

“Labors Of Love”

Hebrews 13:1-8

Let mutual love continue.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by so doing, some have entertained angels unawares.

Remember those who are in prison,
as though you were in prison with them;
those who are being tortured,
as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Let marriage be held in honor by all,
and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled;
for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

Keep your lives free from the love of money,
and be content with what you have;
for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”

So we can say with confidence,
The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?”

Remember your leaders,
those who spoke the word of God to you;
consider the outcome of their way of life.

Labors Of Love

Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16

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I.

Aaaaaah, Labor Day weekend. For me, the most bitter-sweet moment of the calendar year. Labor Day is the last hurrah of summer. The final big bite before school resumes and we all settle back into our “regular” routines. Time for a final BBQ, camping trip, day at the beach, lake, or river. An opportunity to squeeze in just *one* more item from the summer’s “To-Do” list. However, for many, Labor Day weekend is a ringing bell of reckoning which signals the change of season, the passage of time, the onset of new challenges, and a new rhythm to one’s life.

II.

For folks like us living in a college town, Labor Day weekend signals a re-invasion of the collegiate horde. This Monday I drove to town for our August Session meeting past cars parked bumper to bumper on Park Street disgorging students, and their stuff, into dorm room domiciles. Before the meeting I stopped by the grocery store and you could almost hear the money falling out of the pockets of so many young people as they stocked up on laundry soap, snack food, and 12 packs of study aids. Returning the back way to the church, I came up State Street past the little league fields aswarm with kids like ants to a fudgesicle melting on the sidewalk. After the meeting I spied the line for the movie theater snaking around the corner of the Post Office, with roving bands of students descending upon the ice cream stand like Visigoths laying siege to Rome.

III.

For me, Labor Day represents the signal flair to get kayaks and canoe put away, tube deflated and stored and, with nighttime temperatures in the 50s cooling the lake water more and more each day, *well* past time for that one last swim in the lake in order to untether the swim raft and sunfish sailboat and haul them to shore.

Labor Day Weekend, then, is a study in contrasts: a purported *rest* from labor intended to *celebrate* labor which most people use to undertake and accomplish even *more* labor. On the occasion of such events and national holidays, I think it is important to learn, or remind ourselves, how we have arrived at these moments in our commonly shared life together.

IV.

2025 is the 131st anniversary of the Federal Holiday known as Labor Day instituted on June 28th, 1894 by an act of Congress. Growing out of the labor moment of the late 19th century, it is a day dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.

As to who actually came up with the idea for Labor Day, it is a matter of some dispute. Certain records show that Peter J. McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and a co-founder of the American Federation of Labor, was first in suggesting a day to honor those "*who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold.*" Others maintain that it was Matthew Maguire, a machinist, later the secretary of Local 344 of the International Association of Machinists in Paterson, N.J., who proposed the holiday.

V.

The form that the observance and celebration of Labor Day should take was outlined in the first proposal of the holiday — a street parade to exhibit to the public "*the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations*" of the community, followed by a festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families. This became the pattern for the celebrations of Labor Day. Speeches by prominent men and women were introduced later, as more emphasis was placed upon the economic and civic significance of the holiday. Still later, by a resolution of the American Federation of Labor convention of 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day, that is today, was adopted as "Labor Sunday" and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement.

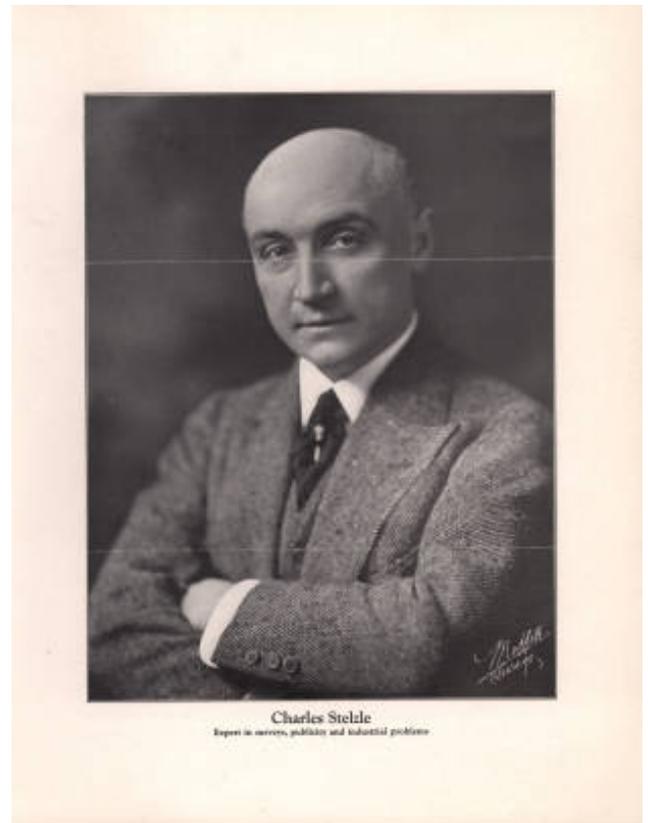
VI.

Way back at the turn of the century the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the institutional forbearer of our current denomination the Presbyterian Church (USA), actually had as part of its national ecclesiastical structure a Department of Church and Labor (formerly The Workingman's Department) which was tasked by the denomination's Office of Home Mission to minister to working people during the nation's industrial transformation.

Ah, but who would spearhead such an endeavor? A great many of the Presbyterian ministers of that era came from highly educated if not also highly affluent families with no real experience of the labor class or blue collar life. Deepening the challenge, most of those who constituted Presbyterian congregations in that day were white collar, often working in management, if not in the ownership, which oversaw working class life.

VII.

In truth, there was only one person uniquely suited to answer the call to such a ministry among the workers: The Rev. Charles Stelzle. Now, an entire sermon could and, really, should be devoured to this guy. Born to an affluent German family which subsequently lost its fortune, Stelzle was raised in the poor tenements of NYC's lower east side, with its poverty and immigrant cultural traditions. At the age of 8, he went to work stripping tobacco in a sweatshop. When he was 11, Stelzle left school, and went to work as a "cutter" in an artificial flower shop. Through a family connection, he was hired, at age 15, by the printing press manufacturer, R. Hoe Company, where he rose to the level of machinist. Stelzle was primarily self-taught, with the only diploma he ever received coming from the R. Hoe Company for the completion of his apprenticeship.



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VIII.

At a point, Stelzle heard the call to ministry and, in a very daring move, left his job and applied to seminary; with Princeton, Union, and McCormick rejecting him for lack of a college degree. Undeterred, he went on to take classes at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and enjoyed great success in forming Sunday schools and a Boys Club in Minnesota and landed a job at the Markham Mission Chapel, a Presbyterian church in St. Louis Missouri, where he grew the Sunday school to over 1,400 members. The denomination's largest west of the Mississippi.

On the merit of his work Stelzle was ordained by the St. Louis Presbytery after a 4 hour (!!!) examination by that body. Eventually, Stelzle was noticed by a big wig Presbyterian Minister from NYC who was in Missouri for a convention, and this led the way for Stelzle to eventually pioneer the newly formed Department of Church and Labor to which was given a very specific charge, *"To interpret the Church to workingmen (sic), to interpret workingmen to the Church, and to interpret employer and employee to each other, through education, inspiration, mediation, evangelism, and twentieth-century methods of Christian Work."*

IX.

Up until 1900, our *own* church operated what was called, "The Miner Street Chapel," located on the east side of the street between Lincoln and Maple, which the congregation's Christin Endeavor Society operated as a mission to the large number of people who rarely went to "religious meetings." Many of these lived in a section of Canton commonly called the Miner Street Division which was home to those working in the various mills (e.g. lumber). In other words, the white collar families of the Church on the Park built a chapel for the blue collar families two blocks away, and *literally* on the other side of the tracks. When the Chapel closed, no effort was made to unite or merge the two congregations.

X.

I relate all of this to you today, both about our denomination and our own church, to illustrate that labors of love are very hard work indeed. Our scripture text for today is written to a group of people who have worked hard for their faith, and is meant to encourage them with a step by step "How To"

on the labors of love. Hebrews chapter 13, in specific, is a wonderful and poignant reminder that the fruits of spiritual endeavor, the blessings of the life of faith, are to be found, over time, in each day's quiet moments and in the small things we do. We like to think of the work of the church in the broadest of strokes: saving souls, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, enacting social justice, protecting the Creation, advocating for the powerless. For the most part, however, it is the day to day stuff that makes the real difference in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. How could it be otherwise?

XI.

The author of Hebrews, often attributed to the Apostle Paul but probably written by another, speaks to the fundamentals of the spiritual life. First, and foremost, we are to let mutual love continue. Whatever we, as the faithful, believe we need for our church and for a our world, we must first remember that most important thing, love, is something we *already* possess. Don't believe me? Take a close look at our congregation. We have big gobs of love, over-flowing the banks of what others suppose life to be. In this regard we are lacking in *nothing*. Our greatest challenge, then, is to simply allow what we already have, to continue.

XII.

One of the easiest ways we offer love, and often the most deeply appreciated, is by simply being hospitable. A plate of cookies to a new neighbor, a conversion with a kid, a warm greeting to a new person in church, a home-cooked meal for a college student, kind words to those who stop for directions and, even, putting up a playground to welcome kids from the community and to make kids in our church feel welcomed. All such hospitable acts, though simple, challenge people to relax their apprehensions, put aside their weariness, and open themselves up to the flow of grace between the children of God.

Hospitality isn't love in the sense of romance or long-cultivated affection. Instead, it provides a paradigm shift towards love which sets people, and the world, down a far easier, fruitful, and grace-filled path. Our hospitality toward others is a vibrant reflection of the hospitality offered to us by God. Moreover, we never know the real identity of those to whom we offer such hospitality, or the significance of the impact it will have.

XIII.

The author of Hebrews also challenges us to remember those in prison, recognizing that when one suffers we all suffer. To the prisoner I would add the refugee, the downtrodden, and those who are considered different or other. We are also to honor marriage, remembering to keep holy the sacred relationships of our lives. This is the proverbial horse which must come before all other carts. The world will not be right unless we are right with those at home, *especially* our partner. Keeping our lives free from the love of money and being content with what we have is another fundamental of the spiritual life. We have to set priorities in life, but let us set the *right* priorities. Let us not retreat into the pursuit for more. Rather, let us find joy and satisfaction in the life that abounds all around us. There is much more we already have, and it is more than we could ever attain.

XIV.

Let us also remember both our leaders and those workers who founded and build our country *and* our church by the wit of their minds, and the sweat of their brow. Let us look to ourselves to become the next generation of leaders, and workers that our nation and congregation will require. Finally, let us always remember the promise of Christ, who said: "I will *never* leave you or forsake you." So we *can* say with confidence, the Lord is our helper; we will not fear. What can anyone do to us? Our responsibility, as Christians, is to stand on grace, and grace alone.

XV.

Now, if grace were an object, and we were to literally stand on it, what would it look like....? For me, grace is the single solitary point at the top of a pyramid which requires us to labor, each day and sometimes each moment, so as to not fall off, or fall away from, that point. What allows us stay there, to settle ourselves, and to be still is the fruit of our labor made manifest in the faith that God *is* here with us: yesteryear at the Miner Street Chapel, today as we gather here at the Church on the Park, and tomorrow as we labor, toil, and craft this fellowship into what will be required for future generations. So confident are we of this truth that we will never neglect to boldly share with others, blue collar and white collar, the grace we have received from God. For all those who gather here, and those yet on the way, are our labors of love, and the means by which we let mutual love continue to be the bedrock of our strength, prosperity, and well-being of our church. Amen.