

## ***Whatever You Do***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Communion Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 3, 2017 ~~ Labor Day Weekend  
Text: Colossians 3:12-17

Happy Labor Day! Now here's a question for you. When you celebrate the Labor Day holiday weekend, what exactly are you celebrating? *(pause for responses and interact)* I think for most of us, we think of Labor Day as the end of summer. Well, unofficially, since the official date of the fall solstice this year is September 22. It does make a sort of sense, though, to think of Labor Day as the end of summer vacation and therefore a return to the "labors" we engage in during the rest of the year. Right? When I was little, I thought that's exactly what Labor Day was – the last holiday before you went back to "laboring" in school. Anybody else think this? *(pause)*

At some point in my younger years, I did learn there was some vague connection between Labor Day and the labor movement in the United States. It was probably my dad who told me because my dad was, at one time, a member of the United Steel Workers of America. I remember him telling me how excited he was when he finally "got in at the mill." He literally left an office job working in an insurance agency as a clerk when he had the chance to get into the mill (the Irvin Works) in West Mifflin, PA outside Pittsburgh. He literally went from being a

white collar clerk to sweeping up floors in the mill because it was a chance to “get in.” He soon worked his way up to a more technical job in the “rolling mill” where the huge sheets of tin plated steel were fabricated. By the time I came along the years in the mill were long behind my dad. While working in the mill, my dad had gone back to night school at the University of Pittsburgh for an engineering degree. It wasn’t given the same weight as a regular engineering degree, but in combination with his years working on the mill floor, it was good enough to earn him a promotion out of the mill and into a white-collar job as a metallurgical engineer.

When I was a young adult and weighing out a potential job change, my dad talked about his decision to leave the mill. He said leaving the safety of a union job was the most difficult decision he ever had to make. He agonized over it. He talked it over with my mom and she told him he needed to do what would make him happy. So, he decided to go for the dream and become an engineer rather than stay in the mill where he had gone as far up the union ranks as he could go. He actually took a slight pay cut to become an engineer, not to mention giving up the security of a union job. It was a gutsy move. But then again, my dad was a gutsy guy. But he never forgot that it was the union that put him on the path that led to his dream job.

So Dad’s is the story I think about when I think about Labor Day, but it’s still a confusing holiday in some respects. One

reason we're all a little fuzzy about it is because it's been around for a long time. Labor Day was first celebrated in 1887 and became a federal national holiday in 1894. It originated as and remains today a holiday which celebrates the American labor movement and the contribution of workers to the prosperity of this country. This is another place where the significance of Labor Day gets hazy again – because we all work, in one way or another, or we're retired from work we did for a long time. This work took place in all kinds of professions, everything from bank presidents to janitors and grocery store clerks.

That's why it's important to remember that Labor Day comes to us from the labor movement – the workers whose blood, sweat and tears kept American factories, mines, refineries, railroads, and institutions running every day. Labor Day was not originally about the bank president. It was about the janitor emptying out the baskets in the office long after the bank president left for the day. It was not about the stock broker trading oil futures or steel company stock on the stock exchange floor. It was about the guys who stood next to the blast furnaces, perpetually drowning in sweat as the shimmering liquid iron ore poured onto the rolling machines. It was not about the bureaucrats in office buildings who never got their hands dirty. It was about the dry cleaners who kept those expensive suits and crisply pressed shirts ready to go to the next important meeting. Labor Day, dear friends, is and

has always been about the people who sweat for a living. Or at least that's how it started.

Nowadays when I think about Labor Day, like so many other folks who live and work in this beautiful area, I think of it as the last day the hordes of tourists are under foot and clogging up traffic. I think of Labor Day as the last day you have to pay to park at the beach. I think of Labor Day as the signal to start allowing extra time for encountering school busses as I drive to work and to visits. And Labor Day is symbolic of all those things. But it's not supposed to be *only* that. It's supposed to be a day when we pause to remember *and honor* the fruits of the labor of every person who touches our lives. Labor Day is about doctors and nurses and the receptionist who greets you in their offices. Labor Day is about teachers and instructional aides and cafeteria workers and janitors, but it's also about principals and vice principals and even superintendents – everyone who looks out for the interests of our children each day. Labor Day is about the general manager at Walmart and the greeter who just started there yesterday, so happy to have the job and the little bit of money it will generate. Labor Day is about the guy or gal who fixes your car and the person who sold it told you. Labor Day, dear friends, is therefore about every single one of us – those who labor, those who have labored in the past, and those who benefit

from the labor of others. That is what we are celebrating this weekend and I think it's important to remember that.

The author of this letter to the church in Colossae is explaining something which I think touches on the how and why of Labor Day. This person, perhaps Paul but more likely one of his followers writing in his name, is describing what it takes for someone, anyone really, to live and work successfully in a community. The letter is addressed to a church community which had been struggling with how to respond to the teachings of upstart prophets claiming to know the only “true” way of Jesus, a common problem still today. This letter, and especially the section of it we read this morning, articulates what it takes for a church to thrive as a community made up of diverse individuals with differing gifts and abilities. In other words, this letter is seeking to explain how to get along with people we encounter in life. Most importantly, this text reminds us that it is one's deep connection to the Gospel of Jesus and a desire to live it out completely which reveals the only truth that matters in any community – honor, respect and love, in spite of differences and maybe even because of them.

“As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you.”

Wow! Can you just imagine how your life would be impacted if every workplace operated like this! Think about it! This says we are to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience along with the rest of the clothing we put on as each day begins! We are to wear these virtues like armor all day, deflecting each barb, each snarky comment, each incompetent action *through* our kindness. A cashier is cranky? Smile. Your boss only criticizes your one mistake instead of thanking you for all the extra stuff you did? Be patient! Be meek! Be forgiving! “What? Are you *crazy*?” we think. In the world in which we live today, that’s a normal response. BUT, and this is the thing, it’s still NOT the Jesus response.

Oh for heaven’s sake, we think. Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t be meek or patient when I am mistreated at work! They’ll walk all over me! They’ll take advantage of me! Maybe. Maybe they will. But, the thing is, it’s not about them. It’s about you and what responding in kind to thoughtless behavior does to you. It robs you and the person Jesus knows you can be. It robs you of the peace Jesus brings into your life. It steals away your sense of self-worth and leaves in its place a sort of hollow feeling. Giving in to anger and mean-spirited actions and comments by responding in kind never makes you feel better about you or the other person. Giving in to negative emotions only creates more negativity. And that, dear friends, is not what God wants for you. That is not what

Jesus wants for you. Instead, Jesus wants his peace to rule in your hearts, his word to dwell in you richly. Jesus wants you to trust that, given the chance, God can transform you into the person the world needs you to be – compassionate, kind, patient and humble.

Now am I saying you should let people walk all over you? No, I'm not. What I am saying is that you can stand up for yourself and still be kind. You can speak up to someone being mean or thoughtless to you and still hold on to your humanity by seeing the fragility of the person standing before you. You can take a stand against incompetence without forgetting that the person who screwed up probably didn't do it on purpose. In other words, dear friends, you can treat others as you would like to be treated. You can give people the benefit of the doubt, even if you're pretty sure they don't deserve it. You can, whatever you do, be Christ-like in your response to whatever situation you are in.

Now this is not easy. Let me say that again. This is not easy. It's never been easy and it never will be easy. But that doesn't change the fact that this is what God expects of us. It is what Jesus showed us, taught us in everything he did. It is what the Holy Spirit acting within each one of us makes possible – this Christ-like response of turning the other cheek when it doesn't make sense. This is not easy. And, most likely, you won't be able to do it all the time. You may not even be able to do it most of the

time. But it is so very important to try. Because in trying we can eventually make our way to doing. In trying and failing we recover a little bit of our humanity every time. In trying and succeeding, we do change the world even if only a tiny bit. And trying, just trying, is all Jesus asks of us.

So, as you head back out to the rest of your Labor Day weekend, I hope you will remember all the workers on whom your life depends each day. I hope you will give them the honor, the respect, the gratitude you would like to receive in their place. And I hope as you make your way through each day you will recall that whatever you do, be kind whenever you can. Whatever you do, be compassionate and humble even when it makes no sense. Whatever you do, wherever you go, whomever you interact with, let the peace of Christ rule in your heart. Whatever you do, believe that you can change the world one tiny bit at a time. And you will. Amen.