

Labor Day weekend is considered by many to be the last gasp of summer. It's the final day of the year when we can wear white without the fashion police glaring at us. It's a time for picnics, parades and pools. After Labor Day, there are no more picnics, no more parades, and the many pools close for the season -- at least in most parts of the country. And, it's the end of the summer vacation season.

Here in the United States, we recognize 10 public holidays for which many of us have a paid day off from work: Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. In other parts of the world those days vary in number. India and Colombia, for example, provide the greatest number of public holidays 18, while workers in Mexico receive the least, only seven.

But listen to this: Most countries around the world have labor laws that mandate employers give a certain number of paid time-off days per year to workers, in addition to federal holidays! For example, our friends to the north in Canada get at least two weeks off -- by law -- from work. And workers in Brazil, France, and Finland get 30 days off! And that does NOT include national holidays.

So...How many vacation days does the U.S. government mandate for workers? *Zero!* Unlike most nations around the world, U.S. law does not require employers to grant any vacation or holiday time, and about 25 percent of all employees receive no paid vacation time or paid holidays -- except for the 10 federal holidays I mentioned earlier. Now, while we may love our paid holidays and vacation time, we don't normally measure the value of our lives by how we spend our leisure time. We know that we are more likely to be evaluated by our professional or work life. When we meet people for the first time, one of the questions that inevitably comes up is, "So, what is it that you *do for a living?*"

The question is not, "Hey, how do you like to spend your time off?" Although, I think we can agree that we do love our vacation time. Who doesn't? But when we experience extended periods of time, feeling as though we are not contributing anything meaningful, we struggle. Maybe this is why some lottery winners continue to go to work every day, even though they have enough money to live the rest of their lives without working. The need to contribute in a useful way also explains why some people struggle with retirement. We all want to know that we have a purpose, that we are useful. We tend to define our lives by what we do, what we accomplish, what we achieve.

As you are most certainly aware, tomorrow is Labor Day. This is an opportunity for us to think about what brings value to our lives. Are we in service, or is it more likely that we're out of service? Are we contributing or allowing life to pass us by? Are we engaged or idling? Do we feel that we are useful, or that we have something to offer in one way or another?

In our second lesson this morning, which we read nearly in its entirety, we're introduced to Philemon, a slave owner, and his runaway slave, Onesimus. Philemon appears to have an ongoing relationship with Paul, as today's short letter is addressed to him, and the leaders of a small house church. It is likely that Paul founded the congregation on one of his missionary journeys, or had at the very least visited them and preached there.

Onesimus is Philemon's slave who ran away and somehow found his way to Paul. And although the letter does not go into the details of what happened between the slave and his slave owner, it is fairly apparent from its contents that Paul is interested in the future of their relationship. He wants his friend to know that his former servant Onesimus is a different person, changed by the grace of God.

According to our narrative this morning, during his time with Paul, Onesimus came to faith in Jesus Christ and Paul comes to believe that the former slave should return to Philemon. Under these circumstances it isn't hard for us to imagine that the runaway man may have been a little hesitant to return to his old life, or that he may have feared being punished or treated harshly by his old master. But, returning to Philemon was considered the right thing to do in that day. Legally, that was where Onesimus belonged.

Unfortunately, Paul never addresses the injustice of slavery in his letter to Philemon. Slavery is understood as a cultural norm which Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and most everyone at that time, simply accepted. And while we would like Paul to have addressed the sin of slavery, he doesn't. He does, however, write about Onesimus in ways one would not have talked about a slave in those days. He affectionately describes how he became Onesimus' father in the faith, and how Onesimus has captured his heart. Paul is so impressed with Onesimus that he tells Philemon how he considered asking him to stay. Bound in prison, clearly he has a soft spot in his heart for Onesimus, and perhaps for all who were being held in the bonds of slavery.

While Paul never overtly condemns slavery as sin, he appeals to Philemon's faithfulness and to his love for Jesus and all God's people in his letter. He asks Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother, as though he were Paul himself. Paul even offers to pay for whatever Onesimus might have taken when he ran away. The imprisoned apostle seeks to convince Philemon that his and Onesimus' social statuses of slave owner and slave no longer apply. All that really matters is that they are siblings in Christ Jesus.

Paul's appeal that all human beings are of inherent worth may seem an obvious one today. In the time of Paul, Philemon and Onesimus, however, it would have been considered radical. The notion that two people from very different social

strata could be equals was unheard of. Yet, for Paul, it something that is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As we read in Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11, all of those categories that subject one person to another are gone. There is no longer slave and free, Greek nor Jew for example. Instead, we are all one in Christ Jesus.

Today, although we may not struggle with issues of slavery, many of us, however, struggle with trying to find our self-worth outside of our work. In fact, the holiday we celebrate this weekend grew out of laborers' desires to be valued beyond their jobs and to have lives beyond their work. The history of Labor Day traces back to a demonstration by the Central Labor Union on Tuesday, September 5, 1882. The New York City trade union organized a parade (some might call it a march) from City Hall to Reservoir Park in Union Square. At the park, there were picnics, a concert and speeches calling for an eight-hour workday.

At the time, the average workweek for a full-time manufacturing employee was 100 hours. That works out to about 14 hours per day, seven days per week. Imagine working from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day. That doesn't leave much time for anything else. This eventually led to Congress passing legislation which created Labor Day in 1894. However, it would take 48 years for the speeches made in Reservoir Park in 1882 to bear fruit. The eight-hour workday and the 40-hour workweek did not become the standard we know today until 1940.

And yet, many of us still struggle to find a balance between our work and the rest of our lives. Even as we celebrate Labor Day, we might be tempted to peek at our emails, or check our office voicemails, just to be sure we haven't missed anything important. We want to believe our lives are more than what we do, yet our inability to disengage from our jobs tells a different story. We still tend to measure our lives by what we do -- our roles, our jobs and our informal social

statuses. Some of us view ourselves much in the same way Philemon had once viewed Onesimus -- only useful at work.

Our take home for today, the key verse in our lesson this morning, is verse 11: "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me." Onesimus was once "useless," but now is "useful" or, we could say by inverting the two syllables of this word, "full of use." Useful = full of use. In Christ, Onesimus became full of use. He found his true self, his usefulness. He is no longer a slave whose sole purpose is to serve Philemon. Instead, Onesimus is a disciple of Jesus Christ, called like Philemon and Paul, to serve Christ by serving others.

We, too, are full of use: whether we are employed, unemployed, or underemployed; whether we have much or little; whether we feel satisfied or frustrated with our work; whether our employer appreciates us or not; whether we feel empowered or powerless. We are full of use as disciples of Jesus Christ, called to serve him in our everyday living.

We serve Christ when we dig wells that provide safe water, when we build hospitals to serve the ill and when we volunteer in soup kitchens and homeless shelters. We serve Jesus when we go on a mission trip, when we show the love of Jesus to a child in a Sunday school class, when we volunteer to help a committee with their ministry, or when we drive a friend to a doctor's appointment.

And, let's be clear. We serve Christ when we work for a full day's wage, when we do our job well and conscientiously as persons of integrity. We are full of use as we go to our jobs or go to school; when we parent our children or care for our parents; when we drive the kids to soccer practice, or when we give food to a neighbor. Our lives are not measured by what we do in our jobs. Instead, they are measured by our usefulness to Christ, whether we feel like Onesimus, Philemon, or Paul.

Labor Day is a time to give thanks to God for our jobs! We thank God for work! Around the world, many thousands of people would love to have a job. On Labor Day, we also thank God for all of those who worked to normalize the 40-hour workweek. And on this Labor Day Sunday, we can also recommit ourselves to finding our usefulness in Christ, rather than in our jobs. We are, after all, more than our jobs. We are full of use for Christ and his kingdom! And thanks be to God for that. Amen.