



LABOR DAY 2022 • LABOR IN THE PULPITS THE COMMON LECTIONARY

HONORING WORKERS ON COVID-19'S FRONT LINES

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For Labor Day weekend, the Scripture readings for Sunday, Sept. 4, provide excellent opportunities for preaching. This resource sheet utilizes both the Gospel as well as each of the possible first readings to preach on working people and the issues they face on the job.

First Reading: Jeremiah 18:1–11

In this powerful prophetic message, Jeremiah is instructed to image God as a “worker,” specifically a potter at work with unformed clay at the potter’s wheel. For many pagan societies, work was considered beneath the dignity of important people and therefore done only by slaves and servants. Their gods were not to be imagined as workers.

But not so for Judaism. God is a “worker” from the very opening passages of **Genesis** and weaves a magnificent creation from the waters of chaos. God also sets the example for the Chosen People by resting on the seventh day, establishing the Sabbath day of rest. Created in the image of God, work is a foundation of and contributor to human dignity. The Israelites saw their work as being “co-creators” with God. This was unheard of in the pagan world.

For Christians, the mystery of the incarnation deepens our understanding of human dignity and the dignity of work. God chose to live among the masses of the forgotten and disadvantaged, raised in a village mired in poverty. Thus, The Lord Jesus Christ established a solidarity of life with those easily exploited and crushed in the daily indignities of life.

The catechism of the Catholic Church states it this way: “During the greater part of his life, Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor. His religious life was that of a Jew obedient to the law of God” (#531).

Optional First Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15–20

“Working to Live or Living to Work”: “Choose Life!”

“In 2021, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 47 million Americans voluntarily quit their jobs, an unprecedented mass exit from the workforce, spurred on by COVID-19, that is now widely being called the Great Resignation.” —Harvard Business Review

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While some elected officials pointed to expanded federal unemployment payments as incentives to avoid work and stay at home, both studies discovered the reasons were more complicated. While shuttered in place during 2020, many workers began to reflect on the workplace as robbing them of any sense of family or life. This reflection contributed to the Great Resignation. Below are quotes from two important studies by the Harvard Business Review and Pew Research Center. Citations for the complete articles are at the end of this resource paper.

“In our view, five factors, exacerbated by the pandemic, have combined to yield the changes that we’re living through in today’s labor market. We call these factors the Five Rs: *retirement, relocation, reconsideration, reshuffling* and *reluctance*. Workers are retiring in greater numbers but aren’t *relocating* in large numbers; they’re *reconsidering* their work-life balance and care roles; they’re making localized switches among industries, or *reshuffling*, rather than exiting the labor market entirely; and, because of pandemic-related fears, they’re demonstrating a *reluctance* to return to in-person jobs.” —Harvard Business Review

“Majorities of workers who quit a job in 2021 say low pay (63%), no opportunities for advancement (63%) and feeling disrespected at work (57%) were reasons why they quit, according to the Feb. 7–13 survey. At least a third say each of these were *major* reasons why they left. Roughly half say child care issues were a reason they quit a job (48% among those with a child younger than 18 in the household). A similar share point to a lack of flexibility to choose when they put in their hours (45%) or not having good benefits such as health insurance and paid time off (43%). Roughly a quarter say each of these was a *major* reason.” —Pew Research Center

Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2022/03/the-great-resignation-didnt-start-with-the-pandemic>

Pew Research Center: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/>

Gospel: The Gospel According to Luke 14:25–33

In this gospel passage, a large crowd of disciples and curious onlookers follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Although he knows the trial of darkness he will face there, no one following him is even remotely aware of where his mission will lead him or what will happen to him. Jesus turns and addresses them with stark imagery, laying before them the real price of following him. A decision of discipleship will mean opposition, persecution and a battle with the darkness of our time. Such a choice requires trust and perseverance, especially in prayer, allowing no one or nothing to block or hinder one’s decision.

Following Jesus as a disciple today requires the same choice of traveling the road of justice in the face of powerful opposition and oppression. During this Labor Day weekend, we need awareness of struggles for workplace justice across our nation. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact these past two-and-a-half years, more workers than ever are seeking the solidarity of labor unions in their quest for healthier and safer working conditions, greater job security and improved wages and benefits.

But even as workers join together, all too often the deck is stacked against them. Although the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) guarantees the right to organize and be recognized as a union, well-financed efforts to undermine these rights abound with impunity. Large law firms exist solely for the purpose of obstructing union organizing efforts. Often paid millions of dollars by one company or institution, these firms utilize intimidation and deception to convince employees to vote against forming a union.

Here is one example from the national workplace scene. During the past several years, all but one new tire manufacturing plants have settled in four states—South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee. All four states have anti-union legislation, low minimum wage, a high concentration of Black Americans and high unemployment rates among those Black communities. All also offer significant tax breaks for locating in their state.

In tire manufacturing plants located in other parts of our country, the United Steelworkers represent most if not all workers. The starting wage at a union tire plant in nearby North Carolina is more than \$20 per hour, or \$800 per 40-hour week. The starting wage at many of these newer, non-union plants is \$13 per hour, or \$520 per 40-hour week. At first glance, this seems to be a positive picture. Companies locate in states where they are welcomed and hire in areas where few if any jobs are located. The result is a greater number of employed people, and we hope to benefit from less expensive tire prices—although even this is not a certainty.

However, the truth is less rosy and quite darker. In an example from a Southern tire community, many workers received no wage increases for four or five years. Beyond that, the increases are purely arbitrary. Some workers received a \$1-per-hour increase, while others received a \$5-per-hour increase. Try providing for your own personal needs at \$520 per week, let alone for an entire family for a five-year period. Try struggling for a pay raise without knowing what criteria supervisors use to grant that increase.

At these new tire plants, overtime does supplement paychecks. But often the overtime is mandatory and demanded with short notice, even for a particular day. The family responsibilities of picking up children, preparing meals, helping with homework and caring for a sick family member are rejected as invalid, and employees must work overtime or lose their job.

The above represents only two of many management practices at these plants that would be unacceptable if workers were to form a union. Workers at some of the plants have begun the process of organizing but, as mentioned above, face stiff opposition from their company and state and local laws.

Harassment and retaliation are common even though they directly violate the NLRA. Due to the large number of such violations nationwide and reduced budgets, the National Labor Relations Board is backlogged with several months worth of cases, a situation of which companies are fully aware. There is no incentive to treat workers justly.

These are moral issues. When people working full-time are still unable to provide for their family's basic needs, family life breaks down. Workers encounter greater stress, both at the workplace and at home. We all know what happens when family life crumbles. Community life disintegrates, neighborhoods deteriorate, children bring family stress into the classroom and crime increases.

When billion-dollar-profit companies refuse to treat employees fairly and retaliate against them for union-organizing activity, that is a moral issue. When states offer companies large tax breaks without insisting on some level of justice for workers, that is a moral issue. When workers are set against each other by arbitrary wage increases or discriminatory treatment, that is a moral issue. All these moral issues and more impact human dignity and the dignity of human work.

[Below are two examples from my home state of Maine. Preachers are welcomed to use these examples or seek situations in their own communities by contacting local labor councils or your state AFL-CIO.]

During this Labor Day weekend, we need to acknowledge that what is happening in the South with workers is also happening in Maine. In May 2020, nurses at Maine Medical Center (MMC) in Portland voted 1001–750 to form a labor union affiliated with the Maine State Nurses Association. This also came after a well-funded anti-union campaign launched by the MMC administration.

In January 2022, workers at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, cast their votes on whether or not to form a union. But those votes remain uncounted until appeals filed by the Bates College administration are settled by the National Labor Relations Board. As with MMC and Amazon, Bates College administration expended large amounts of money to hire law firms established for the sole purpose of disrupting, harassing and stopping union-organizing efforts in workplaces.

On this Labor Day 2022, we are reminded of the Gospel's urgent call to work for justice and peace as vital signs of the Kingdom of God already in our midst. We are also reminded of the many Christian denominations and churches that have stood shoulder to shoulder with working men and women in their continual fight for the right to organize, the right to free and fair elections and the right to good-faith collective bargaining.