

Every Perfect Gift Is from Above
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May my words be a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

Here we are already at Labor Day weekend: the end of summer, the beginning of the school year, the final matches of the US Open, cookouts with family and friends. When I was a girl, it was the time we put away our white shoes and gloves, our straw purses and hats. Of course, none of this was the intent of the founders of the first Labor Day, which occurred September 5, 1882, during the presidency of Grover Cleveland (and, I might add, the year this church was built). It was in part a response to strikes and agitation from labor unions, who wanted shorter working days for their members.

Christian churches of many denominations honor St. Joseph the worker, the carpenter who was the step-father of Jesus, the patron saint of those who work. But we don't mark Labor Day formally in our worship, though our lectionary provides readings for that occasion. Today I would like to include in our meditations a collect for those who work, written by Rick Morley, an Episcopal priest in New Jersey:

Lord Jesus, we give thanks for work, and for the many works you have given us to do. Hear our prayers on this day of rest, and strengthen us for the week ahead. We pray that you would be present with those who work by day, and those who work by night; those who work near, and those whose work carries them far away; and we pray for those who in this uncertain time have no job. We pray all of this knowing that your labors on our behalf never cease, and that your yoke is easy, and your burden is light. Amen

Both of my grandfathers were railroad engineers, members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, whose calendar hung above my Grandfather Casey's workbench in his basement. My grandmothers were members of various Brotherhood women's auxiliaries, and both sets of

grandparents attended railroad engineers' and trainmen's banquets. Though they didn't say much about the Brotherhood, the union was important to their well-being: its existence guaranteed they could bring home a good paycheck to keep their families housed and fed.

Both of my grandfathers knew what hardship looked like. My great-grandfather Casey, a French Canadian immigrant who had no education and little English—he did become a US citizen—worked as a lumberjack in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. When the forests had been stripped bare, he moved his family into Escanaba, where he picked up what work he could at the Chicago and Northwestern rail yard, and in later years at a lumber company. It must have been satisfying for him to see his son employed as a locomotive engineer, a leap up from the menial work he had done.

Both grandfathers were laid off for a time during the Depression. The union, which had existed since 1863, assured that they had an income during those hard years, but it was not adequate to support their families fully. To make do, my Grandmother VandeWiele baked bread and pies, which my mother and her siblings delivered to her customers. My Grandfather Casey had a better option: he took his family to Bakersfield, California—free rides on the train!—where he worked for a year in his brother-in-law Alec's grocery store.

But still, after all these years of progress, we live in an age of world-wide hardship. Men and women seeking shelter and work overwhelm the agencies of government designed to manage their entrance into the U.S. An article in *The Free Press* last week noted that “nearly half of the nation's 1.4 million field workers are undocumented immigrants.” Their presence here is uncomfortable for many Americans, but if they were not here, laboring in the fields, who would do the work? Certainly not those of us who see ourselves as “white collar.”

When I worked for hospice I visited a number of Hispanic men and women who had first come to Michigan each summer to harvest the fields. They had been, for the most part, born in Texas, and were

amazingly bi-lingual, though there were some who had little English. They would describe for me the long days when their entire families bent in the hot sun to pick tomatoes. Today, the offspring of those men and women are prosperous. They've bought their own houses, and some of them own large farms whose success relies on the men and women who come from the south to pick fruits and vegetables in the blazing heat.

Hear again the words of James from our New Testament reading:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

And that word of truth, according to James, is that we “care for orphans and widows in their distress. And, I would add, for the “workers” who cannot find work.

Biblical scholars do not agree about James' identity: he might have been the brother of John, or of Jesus himself. In any case, he was close to the ministry of Jesus, and he would have heard him speak frequently of taking care of the orphan and the widow. He would have heard Jesus demand that we share our riches with those who are without. He would have heard his challenge to be doers of the word, “and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

Our offertory hymn today is a beautiful meditation on this theme:

*Awake, awake to love and work. . .
the fields are wet with diamond dew. . .
the worlds awake to cry their blessings on the Lord of life as he goes
meekly by. . . .
Come, let thy voice be one with theirs,
shout with their shout of praise,
to give and give, and give again, what God hath given thee;*

*to spend thyself nor count the cost;
to serve right gloriously
the God who gave all worlds that are, and all that are to be.*

The world of power and wealth drowns out the cries of God's people, and so it is our calling as followers of Jesus to think deeply about their tempting words, which draw us away from faith, hope, and love. And not just to think, but to act: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.

To care for those who are homeless, penniless; those who are without the work that would give their lives meaning and dignity.