

## **“What Does It Mean to Celebrate Labor Day?”**

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Matthew 20: 1-16 and Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Labor Day: for some, a last hurrah of summer at the lake; for others, the weekend to get ready for school to start (or get what you forgot); for others, a signal that summer has ended. Maybe it means one or more of those things to you and to me, but we all know, deep down, that Labor Day originated for a different reason than the end of summer hurrah.

Labor Day emerged in the late nineteenth century (during the height of the Industrial Revolution) out of the organized labor movements in England, where increasing attention was being focused on the thousands of people from vulnerable populations who were dying every year from poor working conditions and long hours. Inspired by our British friends, US unions in New York threw a parade in September 1882, to celebrate unions as a concept the hard-working people comprising them. Workers gave up a day's wage to attend, and more than 20,000 people came, which meant they weren't laboring for others. President Grover Cleveland signed an act establishing Labor Day as a federal holiday in 1894. It is estimated that this year (which was written a couple of years ago) that more than 40% of businesses will remain open this Labor Day, and the vast majority of staff members on the clock will be those from within the working-class—the people meant to be honored by the holiday.

Those who work on Labor Day may get extra pay (in some settings) and it turns out they are going to need it. According to a 2025 article, the following things are true:

-A single adult earning less than \$80,000 per year cannot afford to live comfortably in a single US state, a new report found. (In Michigan, that number is between \$80,000 and \$90,000 to “afford a reasonable and sustainable lifestyle.”)

-The report, released by SmartAsset on June 4, 2025, also revealed that families of four must earn more than \$200,000 to live comfortably in nearly every state.

I know we could debate what a comfortable lifestyle is, and in our culture, we constantly debate who deserves what, but according to my math, in order to make \$80,000 per year (as a single adult) one would have to make \$38.50 an hour. That was before the economic realities of today.

On this Labor Day, I'd like for us to take a minute and think about what it takes economically to survive today. Many of us know this first-hand. As we celebrate Labor Day, it's getting harder and harder to get by. Meanwhile, we waste time arguing about who deserves help and who does not. This is particularly problematic for Christians, as today's stories suggest. The Matthew scripture is perhaps the most difficult in all the gospels—from one perspective—the perspective of who deserves what. Yes, it's rooted in economics, but I submit to you that for many, it's also rooted in our view of who God is. I'll tell you the point right away...you can choose whether or not you want to listen to the rest. You see, the “kingdom of heaven” which Jesus spends much of Matthew talking about—especially in parables—is something God is doing, that is, it is to be received as a *gift*. The kingdom is not something that can be acquired and henceforth be held as a legal and permanent possession...the parables instruct us that our response to the gracious gift of participation in God's rule must be total (R.A. Hare *The Interpretation Bible Series: Matthew*, page 158).”

The financial news of the day should impact on our faith as well as the other way around. We spend much of our lives acquiring, and then holding firmly to, our things. To do that, we work (or we did work), and we receive money for the work we do. Not a surprise to you. Where the problem comes in is when we decide who works the hardest, who deserves the most, and who deserves any kind of help. This parable in Matthew is uncomfortable because it hits us where many of us live—right in the pocketbook. This is not a favorite parable like the lost sheep, son, or coin—although the point is the same. But before I get there, let's explore this parable:

The landowner goes out to recruit workers three times. He promises them a day's wage for their work. The problem comes when two things happen: 1) the people hired late in the day (or last) not only receive the same pay, but 2) they also get paid first! Can you imagine yourself in the audience when Jesus first tells this parable? The audible gasps could be heard anywhere around where they were. No wonder Jesus could never get called to lead a congregation, nor could he ever win political office.

“The Gospel of Matthew often seems to abet the very natural human assumption that we are saved by works. Faith is assumed; judgment is on the basis of performance (see Mt 7:21). At certain critical points however, Matthew corrects this misinterpretation (Hare, p228).”

At this point, someone in the room is quoting the famous line from the book of James that “faith without works is dead!” Perhaps. But the challenge today is to think about how much time we spend in comparison with others. Doesn't matter your economic

status, or your political party, or even which church you belong to – all of us spend a lot of time comparing ourselves with others and determining not only what we deserve, but what they deserve. I don't know very many people who identify with the last people who showed up to work and say, "Yes, that's me!" We are proud of our work, and many of us have worked for many, many years and we feel we have earned much of what we have. Not the argument. The argument is about what justice for all really means. I don't know about you, but there are many people out there working jobs I never would consider doing and making a whole lot less than I have or do. How and why do we value people's work? Who deserves to be paid more? Helped with government or charitable assistance? Who deserves time away? All along the same question is, "who deserves?"

Sadly, many people ask that question related to who "deserves" God's love. Who deserves God's heaven. Who deserves to be called "Christian"? Who belongs in God's kingdom. And then stories like this come along and tug at our inner conscience when we realize God doesn't put value to things the same way we do.

The climax of our parable in Matthew's Gospel occurs in verse 15: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" The vineyard owner claims the right to pay the workers not on the basis of their merits but on the basis of his own compassion. Commentator R.A. Hare asks, "Why should such generosity be condemned as injustice?"

This parable guides us to – especially on Labor Day – be more compassionate. We are all caught up in what we deserve, what we have, what we might lose...and subsequently

we turn and judge the other. Compassion is what we lack most. I know many of us will use services on Labor Day, but for one day could we tip a little better, smile a little more, be a little more gracious, or even thank people for working that day – whether they chose to or not. And for those of us who get the day off, maybe we could be thankful that we are able to celebrate such a day. Maybe we choose to use some of our time to make someone else's life a little bit better. Yes, we could donate to the food pantry, but even more helpful would be to begin to learn why more and more people need it every day and then to ask if there is a better option?

Maybe we can begin to work together from a place of compassion rather than comparison, to help all boats rise – especially for those who work so hard and couldn't imagine their household of four making \$80,000, let alone a household of one. This is a Democrat problem, and a Republican problem, but beyond those groups, this is a Jesus problem. As people of faith, we are called to do what is ours to make the world much more like the kingdom of heaven. And as we just learned, we don't get to control the entrance requirements, so we might as well quit wasting our time doing what is God's to do. Instead, let us put our energy, whether it's faith with works, or showing up at the last minute, let us put it all together in compassionate care for the other. Only a small group of people benefit from the way we do things...and none of them are anywhere around here, even if they think they are. Jesus calls on us this Labor Day to be challenged to do more than compare ourselves to others with our net worth.

What does it mean to celebrate Labor Day? Let us celebrate those who came before us who have done much that is good and that many of us benefit from today. At the same

time, let us work together to fix those injustices that still plague our culture, our nation, and perhaps even our church.

I didn't get to talk about creation Sunday like I'd hoped to, but this sermon is long enough. Let me end with the words of authors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Prickett:

*Reducing economic inequality is not a panacea for health, social and environmental problems, but it is central to solving them all. Greater equality confers the same benefits on a society however it is achieved. Countries that adopt multifaceted approaches will go furthest and fastest.*

What does it mean to celebrate Labor Day as Christians? Amen.