

Minilogue

September 2026

The curmudgeonly mathematician and philosopher, Bertrand Russell, once said that “*work consists of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth’s surface relative to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid.*”

I think of Russell’s remark every Labor Day, even though a lot has changed in the world of work since his time (though he died in 1971 at the ripe age of 97). Even in the last fifty-five years, the nature of labor has been radically transformed, as automation, de-industrialization, and the information/service/gig economies have come to dominate and replace earlier understandings of work. Even supposedly secure ‘knowledge workers’ have found their jobs being outsourced and eliminated. The COVID pandemic created further dislocation, leading to what some have called “The Great Resignation,” and now, of course, we are facing enormous disruptions due to the Artificial Intelligence revolution. These economic transitions have been difficult and disruptive for many, and they have forced us all to realize the importance of work as an essential moral and spiritual force in our lives.

In his wonderful oral history entitled ***Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do***, Studs Terkel interviewed a 37-year-old steel mill laborer named Mike Lefevre, who described himself as a “dying breed” doing “strictly muscle work.”

Somebody built the pyramids [said Lefevre]. Somebody’s going to build something. Pyramids, Empire State Building — these things just don’t happen. There’s hard work behind it. I would like to see a building, say, the Empire State, I would like to see on one side of it a foot-wide strip from top to bottom with the name of every bricklayer, the name of every electrician, with all the names. So when a guy walked by, he could take his son and say, “See, that’s me over there on the forty-fifth floor. I put the steel beam in.” Picasso can point to a painting... A writer can point to a book. Everybody should have something to point to.

It has been a long time since I’ve earned my living by “altering the position of matter at or near the earth’s surface,” but I still experience ministry as *work*, as action that exists on a continuum with my physically demanding youthful labors on the Duluth, Missabe & Iron Range Railroad and the heavy lifting and teamwork involved in building a stone wall at Minnesota’s Split Rock Lighthouse State Park:



In her poem, “To Be of Use” (found as a reading in the back of our hymnbook), Marge Piercy concludes that:

“The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.”

Labor Day is not usually thought of as a religious holiday, but I think it’s worth taking a little time this coming weekend to reflect on the sacred depth dimension of work. What makes work meaningful for you? What makes it “**real**?” What can you point to at the end of the day and say, with pride, “I built that?”

All the world’s religious traditions treat work as a spiritually significant activity – from the Buddhist idea of ‘right livelihood’ to the Jewish rhythm of work and sabbath, labor and rest, and the Protestant Christian notion of seeing one’s secular calling as a ‘vocation.’

As Robert Frost writes in his wonderful poem, “Two Tramps in Mud Time,”

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future’s sakes.

The theologian, Delores Williams once wrote that Americans typically “worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship.” On this Labor Day holiday, may we all find the time to really *play*, and to authentically *celebrate*, and to deeply *reflect* on the place of work in our common life, and may we all discover a healthy and integrated and dynamic balance between these essential dimensions of our lives.

In good faith and fellowship,

Rev. Bruce