

Jeremiah 2:4-13  
Luke 14:7-14

**Holy Work**  
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Labor Day is a Federal holiday, not found in the Christian calendar. But it is a good chance to say something about this holiday looking at it through Christian lenses, OR, let's say, through the lens of Jesus. For most of still-working America, it is an extra day off and a chance to do some serious grilling before Fall comes on. Its history has weight though. In the 1800's, the average laborer in this country worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, to barely get by. A small wealthy class made all the money. Kinda sounds like today, yes? Laborers who organized strikes, or refused to work, were sometimes gunned down. (Haymarket riot, Pullman Strike.) But the idea of workers being treated fairly caught on, individual states began to pass their own legislation, and finally in 1894 President Grover Cleveland signed a lawmaking Labor Day a federal holiday, and legitimizing the movement which put labor on a par with capital in the USA.

So what might all that have to do with the church and with the Christian life? Or even more, what might this day's theme have to do with *our* work as a church? I think it does, when our work becomes Holy Work. In the Old Testament text we read, the prophet Jeremiah railed against the entire people and culture of Israel who, he said "went after worthless things and became worthless themselves." We become like the gods we serve, that is, and Israel's religious leaders knew the fertility god Baal better than they knew God.

Their problem was actually prosperity. During the Exodus, 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, they were in a daily struggle for survival and this totally dependent on God for life itself. The productive plenty of generations in the Promised Land took that intimacy with God away from them. They forgot God's past blessings. They thought they were entitled, that it was not gift from God but something they earned. They thought it was theirs, when it was God's all along. Jeremiah said they forsook the fountain of living water cracked cisterns of their own making. Roger Owens wrote, "Idolatry is not holding on to the wrong things. It's holding on to good things wrongly, including God."

In our Gospel lesson Jesus was invited to dinner, this time at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. (Reading Luke it may seem like Jesus was always eating – healing people, then eating. There's a pattern in Luke's version. But always these meals are teaching tools, in Luke's gospel. The Pharisees, religious teachers of Israel, had the same sense of personal entitlement that Jeremiah objected to years before, even as they tended to the religious teaching of a people occupied and suppressed. Jesus saw how guests jockeyed for the place of honor and turned it into parable: "When you're invited to a banquet, don't sit in the place of honor, lest the host have to ask you to move down. Sit in the lowest place, and the host may invite you to move up. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (If they had believed him, there could have been a mad rush for the cheap seats, and it would have all turned into comedy.)

It was what Jesus said next, to the Pharisee who had invited him, and who was watching him like a hawk, that turned the enacted parable into a lesson in God's justice. "When you give a luncheon or dinner, don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, rich neighbors – who then feel obligated to invite you in turn. All you have accomplished is social interchange. Invite the poor, the crippled the lame, and the blind. You will be blessed precisely because they cannot repay you." Luke takes it for granted that, in his culture and time, the disabled *are* poor. In Jesus there is a great reversal of values! Women, by custom, were often not even provided the lowest seats but were relegated to the serving or cooking area or even outside.

Jesus was not telling his host to invite the “deserving poor”, a phrase we like to throw around as if we could decide what that is, as if we knew from the outside everyone else’s situation and the struggles of their life every day. Jesus was telling his host to invite the “unclean”, the unworthy, the irreligious, the sinful poor. Invite the one who *cannot* repay you; then only God can do so.

That attitude of entitlement, or being above others, alarms me. Flying is getting weird because of angry, out-of-control people attacking flight attendants or other passengers, because they didn’t get the seat they wanted, or won’t sit down, or... the reasons smack of a sense of entitlement. Of being superior to others, privileged, always having the self in prime view. The folks having to be escorted off airplanes got that sense of entitlement somewhere, probably from the values of our culture itself.

We package public policy in order to deceive our selves – that we do care for “the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” (or their equivalents), those Jesus said should be invited first to the table, the “little ones” he sometimes called them. Yet in any tight government budget the social safety network is often where the first cuts are made. And not just to pick on government alone – in the non-profit world of churches and charities, a *lot* of money is spent on programs to make the giver feel good, not effect lasting change for the poor.

On this Labor Day weekend, the lectionary has given us this weirdly ordinary issue of diner table seating, except Jesus turned it into parable to make a point, which for us today could be this – **our work becomes holy when it is not about us, or at least is about more than ourselves, and is work done for others.** The exercise had you do, to provide information to the Pastor Nominating Committee about how you, the congregation, saw this church, was very interesting to me. I did a “word study” on how many times key words were written. The #1 word you used was “community”. It beat out “worship”, “mission” and “diversity” (the next 3). I think that’s kind of wonderful! We probably need to find ways to strengthen that in the future. How can we do that even better here in Jemez Springs. What you did in that exercise was to define our WORK. Our Holy work.

Holy work is work we do that turns reality upside down when the world has too little love and too little promise. Real human dignity is always unconscious of itself. True honor is unexpected. If it seems odd that Jesus talks about us receiving reward for disinterested goodness, it is because loving service to the helpless and hurting IS life in the Kingdom of God. That Jesus found parables in table lessons of the familiar and ordinary is a sign of the Incarnation, God among us in human form, and says where holiness is to be found is in the familiar and ordinary.

For the first readers of Luke’s gospel, the central act of worship was an ordinary meal. In our parable today Jesus took over, as though he and not the Pharisee, was the host. Holy work, sacrament, happens when he does that. When we gather and set *this* table before us, Jesus takes over. May he take over every table at which we sit. And Church, may this meal we share give you strength and direction for your Holy Work.