

LOVE OF LABOR AND LABOR OF LOVE

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The sermon title “Love of Labor and Labor of Love” brings into focus two of the three events which call for our attention this first full week of September. Today we celebrate Holy Communion and will recognize in the Lord’s Supper the quintessence of Jesus’ Labor of Love. Tomorrow is Labor Day and during this Labor Day weekend we need to recall the variant and conflicting ways in which human labor is presented in biblical literature for the purpose of highlighting neglected biblical texts which express a genuine love for labor and laborers. And, before this congregation meets next Sunday, America will observe the third anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York by Islamic terrorists, which manifested a “Love for Violence” and “Labors of Hatred.” My comments will be brief since this is a sermon in a one hour worship service and not a lecture for a two hour class.

First, my comments on a “Love of Labor / Love for Labor.” The words of Genesis 3:17–19, “cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground,” coupled with Sirach 40:1, “Much labor was created for every man, and a heavy yoke is upon the sons of Adam, from the day they come forth from their mother's womb till the day they return to the mother of all,” contribute to the popular consensus that the Bible from beginning to end teaches that work/labor/toil is a curse — and curses have nothing to do with love or pleasure.

However a second look at the creation story in Genesis reveals that Yahweh God took the earthlings Adam and Eve and put them in the Garden of Eden to *administer* it and to *keep watch over it* (Gen. 2:15). In Genesis 1–3 human work was elevated and celebrated as part of the divine plan for the environmental protection of Eden and the world at large. And, before there is even a hint of the need for humans to labor in Eden, the Genesis story emphasizes the way in which God labored in creation. Along with the statement of simple divine fiat, “and God said, ‘ Let there be... ’,” are the verbs of action,

“and God made..., and God separated..., and God called..., and God created..., God finished his work..., God rested from all his work” (Gen 1:3-2:3). The God of creation was a hard worker, a laborer if you please, who in turn experienced the sweet pleasure of rest. Exodus 31:17, expresses this idea beautifully:

. . . for in six days Jehovah made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and refreshed himself.

One inference to be drawn from this emphasis on divine labor is that work and rest, which were good for the Creator, are good for those made in the image of the Creator. In Genesis, one senses that God’s working was the wellspring of divine pleasure, and human labor was a *gift* to those in the image of God. According to the priestly account (Gen 1:26–29), men and women were designed from the very beginning for responsibility and labor: “let them have dominion” and they were duly charged, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish . . . birds . . . and every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Similarly, the Yahwist’s account (2:5, 15; 3:23) speaks of God’s intention to make human beings responsible for Eden’s well being. The Hebrew *le^cabdāh ūlšāmērāh* in 2:15 means more than simply “to till it and watch it.” Even when cast out of Eden, the man and the woman were sent out “to administer the land” east of Eden. This was not a curse but was in the spirit of John 5:17, where Jesus later affirmed, “My Father is working still, and I am working.” Work was *not a curse for God nor for Jesus*. In one sense of the word, “work” can be viewed as divine activity; and for people, in the image of God, work remains a part of God’s gracious gift. That was one reason I postponed my retirement to age seventy. I was having fun working, and like many of you, now that I am retired, find myself working longer, better, and being more fruitful. (The terms *kabash* “subdue” and *rad/radah* “to have dominion over all,” in Gen 1:26–29, cannot be used to legitimate the decimation of the animal kingdom or the pollution of the land and the seas. The Greek translation of Theodotian has here the verbs *upotasso* “to subject” and *paideuo* “to train, to educate, to instruct, to tame.”)

This brief Bible-study on the “Love of Labor” is my attempt to fulfill in part the resolution passed at the American Federation of Labor convention of 1909, that the Sunday preceding Labor Day be adopted as “Labor Sunday” and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor

movement. On a personal note, coming from a blue-color family—that required my mother to quit school at age ten so she could go to work as a floor sweeper in a cotton mill, and my father at age thirteen so that he could become a laborer—I am greatly appreciative of those nine gentlemen in Philadelphia who organized the Knights of Labor in 1869 and initiated the first organized labor movement in America. Whether Peter J. McGuire (a co-founder of the American Federation of Labor) or Matthew Maguire (of the International Association of Machinists in Paterson, N.J., and of the Central Labor Union in New York) receives the credit, the *first* Labor Day was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New York City. Thanks initially to municipal and state ordinances, and finally by an act of Congress on June 28, 1894, the first Monday in September became the “Labor Day,” a national legal holiday. On this “Labor Sunday” we acknowledge our indebtedness to all those laborers who have a “Love for Labor” and “keep stable the fabric of the world—whose prayer is in the practice of their trade.”

My focus now shifts to those who have a “Love for Violence” and initiate “Labors of Hatred,” exemplified by the terrorists acts of September 11, 2001 in New York, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and the terrorist acts of September 3–4, 2004 in Beslan, in the Russian republic of North Ossetia (Oh-seé-sha). As a religious community we need to recognize that Islamic terrorists are very religious people who legitimate their terrorism with Biblical, as well as Quranic, authority. According to the clerics who recruit, indoctrinate, and dispatch the terrorists, the sacred scriptures of the synagogue, the church, and the mosque *validate* their horrific actions. Religious people can execute demonic deeds—all the while quoting the Quran as well as referring to the Bible. For example, Sura 9:111 in the Quran, reads as follows: “*GOD has bought from the believers their lives and their money in exchange for Paradise. Thus, they [the believers] fight in the cause of GOD, willing to kill and to get killed. Such is His [Allah’s] truthful pledge—in the Torah, in the Gospel, and in the Quran—and who fulfills His pledge better than GOD? You shall rejoice in making such an exchange. This is the greatest triumph.*”¹

The reference here in the Quran to the Torah’s sanctioning religious killing surely refers to Exodus 32:19, and 32:27. When Moses found the Israelites dancing before a golden calf he became irate, trashing the tablets of the Ten Commandments, smashing the golden calf, and poisoning the people by

making them drink a gold-dust potion made from the shattered golden calf. When his poisoning the infidels did not bring about the death of the idolaters, Moses recruited the Levites to terrorize the unsuspecting idol worshipers, saying, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put every man his sword on his side, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.’” In obedience the Levites immediately killed 3,000 of their kinsmen that very day— leading Moses to congratulate and reward the Levites, stating, “Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, that [God] may bestow a blessing upon you this day.”

Thus, Moses *added an eleventh commandment* to the Ten Commandments inscribed on the undelivered tablets: “Death to the infidels!” And Moses’ attempt to poison the idol worshipers may be the first case of a religious leader’s using a chemical weapon for a terrorist activity. To the chagrin of many, Moses’ eleventh commandment, “Death to the infidels!” has been the most widely obeyed commandment of all his commandments, and directly or indirectly this eleventh commandment legitimates the religious terrorism of our time—first from the Torah/Bible and then from the Quran.

BUT—and this is a big BUT—is there any historical or theological truth to be found in the traditions in Exodus 32:19–30? According to Deuteronomy 9:17–19, 21, 25–26; 10:1–5, Moses indeed became angry and shattered the two tablets. But he simply ground the golden calf into dust and scattered the dust into a brook which carried the golden dust downstream into oblivion. Then he fasted and prayed for the forgiveness of his people for forty days and forty nights. As a consequence, God answered Moses’ prayers for forgiveness by approving a “second edition” of the *Ten Commandments*, with no hint of any *eleventh* commandment requiring the death of infidels at the hands of fellow humans beings. (According to Exo 32:33–34, punishment would come from God directly, “. . . in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.”)

There was only one Moses, but there are two contradictory accounts of what he said and did. One tradition made him into a terrifying and terroristic hawk; the other presents him as a reconciling and an atoning peaceful dove willing to give up his own life on behalf of his people, saying “Now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for

your sin. . . . Now [O God], if thou wilt, forgive their sin — and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book [of life] which thou hast written” (Exodus 32:31–32). The Quran in Sura 9:111 alludes to the tradition of Moses, the hawk, with his eleventh commandment, “Death to the infidel!”; it ignored the tradition of Moses in Deuteronomy, where he is the dove, putting his own life on the line for the forgiveness of his people, but harming no one.

The reference in Sura 9:111 to the Gospel’s calling for believers to kill and be killed can only be a reference to Matthew 10:34, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” But I ask, “Did Jesus really say that?” Just as we have two traditions about what Moses said and did, I think there were different traditions about what Jesus actually said. How can the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God,” and Matthew 26:52, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword,” be reconciled with Matthew 10:34, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” The fact is they cannot be reconciled. But the difference between these statements can be explained. Four distinctly different words in Hebrew ended up being spelled the same way, namely,

<i>šlm</i> “peace”	שָׁלוֹם	<i>shalôm</i>
<i>šlm</i> “recompense”	שְׁלֵם	<i>shillēm</i>
<i>šlm</i> “retribution”	שְׁלֹם	<i>shillûm</i>
<i>šlm</i> “end, Finis”	שְׁלֵם	<i>shelem</i>

In my opinion Jesus, in disagreement with John the Baptist, said, “I have not come to bring the end” or “I have not come to bring retribution.” But the SHLM meaning “retribution” or “the end” was mistakenly read and interpreted as the SHLM of *SHALOM* “peace.”

Similarly, there are eleven different words spelled using the consonants HLP, namely,

ROOT	MEANING	HEBREW SPELLINGS	PRONUNCIATION
1. <i>hlp</i>	“knife”	חֶלֶף	<i>hōleḥ</i>
	“knife”	חֶלֶף	<i>hallîḥ</i>
2. <i>hlp</i>	“sharp spear”	חֶלֶף	<i>halîḥ</i>
3. <i>hlp</i>	“butcher knife”	חֶלֶף	<i>māḥālaf</i>

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| 4. <i>hlp</i> | “change” | חֲלֹף | חֲלוּף | <i>hillûf</i> |
| 5. <i>hlp</i> | “reversion” | חֲלֹף | חֲלֵף | <i>hēlef</i> |
| 6. <i>hlp</i> | “substitution” | חֲלֹף | חֲלִיפָה | <i>hālîfâh</i> |
| 7. <i>hlp</i> | “differences” | חֲלֹף | חֲלֵף | <i>hilôf</i> |
| 8. <i>hlp</i> | “dissension” | חֲלֹף | חֲלֵף | <i>hilôf</i> |
| 9. <i>hlp</i> | “contention” | חֲלֹף | חֲלֵף | <i>hilf</i> |
| 10 <i>hlp</i> | “a sincere friend who swears to his companion that he will not act unfaithfully with him” | | | |
| | | חֲלֹף | חֲלִיף | <i>halîf</i> |
| 11 <i>hlp</i> | “covenant, friendship, brotherhood, league” | | | |
| | | חֲלֹף | חֲלֵף | <i>hēlef</i> |

Given this ambiguity, I am convinced that Jesus said “I have come to bring a covenant community,” or, if you paraphrase it, he said “I have not come to bring the *end* but a *church*.” Translators made mistakes and clerics have based their theology upon the mistakes made by translators. Thus, we end up with the Quran saying that the Gospel of Jesus legitimates the violence of the terrorists. I would rather take Moses’ fasting for forty days and for forty nights seeking the forgiveness of his people, and his willingness to put his own life on the line to please God and seek reconciliation.

As we observe the memorial day of September 11 our response can be “Kill those Islamic infidels” and give Moses (à la Exodus 32) the credit for our anger. But do not forget Deuteronomy 9 (“Forgive the infidel!”), and be willing to give our life as Moses (à la Deuteronomy 9) was willing to give his life.

The third thing we do today—in addition to celebrating Labor Day and remembering September 11—is to come to the Lord’s Table. Here I offer no Bible study but a personal experience as we come to the table. I was in Virginia in June, doing a Bible Study at the North Fork Baptist Church, as I have done for many years. My host, Pastor Parker Thompson, a retired chaplain who served thirty-two years in the US Army, had learned from a friend that a very special military medal had come on the market for military medal collectors, and the chaplain had told his friend, “Buy it! Buy it!” His friend bought it for the chaplain;² and the day he brought it to the chaplain’s house I was there. I had a chance to look at the gold medal and to hold it in my hand.

Surprisingly, when I held it I was overwhelmed with emotion and I became choked with tears. I was pained with memories from childhood in 1943, for the medal was the special congressional medal awarded the four chaplains who went to their death on the USAT Dorchester, a costal luxury liner which had been converted in World War II into a troopship. With 902 soldiers onboard (in a convoy of three ships and three escort cutters) the Dorchester was headed from Newfoundland to Greenland. But on February 3, 1943 at 12:55 am. the Dorchester was torpedoed by a German submarine and sank in 27 minutes. The four army chaplains on board gave away their life jackets to soldiers who did not have one; and the four chaplains were seen—arm-in-arm—standing on deck when the ship sank beneath the icy waters: They were Methodist George L. Fox, Rabbi Alexander D. Goode, Father John Paul Washington, and Dutch Reform Clark V. Poling (whose father was the Reverend Daniel Poling of Grace Baptist Temple on Broad Street in Philadelphia, now a part of Temple University). America was in mourning of February 4, 1943. Including the four chaplains, 672 soldiers died in the icy waters of the North Atlantic, with only 230 soldiers rescued by one of the three cutter escorts which disobeyed orders when it turned around to rescue survivors.³ As I held that medal, I relived the pain I had as a twelve year-old when I first heard the news of the self-sacrifice of these four heroic chaplains—four chaplains who knew this truth: “greater love hath no man than this than to lay down his life for a friend.”⁴

And I suggest that as we come to the Lord’s Table and take the bread and the cup that it be for us like touching the medals of the soldiers and chaplains who laid down there lives in love for others. “God so loved the world!” and the Christ who gave his body and his blood gave it in love that there might be life. May we relive some of that pain and come away with a new appreciation of what it was to so love that they were willing to lay down their lives—in contrast to our human propensity, even for religious reasons, to take life. Christ gave life, his own, and gives us life. Amen

NOTES

1. Other references in the Quran which encourage a terrorist to exchange his or her life on this earth for a life in paradise are Sura 3:157-158, “And if ye are slain, or die, in the way of Allah, forgiveness and mercy from Allah are far better than all they could amass. And if ye die, or are slain, Lo! it is unto

Allah that ye are brought together”; and Sura 3:169, “Think not of those who are slain in Allah’s way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord.”

2. The Four Chaplains’ Medal was established by Act of Congress (Public Law 86-656, 86th Congress) on July 14, 1960.

3. Mr. Jerry Duvall purchased the medal for Chaplain Parker Thompson who presented it to the Army Chief of Chaplains, David Hicks, at the North Fork Baptist Church, Virginia, in a special service on July 25, 2004, as a gift to the Army Chaplains Museum.

4. The inter-faith “Chapel of the Four Chaplains,” housed in the Grace Baptist Temple in Philadelphia, was dedicated by President Truman on February 3, 1951. It was funded in part by Daniel Poling, J. C. Penny, and S. S. Kresge. The Special Medal of Honor, awarded the four chaplains posthumously, was authorized by Congress on January 18, 1961. The Chapel of the Four Chaplains was closed once the Grace Baptist Temple property on Broad Street became a part of Temple University.