

A Rite for Labor Day

This week we're pleased to bring you a liturgical rite for the observance of Labor Day, written by Steve Kuhl, our Crossings Executive Director. As you'll see, Steve introduces his rite with some historical context, and he warmly invites you to use the rite in your own worship this weekend if you so choose.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

A Liturgical Observance of the Vocation of Daily Work for Labor Day

Liturgy and the Crossings Congregation

Back when I was a pastor at Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, Bob Bertram sparked the idea in me to think about what it would mean for Mount Olive to be a "Crossings Congregation." The idea was this: being a Crossings Congregation means that Crossings is not merely an add-on program, placed on top of the other things you do; rather, whether in the area of worship or education or pastoral care or church administration or social outreach, a Crossings Congregation is one that seeks to infuse the Crossings Concern into everything it does.

So I began to think first about worship. One of the weekly high points in the congregation's life is worship. How might the Crossings Concern be infused into that regular activity? Of course, one of the "routine" ways for doing this is found in preaching that minds its Ds and Ps (the Law's diagnosis of what ails the human situation and the Gospel's prescription for healing it) in such a way that focuses the hearer on "crossing

life with the Promise of Christ.” But I wondered: Might there not also be a more systematic way to connect everyday or secular life with the promise of Christ by paying attention to the everyday or secular calendar? Might not the themes of everyday life that confront us through the rhythm of the secular calendar also be incorporated into liturgical life, just as the themes in the drama of salvation—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—systematically confront us through the liturgical year?

So I began to think about all the ways we as a society have secular celebrations (Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Fourth of July, etc.) that people are predisposed to observe, but which we as the Church often let pass by. Could they be infused with a meaningful, intentional, liturgical connection to the Christian Message? Finally, it dawned on me that they did have a connection! These secular observances coincide with what we as Christians call “vocations” or callings from God. Collectively, they identify those situations and activities in daily life that we as Christians regard, not as legal obligations, but as holy opportunities for living out our baptismal identity as “Little Christs” in the world: situations and activities wherein we “dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that God has made,” as one of the Offertory Prayers in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (p. 68) puts it. Therefore, the liturgical life of the Church is a very appropriate place to remind and teach Christians about Christian vocation.

At Mount Olive, I began to lift up the connection of faith and life in the liturgy by creating rites that affirmed the vocation of Christians in the world as those vocations were suggested by the secular calendar. Below is a rite I developed for the observance of Labor Day. You are welcome to use it in the upcoming Labor Day Sunday, a rite that lifts up the vocation of daily work.

According to the US Department of Labor's website, the idea of Labor Day "constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country" (<http://www.dol.gov/laborday/history.htm>). It was first conceived by Matthew Maguire in 1882 while he served as the Secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. He had led several strikes in 1870s to bring public consciousness to the plight of manufacturing workers and the exploitative conditions under which American workers toiled. Daily work was being demeaned and devalued by the exploits of big business which valued capital accumulation over the worker who produced it. Labor Day, therefore, fit into the overall concern to promote dignity and justice for the common worker in a society that was rapidly moving from a family-farm agricultural economy to an industrial-based capitalist economy. Through parades and festivals, the day was designed to show "the strength and *esprit de corps* of the trade and labor organizations" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labor_Day) in their support of the value of daily work. In a bit of irony, Labor Day was declared a national holiday in 1894 by Grover Cleveland, six days after the end of the Pullman Strike, in the wake of the tragic death of strikers at the hands of the U.S. military that Cleveland himself sent to the company town of Pullman, Illinois, for the purpose of breaking the strike (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pullman_Strike). By 1909, Labor Sunday was established, as many churches began to show their support for the struggles of the common worker and the value and dignity of daily work. The prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer* that I use in the rite below was developed for this Labor Sunday observance.

Although Labor Day has devolved into an end-of-summer holiday, we would do well as the church to lift it up and to remember it

as a day to celebrate and extol the value of daily work as a calling from God. The following rite is offered to that end.

AFFIRMATION OF CHRISTIAN VOCATION OF DAILY WORK – LABOR DAY

This Rite may be used as part of the sending rite of the liturgy, placed after the Post-communion prayer and before the Benediction.

Dear Christian friends: Baptized into the priesthood of Christ, we are called by the Holy Spirit to offer ourselves to the God of all creation in thanksgiving for what he has done and continues to do for us. There are many ways and places in which we as Christians offer ourselves to God in service. We call them vocations: callings from God to be God's servants. Some vocations are chosen; some just fall upon us, seemingly by accident; but no matter how these vocations come to us, they are to be viewed as opportunities for us to serve the Lord joyfully. On this Labor Day weekend, we lift up the vocation of daily work.

The creation stories in Genesis depict daily work as an integral part of God's relationship with humanity. Through daily work God dignifies us: calling us to participate in his ongoing work of blessing the creation so that it may be fruitful and multiply. Through the blessings of daily work God also provides for us: calling us to share with each other the fruits of our labor so that all may partake in the common good. Unfortunately, our daily work is often tainted by the reality of our own sin—our inclination to work for self alone and not for God and the common good—and it is frequently demeaned by the exploitation of systems that would rob workers of their dignity and a living wage. Labor Day was initially established precisely to help us appreciate the great gift that daily work is and to safeguard it

against all that would demean it.

Therefore, let us give thanks for our calling to daily work. Let us remember those who are happily employed or busily retired; those who are unemployed or underemployed; those who are overworked and underpaid; let us pray for justice in the workplace and meaningful work for everyone.

The presiding minister addresses those affirming Christian vocation.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, believing that you are called to live out your baptismal covenant through your daily work, will you endeavor to pattern your life and service after the Lord Jesus Christ? **We will, and we ask God to help and guide us.**

Knowing that the weakness of the flesh and the temptations of the evil one are all around, will you make use of the means of grace so that, strengthened in faith, you may exhibit the love of God in your daily work? **We will, and we ask God to help and guide us.**

The presiding minister continues.

Let us pray. Almighty God, you have so linked our lives one with another that all we do affects, for good or ill, all other lives: So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for self alone, but for the common good; and, as we seek a proper return for our own labor, make us mindful of the rightful aspirations of other workers, and arouse our concern for those who are out of work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen.* (Book of Common Prayer, p. 210, Collect 25, For Labor Day)

The service concludes with the blessing and dismissal.