Paul's teaching using a description of *love*. This love, as Paul describes it, is not a romantic love; it is instead a love of action, which Paul believes anyone following Christ will have. "Up until this point in Paul's argument, love is something that only God or Christ has performed."<sup>i</sup> But in this text, Paul shifts his instruction around love as something followers of Jesus will do as the fulfillment of Torah – as part of God's call toward communal hospitality.

As Paul defines this love in verses 9-13, it's easy to see how our offering love as disciples of Christ stems directly from the witness of love offered by God in Christ. Love must be genuine; it must hate what is evil, and hold fast to what is good. We are to love one another with mutual affection, and to outdo one another in showing honor. We are to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and to persevere in prayer.

In each of these descriptions of love, we can think of ways Jesus emulated Paul's instructions. Jesus spent a lot of time in prayer, from the start of his ministry while praying in the wilderness to the end of his ministry while calling out to God while hanging on the cross. Jesus loved others with mutual affection – offering a welcome, a helping hand, and a place of belonging to those who had never been offered any of these before. Jesus hated what was evil, often offering instruction to ensure those around him understood evil so that they might reject it. And Jesus held fast to what was good, proclaiming God's will and grace throughout his ministry.

If we were to stop at verse 13, we might be comfortable claiming that these instructions are offered as a way for the community of faith to offer love amongst themselves. Most of Jesus' ministry was spent with and among other Jews. So, one could try to claim that Paul's instructions to love are intended to

guide our interactions with one another amongst the Christian community. Certainly Paul's guidance is meant, at least in part, to define the ways in which we love one another among the household of God.

But, again, Paul is writing to a people who are living in the midst of a community that does not welcome their Christian-belief. The vast majority of those living in Rome, especially those with any power in Rome, persecuted any who claimed Christ (or anyone other than Caesar) as lord. And if we're unsure who it is Paul is thinking of when calling us to love, we just need to keep reading.

Verse 14 begins, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Verse 17 adds, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." Verse 19 adds more, offering, "Never avenge yourselves." Finally, verses 20 and 21 conclude, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

What we find here is that Paul's instructions to love are not limited to the ways in which we share in relationship with others within the Christian community. These admonitions to love are to be extended to the all of those in the world around us, indeed, even to those who we might define as our enemies, or people who are evil.

Understanding the context in which Paul is writing, these instructions become quite clear: Paul is calling us to extend our love to those beyond the church – to those in the secular world who may have little or no faith in God or in Christ. Paul is insisting that, if we are living in faith, we cannot remove ourselves from living in relationship with the greater community beyond the walls of the church. ... And let's keep in mind, at the time of Paul's writing the book of Romans, there were no physical Christian church buildings in Rome. When Paul was saying, "connect beyond the walls of the church," he was speaking of the human coalition that comprised the body of Christ. He was necessitating that we share in relationship and love beyond the human connection of those who affirmed Christ as Lord.

I want to re-emphasize here that Paul is not creating a new set of hopes and instructions for God's people, he is just further defining the kind of love we witness by God in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christ came and stretched the understanding of the people Israel regarding God's desire for engaging in the greater community. Christ taught them a new understanding of the word "neighbor," and pushed them in their acceptance of those who were formerly excluded from their company. The Spirit further pushed the limits of their boundaries, gifting them to share with others in God's expansive kingdom, which invites and includes those of every nation, tribe, and tongue.

This invitation to further expand our witness of love feels appropriate on this Labor Day weekend, and it offers a strong condemnation of the Christian church today.

You see, the Christian church, especially here in America, has long preferred to have an insider focus. In many places around our nation, Christians only associate with other Christians. I remember growing up in the youth program of my United Methodist Church being taught to avoid relationships with non-Christians – especially any form of romantic or dating relationship. As the image was pressed upon us, it's far easier to pull someone down from their Christian pedestal than to pull someone up to join you on the pedestal.

But the division and isolation of Christians isn't just something we teach our youth, it's something we practice as adults – it's a way of life we spend large amounts of money to maintain.

For example, many of the gated communities and private schools in our nation were established by Christians to ensure they only had to live around and share in community with other Christians, or that their children only had to go to school with other Christians. And to ensure we don't ignore the co-mingled underlying conditions of these gated neighborhoods or schools that Christians built, in an overwhelming majority of these neighborhoods and schools, the emphasis is not just on faith, but is also deeply entrenched in racial division and white supremacy.

Sadly, white Christians in America are among the worst at secluding themselves from those who look, think, and act differently. Even still today, of the nearly 1200 hate groups tracked in America by the Southern Poverty Law Center, some of the most well-known for using hate against non-Christians or people of color are led and comprised by white Christians.

Indeed, on this Labor Day, it's worth noting we have more labor to do. Romans 12 insists that we, as followers of Christ, must labor in love.

The opening invitation by Paul is that we have *genuine* love. Scholar Sarah Heaner Lancaster offers, "If love is genuine, we will want only the best for [others] ..."ii Just as Paul instructed in 1 Corinthians 12 regarding the body of Christ, Paul extends these instructions to those beyond the Christian community, telling us that genuine love amidst the greater community leads us to care deeply about each person's well being. We are to "rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep." Regardless how well we may want to get along with those around us, we are given firm instructions to live "peaceably with all."

The ways in which we engage in the world around us have ramifications on the well-being of those who live around us. The ways we invest, whether in real estate or in the stock market ... the ways we treat service industry workers, whether in our places of work or while enjoying a night out on the town ... the places we dine and the facilities we use ... the schools we support and the votes we cast ... the policies we back and the prayers we pray ... all of them affect the way in which the world around us operates. All of these decisions affect how well the world around us lives in harmony. All of these actions impact how well the created humanity (*all* of the created humanity) is able to experience God's desire for community – for holistic communal wellbeing.

Until all of God's created are able to experience that holistic communal wellbeing, we have more work to do: we must continue in our labor to love.

And we cannot let our labor – our work of protest against that which is evil – be taken up by a cheapened version of itself.

See, I don't know about you, but when I think of Labor Day, I don't think of it as a day of protest or a day to demand better labor policies in our nation. I don't know that I associate Labor Day as a day in

which we might consider better practices of care for the laboring communities who first marched the streets of New York City in the early 1880s. Maybe it's just my privileged blinders, but as I look out, what I see is a Labor Day that has become, for most people, little more than a single day off of work, and perhaps a day to celebrate the labor (past and present) of our nation. I imagine that it has, in the minds of the original instigators, lost its intended impact.

So too, I wonder how much our scripture has lost its intended impact.

Has the Christian Church assumed too much corrupted power in society to acknowledge how important the calls of Paul are for offering genuine love even to those who are evil? Have we forgotten the mandate of Christ to connect with the greater community, and to ensure the well-being of everyone – even those of little or no faith? Have we lost the framework of the Biblical text, which calls Christians to stand in protest to the ills of the empire, and to work for the good of God in the small corners of the world? Have we celebrate our own salvation at the expense of the greater peace of society?

We must continue in our labor. We must continue to proclaim God's love for all of God's created. We must continue to live our faith in protest, following Paul's invitation to share more wholly in the greater society on behalf of Christ. We must not be overcome with evil, but we must overcome evil with good. Therefore, let us continue to labor in love, that everyone might know the love of God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> David McCabe. "Commentary on Romans 12:9-21." <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved August 30, 2023.

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Heaner Lancaster. *Romans: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.