

SPEAKER'S GUIDE

*Reflections on Labor Day
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Thirty years ago as I was preparing to fill in for a vacationing pastor on Labor Day in the rural South, I worried how I was going to speak to the issues facing workers in a language my audience would understand and connect to their faith values. I was working as a union organizer mostly with garment and textile workers and not only did the climate for organizing seem bleak in those Reagan years but I was often struck by how little people really knew about unions and organizing. As you certainly know, the organizing climate has not improved and if anything the challenges for workers in the United States have only gotten more difficult. At the same time, so many younger generations are removed from any real experience of unions and have likely been subject to today's well-organized anti-union propaganda.

So what is a faith leader or labor speaker to do on Labor Day? I'd like to share a few general ideas and then a little commentary on each of the Revised Common Lectionary texts in the hope that it will be helpful.

If you are a worker, union member, worker center activist or labor leader,

thank you for sharing your story with your or another faith community! Nothing is more likely to enable people to connect their values with today's worker justice struggles than the face and story of workers and activists. Share why worker justice matters, tell about struggles you have faced or seen up close, talk about the shared desire for work that is safe and marked by dignity and fairness. These values and yearnings will resonate even among faith communities that seem more distant from the struggles you know best. Invite people to think of

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children and grandchildren, neighbors and friends. Most faith communities share a belief that God's intent is for all to have just, fair and sustainable work. Your stories speak of a world that falls far short of God's intent and call all of us to action that God's will may be done.

If you are a faith leader or a labor speaker who is giving the sermon or message

during a Christian worship service, here are a few thoughts specifically on the Revised Common Lectionary texts that many congregations will use that

day. All three scriptures deal with the gift of the law, the Torah, God's instructions for how to live as the faithful people of God. Much as a map might guide you safely and efficiently to where you want to go, God's law provides a roadmap for abundant life, a way to live in human community that all may flourish. You might consider three main points under the theme of work:

1. What does it mean to live in the world as people of faith, to follow God's intent for us and creation? What are the components of our mission as beloved human beings created and called by a loving God? If it's part of your tradition, the language of vocations may be helpful here. You could talk about the calls to care for neighbor and the earth, to work for justice and peace, to live faithfully in relationships, to build the common good that all may experience God's abundance, to share the story of God's love in Jesus. You might say this is the "labor" to which all the faithful are called.
2. With that broad context, you could move specifically to jobs and employment. What does God intend for our lives of work? How do we behave as workers but also what should we expect from our jobs? Here you may wish to speak of dignity, creativity, appropriate hours that enable family and community life, respect and equity across lines of race, sexual identity,

gender identity, and age. Catholic Social Teaching is especially rich in language about the dignity of work but many traditions have social statements or other teachings in addition to the biblical material you may draw on.

3. Finally, how are we called to advocate for dignity and justice at work, for workers' rights of all kinds especially the right to organize? This too is part of the labor too which we are called. You might talk a little of the gig economy and the other broad changes to work we're seeing. You might talk of the role worker organizing, unions and worker centers play in limiting corporate power and enabling workers to protect themselves and participate in the key decisions about their lives of work. As people of faith we are called to work for a different vision of the economy than the current dominant narrative. Economic structures exist for the benefit of people and the common good, not the other way around. As corporations get more powerful, workers' right to organize becomes an ever more important faith value.

In conclusion, here are a few specific comments on each of the three texts:

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, NRSV

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that

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your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children —

In Deuteronomy Chapter 4, the people of Israel stand poised to enter the promised land after 40 long years in the wilderness. Moses, who in Chapter 5 will remind his people of the details of the 10 Commandments, here reminds them of the importance of keeping God's "statutes and ordinances", that their lives may be full of God's abundance. If you choose to focus on this text, you might invite your listeners to consider their own version of a set of commandments for abundant life in 2018, particularly related to work and the economy. What are the situations and structures of today's workplaces that are not consistent with God's intent? How might our faith understanding of work as a gift from God and our call to be stewards of all God's gifts influence our economic structures and advocacy?

James 1:17-27

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. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and

undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

With the requisite disclaimer regarding works righteousness I'm required to provide as a card carrying Lutheran, James' emphasis on being doers of the word not merely hearers certainly lends itself to a labor day sermon. These last verses in particular ring of the prophet Amos in his challenge to the people of his day. Beautiful worship and fabulous festivals are meaningless without justice he told his people. Most famously in Chapter 5, verses 23 and 24: Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. James is picking up this theme as well as the Hebrew Bible shorthand for those one the fringes of society, "orphans and widows". God's law is not simply about worship or how you love the Lord, it's about how you love your neighbor. To be a faithful doer of the word includes working for the common good, caring for your neighbor, especially those least able to care for themselves. This provides a perfect entrée to an exploration of key worker justice themes.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain

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do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

In our gospel text we find Jesus again challenged by some of the religious leaders of his day around his disciples' faithfulness to the law and the traditions that his faith community keep.

Time and again he will challenge specific practices and traditions of his day, always returning to the critical questions of purpose and intent. Are God's laws arbitrary rules intended mostly as tests of faithfulness or are they intended to foster abundant life among the people of God? Is the Sabbath a gift to humankind meant to build up community life through needed rest and care of relationships with God and neighbor or is it a weekly test of one's ability to do no work for a day?

A preacher might choose to think about how the economic practices of our day, often lifted up as simply the way it is in a global economy, need to be challenged and rethought. Jesus concludes with this strong word about how faithfulness is far more about our intents and actions than any external purity codes. There is certainly plenty in his laundry list of sins to lift up in a sermon about workplace justice and the right to organize.

While the present moment calls for all of us to lift up work and workplace justice issues far more than just on Labor Day, it is still a powerful witness to the importance of these themes to people of faith to make a special emphasis on this day. Thank you for being willing to speak this very counter-cultural word on behalf of workers and just work in this present moment.