

The first year we lived within this presbytery our daughter had to march with the band in the Labor Day Parade. I remember being surprised and moved by the number of unions represented, the pride demonstrated, the camaraderie of the workers, and the support of the onlookers as they all marched by. That parade isn't as big today as it was in 1986. I know labor unions have moved beyond simple assurance of quality work and today focus more on contracts and wages. Corporations don't always see the value of workers' organizations. Many issues are at stake as we celebrate this day.

On this Labor Day weekend we do celebrate work; the ability to work, particularly people who labor unseen, and pray for those in need of work. We tend to think we can manage this all by ourselves. We forget we are in the hands of a powerful God. Our life experience makes us aware that life-long employment with a single business or corporation is rare. Great flexibility is required in order to continue in many positions: additional training, changing work hours, fewer benefits. The outcome is diminished allegiance to one's workplace or corporation. Strong allegiances today appear limited to athletic teams that don't affect our wages as a rule.

Shifts in attitude occur in other dimensions of life also in our rapidly changing world. There are times when our conversations resemble a "pity party" as we reflect on the things that are no longer a part of our lives. In the mainline churches we are particularly susceptible. We have trouble understanding that many now feel there is no need for "church". They believe they can find fulfillment in other relationships and activities. We see people engaging in community service and mission trips organized by non-religious organizations. Congregations are hard-pressed to attract participation in local program, traditional worship and study.

Jesus' words cut through our anxiety and challenge us this day. Jesus became aware that a crowd was gathering as he spoke. Jesus reached out to the crowd extending an invitation and call to discipleship. Jesus invites us to join that crowd and share in his ministry in this world. This is not about one hour on Sunday morning. More is expected and required. This is about daily commitment. It is about keeping focused on our commission: to make disciples and baptize in the name of Jesus Christ. It is about extending the invitation further, inviting others to join us in reshaping this world.

We aren't entirely comfortable with the whole idea of being "reshaped". We like to keep that notion as an Old Testament solution for the failure to obey the Law given by Moses. We are called to examine "what" we live, the content of our lives. That is, we need to look closely at our motivations and where we place our efforts. The old adage: "what you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying" may be the clue to the practice of our faith. Does our daily behavior witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ?

We are called to evaluate the "things of this world" that tempt and distract us. Values clarification is an ongoing process. We are always in the position of deciding what to add or take on in our lives and how it may impact our practice of faith.

Last Monday night I shared with our United Congregations of Metroeast chapter in their regular meeting. At the conclusion we watched the first half of the documentary "From Jim Crow to Barack Obama" - the story of segregation and separation in our nation's history. The discussion that followed led us to a consensus that we need to continue to talk, to recognize the complicity of the dominant culture and to discover how to reshape our own lives to move forward.

The tough part is the call to relinquish, give up, everything that might interfere or hold us back from faithful action. Some associations are so affirming - even though they drain us completely; some relationships pull us away from following through on the commitments we really intended to keep; some personal desires pull us out of line with our faith commitment. To let go of these things takes discipline. Discipline and discipleship share the same root. Both are challenging.

Jeremiah called out to his people to "turn around, turn back to God". Jesus invites us to practice our faith in action: reaching out to the pain and distress and need of our world. It all begins with a willingness to be reshaped by God; allowing God to "fix" us so that our eyes will be able to see; our bodies become able to do; our spirits become one with Christ.

Our shaping has begun in our baptism. It takes on particular characteristics as we share in the community of faith and practice that faith in our everyday lives. May we welcome that reshaping in every stage of life. May we discover the many ways in which we are able to respond to God's presence and direction in our lives. May we rejoice in our work as disciples of Jesus Christ, workers in the building of his kingdom. Amen.