

Proper 17 A (Romans 12:9-21)

Perhaps it is obvious, but whenever you pick up the Bible, it is you who pick it up.
And you pick it up as you happen to be,
with your greater or lesser experience in reading Scripture,
with your various life experiences,
and in your current spiritual, physical, and emotional condition.
What you read there will affect you in different ways, depending on all those things.
I was tired and sore when I read our Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans earlier this week.
I went to a workshop last week, which put me behind on everything I had meant to do here.
And my travel back from that was a mess;
sleep was in short supply and my back hurt from those terrible airline seats and unfamiliar beds.
I wasn't ready for Paul's powerful word of exhortation toward the active form of the Christian life,
the passage from the culminating 12th chapter,
full of verbs in the imperative, the commanding form.
A whole bunch of verbs:
Hate, hold, love, outdo, serve, contribute, extend, bless, feed, give, overcome.
He also commands us be ardent in spirit and full of zeal.
Do it all and smile while you do it!
My sore back and tired brain did not welcome this word from St. Paul on Monday morning.
I said back to the great Apostle: I am doing all that I can!
Don't pile more on me on Monday morning.
Let's talk later in the week, brother Paul.
But then came the clear call to action in the Gospel lesson,
a demand that we take up our Cross and follow Jesus
and a promise that we will be judged by what we have done.
By what we have done! We better get busy.
We are to accomplish much in the Lord's name and will be evaluated, this pair of lessons would tell us.

Tom Nicoll, a retired priest in Greenville who has filled in for me here,
Has said this is a test he applies to sermons he hears;
if they are 100% call to action, it is hard to find the Gospel of Jesus Christ in them.
And he says most sermons he hears, even from beloved preachers like our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, are calls to action, to social action, evangelism, or church-ey activity.
Come to more things, sign up for more stuff,
be more engaged, read, pray, serve others, make the Kingdom of God happen.
I think I have preached a few of those myself.
And I bet there are hearers who have been working hard all week,
caring for the needs of their families,
dealing with their own illness and fatigue,
who hear my sermons in that vein of exhortation and say: not now, preacher!
My hands are full; I've done enough.

Give me a word about grace;
give me a word about rest;
let me hear of the acceptance freely given in Jesus Christ.
Preacher, don't pile more on; but lift a burden from me!

There circulates on the internet a meme (a picture with a few words superimposed) of the actor Michael Clarke Duncan, who played condemned inmate John Coffey, opposite Tom Hanks as prison warden, in the film *The Green Mile*.

"I'm tired, boss," it says on the meme, and many people share it online when fatigue with the world has them down.

In the film, Duncan/Coffey goes on to say "I'm tired, boss. Tired of bein' on the road, lonely as a sparrow in the rain. Tired of not ever having me a buddy to be with, or tell me where we's coming from or going to, or why. Mostly I'm tired of people being ugly to each other. I'm tired of all the pain I feel and hear in the world everyday. There's too much of it. It's like pieces of glass in my head all the time."

A person in such condition does not need a further word of exhortation, a demand to get busy.

He needs a hug and promise of divine love and eternal rest.

So tomorrow is a day of rest for many of us, that rare day when we can sleep and loaf or accomplish a few easy things if we choose to do so. Wonderfully, it is called Labor Day.

I wish we could arrange the world so that all could enjoy it.

It is the wonderful sort of holiday that doesn't require mother to prepare an elaborate meal or father to put lights on a tree.

Nothing needs to be wrapped or, for that matter, preached.

You can just **be** on Labor Day; you can rest.

And, weirdly, that makes it a better sign of the promises of the Gospel than many of our Christian holy days.

You'll struggle, I am afraid, to feel the good news of Jesus in the swirl of Christmas or in the pastels of Easter, given the cultural and emotional layers we have built on them.

But tomorrow, when the town is quiet and you don't have to do anything,

think of the grace of God in Christ; the fullness of his work; his freely given salvation.

A quiet moment, when you can be and hear and know that you are loved is a Gospel moment.

And such moments steel us for the challenge and struggle of the Christian life when next we can face it.

The great Orthodox Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik insisted that religion at its best is a great struggle, not "simple and comfortable."

"On the contrary, it is exceptionally complex, rigorous, [even] torturous."

The consciousness of the religious person flings bitter accusations against itself and immediately is filled with regret, judges its desires and yearnings with excessive severity, and at the same time steps itself in them... Religion is not at the outset, a refuge of grace and mercy for the

despondent and desperate, an enchanted stream for crushed spirits, but a raging clamorous torrent of man's consciousness with all its crises, pangs, and torments."¹

We are comforted to return to the fray; we are saved in order to be sent. The same Lord Jesus who has done all that was needful nonetheless invites our labor for his kingdom.

¹ Quoted in David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 88-89.