

LABOR DAY 2022

THE COMMON LECTIONARY

HONORING WORKERS ON COVID'S FRONT LINES

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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 imaged 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 in 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**.

While some elected officials pointed to expanded federal unemployment payments as incentive 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 **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 childcare 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**

Gospel: The Gospel According to St. 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 travelling the road of justice in the face of injustice and oppression. Chris Smalls understands this exactly. Who is Chris Smalls? Chris Smalls worked as a supervisor for a large Amazon warehouse on Staten Island in New York City. He loved his job at first and there seemed to be a focus on helping employees "make it in life". But then workplace culture changed from a "humanity model" to a more "soul less" institutional model. Humanity was discarded for a more industrial stressful metrics driven culture.

In early 2020, when Covid emerged in the metropolitan area, thousands became sick daily, and hundreds died daily. Chris was fired after complaining about the unsafe working conditions and lack of protections from the virus. A year later he formed the Amazon Labor Union and began an organizing effort to form the warehouse workers as a labor union. Chris recruited two warehouse employees as organizers. These two employee organizers were living in their cars, as their salaries were insufficient to pay rent anywhere in the vicinity of the warehouse. The three of them faced the full weight and force of Amazon financial resources against them, spending over \$4million to defeat organizing efforts.

Amazon's union busting efforts included, forcing employees to attend mandatory meetings where mistruths were spread regarding union membership, surveillance of workers, massive printing of anti-labor flyers and posters spread throughout the warehouse. Because Chris Smalls dresses in clothing associated with black hip-hop culture, rumors were spread regarding his supposed lack of intelligence, and his alleged immoral and illegal tactics.

On April 1, 2022, the workers at this Amazon warehouse voted 2,654–2,131 in favor of the union. Although that is the first of many difficult and tougher battles ahead of them, Chris Smalls and his two homeless organizers represent all that Jesus declares is necessary to bring justice into the world today. They are 21st Century examples of a "David" slaying "Goliath" with the use of one sling shot and two pebbles! https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Small

On this Labor Day Weekend, we need to remember that what happened on Staten Island in New York City is also happening in Maine as well. In May 2020, nurses at Maine Medical Center 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 Maine Medical Center administration.

In January 2022, workers at Bates College in Lewiston 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. Like Maine Medical Center and Amazon, Bates College administration expended large amounts of money hiring 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.

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/>