

We pray you, Gracious God, on this Labor Day weekend to bless us; for we labor to your honor and your glory in all we set our minds and hands to do. Amen.

What we do matters. What we work at matters. All work is hallowed in Christ. The Church sometimes seems to foster a Sunday/Monday split. We seem to value certain work over other work. We bless the Sunday school teachers. We commission the vestry. We pray and give thanks for the ministries here at Trinity Church. But what about the work we do during the week? Is that work any less holy? Shouldn't we bless those who work as gas station attendants, lawyers, teachers, accountants, sales men and women, carpenters, writers and repairmen? We are led to believe that there is holy work, and then there's the work we do to make a living. But why should we think any sort of honest work to be less worthy or more worthy than other work? We shouldn't. Let's look at how our readings speak to this.

Today in our reading from Jeremiah, Jeremiah tells the people a sort of parable from God. God is the potter of the parable and we are the clay. See, God is working too! "Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand..." God says. But just as a potter might say when his creation isn't coming together as he wishes it would, "This clay seems to have a mind of its own."

This parable takes into account our free will by saying that we, the clay, are not doing what the potter, God, shaped us to do. In Jeremiah's story God is able to shape evil as well as good. That leads us into the whole problem of evil which we will have to tackle another day. Today we will focus on the fact that we have a choice to be the vessels that God wants us to be, or to go our own way. What makes our work holy is when we do it in light of the Gospel. Another way to say this is that when we make the choice to do as Jesus would do... in all we do, our work is holy.

Now on Paul's letter to Philemon. Lots of ways to pronounce this name, but this is how it is said in the original Greek. This letter is the shortest in the NT, and we read it in its entirety this morning; all 25 verses. Here is the story behind the letter. Paul is in jail, again, and person named Onesimus has been helping him there. Perhaps Onesimus gets food or other creature comforts for Paul. Perhaps Paul has taught the man to read and write and becomes his scribe. Onesimus has become a Christian while with Paul in prison. The name Onesimus may have been given to him in light of his rebirth in Christ. Onesimus, you see, means useful. What a great name, don't you think? Paul makes a play on his name in this letter. He says "Formerly he was useless to you but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. Onesimus seems to be a runaway slave. He belonged to Philemon. So, Paul writes to Philemon to ask him to take Onesimus back, and sends the letter with the man back to his master. The letter is an appeal. He wishes to have Philemon take Onesimus back and be restored to his master's good favor.

Philemon is a Christian too, and from the sounds of it, has been a friend and companion of Paul in previous journeys. So, he is pleading with Philemon, in light of the fact that they are all brothers in Christ, to receive Onesimus back without punishment. (Philemon would be within his rights to kill a runaway slave if that slave was found.)

But the letter is also more than an appeal for clemency for Onesimus because Paul says that Onesimus is very useful. He says, "I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place." So, why this delicate dance? Why return Onesimus at all? Why not just let him continue to work for Paul, or instead write a letter to Philemon that he, Paul, is now taking over his slave. "Hey, you lost him. I found him. Thanks."

It's all about Paul knowing that his life is in Christ, and doing the next right thing that presents itself. In this case, the slave needs to go back to his master to be properly and formally released. Yes, it's a risk. Philemon might treat Onesimus badly, or even kill him. He might also not be willing to send him back to Paul, but it's a risk Paul must take to do the right thing...to do the Christ-like thing. Paul trusts that because Philemon is in Christ as well that he

too will do the next right thing. Paul has faith that Philemon will choose to do what Jesus would do.

And Onesimus must trust Paul and God that it will all work out. Onesimus has given his life to Christ and his work, either as a slave, or as Paul's helper. He is a Christian brother and his work is holy work. It doesn't matter what his background, or his status in society. What matters is that he is a useful Christian brother in Christ. He carries his cross.

Lastly, about this short personal letter. It's kind of odd that this letter is in the canon of the NT. Paul must have written hundreds of letters such as this in his lifetime. Why was this one preserved for us and made part of our holy Scripture? It must be that the letter was a success and that Onesimus was indeed released to return to Paul. We hear from an Early Christian bishop in his writings, Ignatius, about another Christian bishop named Onesimus. It's not a common name, so it is entirely possible that this former slave became a bishop in the early christen church. That would be a good reason to save this letter!

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus talks about cross bearing. We sometimes hear people say, "Well that's my cross to bear" speaking of an illness or a difficult family relationship. But Jesus says that we all have a cross to bear if we are willing to take it up. It need not be some unpleasant irksome task. Cross bearing is the work you do. It doesn't matter if you are a carpenter who works with wood and picks up cross beams all the time in your profession. It doesn't matter if you are a nurse who helps to lift people in your daily rounds. Maybe you carry a pen, or pick up a computer in your work. We all pick up our tasks and do them. Jesus asks us to do our daily round of tasks with honesty and integrity....and in light of the Gospel. We must, to the best of our ability, take the risks necessary to do the next right thing that is put in front of us.

I try to cut corners when possible; "can I just drag the cross please...it's a bit heavy? Or, How about if I get someone else to carry it and I'll just encourage them on? Or can I just do it later?

It isn't the right sort of weather at the moment. I mean, I don't want to jump into this cross bearing thing...it's risky you know."

But even while I make excuses sometimes, I know what the next right thing is in my heart. I know what I am supposed to do. And if I don't know what I am supposed to do, that's when I ask another person in Christ for advice. We are meant to work with others and in relationship to our fellow Christians. If I allow Christ to work through me, and through those around me, I'll be able to take a risk and pick up that cross.

But at the same time, in this reading today, Jesus is not suggesting that we dive into something without first coming to grips with the task ahead. He paints us a picture: His image is of someone sitting down before building a tower to see what the cost will be, to prepare for the task. The way we go about our work is important.

All work is holy work. All work matters and can make a difference in someone's life. We are all vessels that have been lovingly created by God and what ever form of work has been set before us, and is prayerfully considered, is useful work. The grace that God gives us to sustain our work is in the sacraments. We are fed by God's grace, in our work and our rest. So, when you come forward for communion today receive the host as food for your work, to feed you in all your labors.

I would love to have God bless each of us, and we bless each other in our various professions this morning. It might be a very long service if we were to do one person at a time. But I have an idea about how we can support each other in our work. During the time of the prayers of the people, I ask that you take a moment to ask God's blessing on your work, either aloud or silently. Ginny will say, We ask God to bless each of us in our daily tasks and vocations. You can say in response, "I ask your blessing on my work as a _____". Now if you are embarrassed to do that, then do it silently, but we are all family here. You can speak up. Take

a risk! Here is a cross Jesus has put before you that each one of us can take up by the grace of God.