

Living in God's Economy  
September 4, 2016  
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church  
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Just lately, it seems like many of the lectionary readings have to do with labor and work. A few weeks ago, we heard about God as the designer and worker of a vineyard. Agriculture is a hard line of work. My grandfather owned and worked a fruit farm in northeastern Pennsylvania, near the Pocono Mountains. They always got by and there was plenty to eat, but it was not an easy life. In today's lesson from Isaiah, God is a potter. It is not heavy physical labor, but making a living as an artist is also not always so easy. In today's gospel lesson we hear about an architect and builder who may or may not have the means to complete a project. Another story of the work-a-day world. Finally, we hear of a commander with an army that is outnumbered. These soldiers are either conscripted or mercenary, but either way, they fight for a paycheck.

This weekend, we celebrate Labor Day, a day in which we hold up the labors of workers as a good thing. We live in Wisconsin, a state that has played a large role in work as we now know it. The five-day work week is our heritage. Care for workers has been a part of our DNA here. The work we do is important and is worthy of celebration.

Why? It goes back a long way. In creating the world, we hear of the work God did each day for six days. At the end of each day, God deemed that work and its product to be "good." On the last day, the whole work was deemed to be "very good." That is the model for the work we do.

Yet, these readings are troubling for us. When we heard about the vineyard, the vines, Israel, produced sour grapes, and God was ready to destroy. In today's reading about the potter, the potter mentions that as the pot is created, it takes just one little move of the hand to destroy the pot. Jesus tells his followers that, in order to be a disciple, one must hate father, mother, sister, and brother. This sounds so unlike the rest of the biblical message. What happened to love of God and neighbor? Is it really okay for the God who says, "Love one another as I have loved you" to say we must hate those to whom we are the closest? What is going on here?

When someone comes to me for counsel on a difficult matter in their life, I have two choices. I can listen and try to offer ideas that can help the situation, or I can say any number of things that would cut them to the quick. I, as a trusted religious leader, *could*, really hurt people. Some religious leaders have done that, not as perverse behavior, but because they have come to believe that their notion of truth is more important than the other person. Our denominational leadership has, sadly, done this when we decide

for ourselves who is 'out' and who is 'in'. We have done it when we choose to play God, the judge, rather than opening hearts, minds, and doors to others.

As we read this gospel passage, just what does Jesus mean when he tells us to hate family in order to follow him? Scripture has many ways of getting a point across. Do we take this literally? If parents live with us, should we just turn them loose on the streets? Or, is Jesus saying, "Listen, you have to have priorities in your life. Your mom and dad are important, but what role do I play in your life? Am I just an extra? Do I just get your left over time?"

You keep hearing about how Christianity is shrinking in our world. The key phrase here is "our world." In Cameroon, they cannot build United Methodist Churches quickly enough. Once a new one opens, it is already overcrowded. Christianity is growing by leaps and bounds in Cambodia. It is just in the so-called 'developed' world that it is shrinking – and why shouldn't it? What need have we for God? Our lives are going along pretty well and we merely show up for God occasionally. Where life is incredibly difficult, people know they need a God who will care for them and save them. We go along with the familiar status quo of our lives. People in the two-thirds world are ready to give stuff up just for God – even family, if they have to.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's most famous book is *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, he writes that there is no such thing as cheap grace. If we just live a surface, skin deep, Christianity, he would claim that we are not really Christian. There is a cost to following Jesus. This is how God's economy works. That cost is not necessarily a bad thing. It just means that we have our priorities in line. However, God's economy can also cost everything – in order to gain everything.

Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor. He was captured and imprisoned by the Nazis because he did not preach the faith in the way they wanted it preached. He told the truth. Finally, days before the signing of the armistice, he was executed.

Tomorrow, most of us will have a day off to remember the importance of our work – not just our everyday work to make a living, but also the work of the kingdom – the work that God says is "very good." Will we take a few moments to reflect on our priorities? Will we remember that, as we gather around the table today and share this sacred meal that includes wheat and grapes grown through the labor of others, God is calling us to important work? Will we scrutinize our priorities?

The same God who says, "To be my disciple, you must hate father, mother, and other family" also is saying, "I am doing a new thing. Can you not see it? Can you not feel it? Behold, I am making all things new." We are called to be kingdom people. It is work. There is a cost. It is all part of God's economy and we are up to it!