

“Love’s Labor. And Loss?” (6Sept2020)
Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14

It’s Labor Day weekend.

On this occasion, we can connect the biblical sense of sabbath to social movements making space for that sabbath, voiced by the clever phrase that “labor unions are the folks who gave you the weekend.” It’s valuing the image of God in humans and creation. It fits in with the Fight for \$15 minimum wage (though we as Christians could rightly question why we’re so focused on being able to do or pay the minimum and minimize somebody’s contribution or identity). It’s justice when some would dominate and boss others around, oppressing and demeaning people, which is clearly against Jesus.

But broader than workplace grievances, our theology has a wonderful focus on vocation. We mostly think of vocation equaling your profession or occupation. It’s sorta sadly reflected in the question, “What do you do for a living?” Vocation and living or life itself get summed up in your job. Sure, we spend lots of time preparing for careers and many of our waking hours at work or with our thoughts and worries occupied by it.

But in Christian terms, your vocation is a lot broader and better: your calling from God is to love your neighbor. Your vocation is love. You embody and re-present God’s presence for the sake of the world in your loving, so it is a holy vocation.

That’s important because sometimes it’s been seen that only clergy or church professionals have a calling. They’re the ones to say, “I heard God calling me to do this.” But it’s not special. God is calling you to labor in love.

That’s clearly a big task, much more than a job. It can be unending responsibility, in the opportunities to love and efforts to love and people who need to be loved, near and far, and all creation.

Our readings seem to approach this huge task through what goes wrong and repentance, about the failure to love. For such failing at being a Christian,

the BYOB Bible Study group brought up the word “excommunication.” Generally, we describe failing at a vocation with the term “fired” or maybe “expelled” for the vocation of a student, or “sacked” in fun British English.

I’ve gotta tell you, one person has been especially on my mind these days for failing at his vocation and he should be sacked. And that person is...Jeff Bezos. The founder of Amazon is the first human to have wealth over \$200 billion.* I’ve been incredibly frustrated and sad after learning this, especially since \$87 billion of his fortune—nearly half—has come this year, during the time of global pandemic. That means he’s failing at his vocation. Extraordinarily. Disgustingly.

Although it’s good you didn’t have to go to stores and risk catching or spreading the virus, and Amazon would deliver to your house, and that part of Jeff Bezos could be called succeeding in the vocation of love, and even as our standard economic model would say he’s the most successful businessman ever, the fact that he’s personally hoarded so much money, stuck in his selfish desires means he’s a blatant failure in his vocation.

The other person I’d vote to fire is the President. This week as he continued talking “law and order,” it leaves us to ask at whose benefit and whose expense he means these things. And if Paul can tell us that love fulfills the law, then divisive hate-inducing rhetoric fails in love, and so exactly fails at fulfilling the law. The President, then, is a failure at his vocation.

Of course, by Jesus’ standards, I’m also failing right now, naming these two high-falooters and talking *about* them instead of *to* them. I’m rejecting Jesus’ advice for calling people back to their calling, returning us and reconciling us to our loving purpose in community. Talking about them as jerks and failures and wicked isn’t directly serving love. Though I do hope this indirectly serves love by illuminating it for us.

We fret lots about headline names and huge problems in our world. But the important reality is

* <https://www.msn.com/en-us/finance/companies/jeff-bezos-becomes-first-person-ever-to-have-net-worth-of-more-than-24200-billion/ar-BB18rs9G>

smaller. It's why, for example, Luther says the 4th Commandment names honoring parents as central, and only gets extrapolated to the government and others in authority. Think of it: the Commandment could've said, "Honor your leaders and officers." Instead, it talks about your family.

See, this vocation of love finds its most basic locus in your most basic relationships. We like to think Christian love is shown because we gather food for the pantry, or we swing hammers to build a house, or donate to disaster relief, or advocate for policies that disrupt racism. Those are good, of course. They're just not the main thing. We can tell because of how little time you spend with them, and they're optional.

If you really want to go on a mission trip, it mostly just means going home and your daily tasks. God's mission is mostly where you already are. That is where love is needed and God is active, where your vocation and your presence are most living out God's purposes.

As we pray our students into a school year, we typically conceive they are there to learn for their own opportunities, studying to better themselves and prepare for the future. But the vocation of a student also means they are there to be in community with classmates. Neither are they preparing only to be the next political leader or rich businesswoman, but being prepared to help society, to be a member of this broad community that cares for each other. Or, again in a small way, maybe they're being most prepared as students to be a human, to do what it takes for those nearest-by. We love young people into being so they can love us back, or can extend love.

This is what God's blessing is for.

So for all of us, first, I just want to say thank you. So much! Into each of your households, in all you're doing through these days! For God's sake, I want to affirm all your efforts to love. It's never easy. But it's usually least easy with those closest to us, because it is such a day-in, day-out relentless task. It's demanding and not very voluntary. It's complex and can change by the minute. There aren't right answers. There's no way to do it completely or perfectly. Much less in a pandemic!

With that, the answer of faith doesn't seem to be simply to pat you on the back and say you've done enough or done your best or given it your all. God knows you need more than dismissive acceptance or excuses. Since this involves love, you take it seriously. You're trying hard. You want to do it right.

And so Jesus acknowledges that things can go wrong, that it won't be perfect. We have disagreements in church and in any kind of caring community. So repentance isn't about feeling ashamed or miserable, but is simply living with the reality that things don't always (or maybe even often) go how you want them to.

Jesus uses the word "sin," which basically means "miss the mark." There are all sorts of reasons you may miss the mark. Sometimes it's a moving target or just won't stick. You may have tried hard and your aim was off. You may have been in a bad mood. It may have been quarreling or jealousy or partying too hard, as Paul lists, and I think those things are all too possible when we're worn thin by a pandemic and not as good as we'd like to be. You may have had no energy for one more thing. You may have done well in some area, but missed in others. That's why our confession covered so much territory of relationships close and far and dear and impersonal—not to reinforce a guilty feeling, but to concede that even if your love missed the mark there, still you are kept in relationship, held in forgiveness, given grace, not stuck in past problems but living toward the future.

See, you're not a failure. It's not the end. It's not three strikes and you're out. It's not that you need to try harder next time. Jesus recognizes that we'll miss the mark. You're not perfect, not going to be perfect, and don't need to try. None of us is. Yet we keep loving. Reconciling when it hasn't gone well. Admitting that that's okay.

We keep on loving, keep on with this calling, this vocation. Not only because God told us to, but because God first loved you. And through it all—in the great phrase from Romans—Jesus will remain nearer to you than the clothes you wear. That is his love for you, and that is what loves you

into a vision and practice of life as he intends it,
already nearer even now than it was before.