

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: September 6, 2020  
Sermon: Labor Day  
Scripture: Mark 6:39-46  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Mark 6:39-46

*Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.*

*Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.*

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I've always loved Labor Day.

Of course, we used to think of it as the last blush of summer, one more barbecue, one more ocean swim, one more late sleep-in on Monday, then back to school, work—whatever—for another year. But I loved it because Labor Day honors work, and I love work. I was born and bred that way.

My one grandfather worked full-time as a pastor and a carpenter till he was 80. My other grandfather worked full-time as a shoemaker till he was 84, part-time till 86. My father didn't retire till 86, the last decade some of his best working years as a pastor. In our family, we love work!

Long before I was a teenager I had two jobs. I was a "junkie." It meant something different in those days. I went out every Saturday, scoured everyone's garbage cans, collecting newspapers and copper. And I was a Fuller Brush Man, going door to door with my little case of samples.

At 13, I got shipped off to boarding school, a school that believed in work and required every student to do two hours of labor every day. Whatever grungy, smelly, manual job you can imagine, I did it. "It builds character," they told us repeatedly, as I scrubbed toilets and scraped furnaces and shoveled manure.

College was the same. Seminary was the same. Life ever since has been the same: Work. And I still love it.

At college I got an explanation for work. As a sociology/anthropology major, I read Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The basic point was that in Europe, with the Protestant Reformation, emphasis drifted away from a monolithic religion and a monolithic government to *the individual*. Eventually, individuals fled oppressive Church and state in Europe, coming to America with our "rugged individualism," "an honest day's wage for an honest day's labor," "you can do it," "every man for himself" capitalism. There is a lot of truth to that. Some exaggeration, more than a few injustices still to be sorted out, unforeseen consequences and foreseen excesses.

Still, here we are with a lot to show for it. Work works, if I may coin a phrase. Work . . . works. More often than not. Jesus was a worker. He was a carpenter most of his life: self-employed, blue collar, a tradesman, an entrepreneur.

Even his path to becoming the Messiah was, in a word, work. Our Scripture for today gives us a window into his workaday life. The Bible tells us that as Jesus became popular, people came from all over to be with him, to see him, to hear him, to get some sort of blessing, healing from him. By the thousands! The Bible says there were 5,000 *men* there that day because, that day, literally, it was only men that were counted. So 5,000 men, plus women, kids, donkeys—a humongous crowd.

As the day wore on, it gets late, people are hungry. Jesus organized the massive crowd into two groups, takes what little food they had, shared it around, gathered the leftovers, sent the Disciples off to rest, dismissed the crowd . . . And then, after all that, an amazing, arduous, draining, exhausting day, "Jesus went up on a mountainside to pray." (Mark 6:46)

That was Jesus's work ethic. You get up in the morning, you do your best all day, you send everybody else on their way, and then you work some more.

It's easy to gloss over the hard work of this story. We may think Jesus snapped his fingers and everybody got fed. No, the Bible says. There was pre-work. Jesus spent the day with thousands of people, with their questions and their needs, all looking to him for hope. There was post-work. When all those people left, they didn't just file out in orderly fashion. We know people swarmed all

over him, they wanted his touch, his words, his presence.

I'm a nobody, and I've been in those positions. In my mission work, people came from all over for some special service where I preached, but it's the time before and the time after that takes more work. People with sick children, a dying spouse, heartbreaking petitions, holding bottles of oil to bless them, their hearts in their hands. That's the work, like Jesus did. And in the middle of it all, the miraculous feeding, it took organization, planning, implementation, oversight, and conservation of what was left over. Maybe it was a miracle. But a miracle built on work.

An old-time hymn puts it this way:

*My master was a worker  
With daily work to do  
And you who would be like him  
Must be a worker too  
Then welcome honest labor  
And honest labor's fare,  
for where there is a worker,  
the master is truly there.*

("My Master Was a Worker," revisions by David Rowe)

You all know I was with Habitat for Humanity for many years, from its infancy when nobody had ever heard of it, to its maturity as a worldwide mission. Habitat's success was built on three categories of workers. First, volunteers: People who had worked hard all week long, worked their fingers to the bone, worked till they were frazzled; they'd had long commutes, lots of responsibilities. Then, Saturday morning they'd roll out of bed, drive to a Habitat worksite, and help build a house for a family in need.

In fact, it was a Labor Day weekend back in the late 80s when Habitat first became famous. Up until that weekend, nobody had heard of us, and nobody cared. But on Labor Day weekend, former President Jimmy Carter brought a busload of volunteers from his tiny Church in Georgia, took the bus all the way to Manhattan's "Alphabet City," East 6<sup>th</sup> St. between Avenues C and D. They slept in a Church basement at night and volunteered all day, rehabbing an abandoned six-story apartment house. Volunteers. That week, Habitat was on the NBC Nightly News, in the *Wall Street Journal*, *People Magazine*, *The New York Times*—on the way to the worldwide movement it is today. Because of volunteers.

The second category of workers was retirees. We kept running into older people who said to us, "We're retired, but we're not tired, put us to work." So all across

America, men and women who had earned a good rest—these people became the backbone of Habitat projects in every town and city. Retirees spent weeks, months, crisscrossing the country, or snowbirds showing up in Florida and warm-weather towns to help their neighbors.

Third, the families themselves who are receiving a house. Each Habitat family, according to custom, gave 500 hours, *500 hours* of volunteer labor, including the kids. One year I visited a Habitat site in Upstate New York and met the family, Cambodian refugees. They had survived the horrors of the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge, made it to America, and were chosen for a house. The day construction was to begin the backhoe people forgot to come. So the Cambodian family opened up their knapsacks, took out their plates and silverware and cooking pots, and began to dig the earth with their hands. Some people do love to work!

My favorite Labor Day Sundays have been the last five years. We've made it very special at Greenfield Hill Church. Each year I've picked a few members to become our Labor Day preachers. They come to the pulpit and talk about their work, their jobs, their faith, their calling, their sense that what they do is God's work. We've had CEOs and nurses and the founders of businesses, entrepreneurs, people who sweat and think and plan and create, people who do—and love it.

If the pandemic were over, I would bring quite an array of people up here to speak, all worker bees of one sort or another. You remember: the pandemic came, frightened us all, everything shut down. All true. At the same time, people trying to figure out how to work their Christlike faith in such times; how to put their time, their efforts, their oomph, their idea, their work . . . to work for God's Kingdom, for our community, for projects and ministries, and people whom God loves and we love.

There are all of you who gave money. That's work because where does your money come from? Your work! And there are all of you who have shopped and driven, and delivered, using your time to do work we needed. And cooks, all kinds of cooks: ziti, sausage and meatballs, lasagna, macaroni and cheese, cakes. So far I'm talking over 200 people. We couldn't fit them all up here, so I'll pick three and have them stand in for everybody else.

We told you about Linda Allegretti, who's made 4,000 cookies that she wraps and places in our narthex for people to have when they come into the sanctuary to pray. But Linda and I are especially proud that the next generation is already lined up: Hannah Houghton and Mary Harvey and Anastasia van Battenberg, three high school girls have used their shutdown to hone their baking skills, and what skills they are! Week after week benefiting many hundreds of people,

cookies, cakes, scones, muffins, brownies, key lime cake—can you imagine? Chocolate chip cookies that Betty Crocker never imagined. Three hard workers creating with their own hands something truly sweet in every sense of the word.

Before I became your pastor, I wrote a book, *Faith at Work*, a theology of work and a celebration of work, of living our values in all we do. In the book, I tell about how Jesus is portrayed in a couple of movies and in a Broadway play. The great Italian movie “The Gospel According to St. Matthew” shows Jesus with urgency and vitality in everything he does. He’s working hard. In “The Last Temptation of Christ,” it imagines the fully human side of Jesus before surrendering to the divine. As Jesus works through that journey, we see Jesus get sweaty and dirty. It’s hard work saving the world.

Meanwhile, on Broadway, the great British actor Alec McCowen gives a one-person presentation of the Gospel of Mark. There’s no acting to speak of, no other characters on stage. Just McCowen, a table, a chair, a glass of water. As Mark’s Gospel unfolds, we meet Jesus, learn about him, hear him, watch him. We know where it’s headed—to the cross. As tension builds, as destiny calls, the actor does the only dramatic act of the whole show: he rolls up his sleeves, that age-old sign of gettin’ to work.

Work is a grind. It can be tedious. Difficult. Challenging. But work is also God’s purpose at work in our every effort. That makes work a joy. I end my *Faith at Work* book with this story about Mahatma Gandhi: A Western journalist once asked, “Mr. Gandhi, you have been working at least 15 hours a day every day for almost 50 years. Don’t you think it’s time you took a vacation?” “Why?” Gandhi said, “I am always on vacation.”

That’s why I love Labor Day.”

Our closing hymn today is “We Would Be Building” sung to the tune of “Finlandia”

*We would be building; temples still undone  
O’er crumbling walls their crosses scarcely lift,  
Waiting till love can raise the broken stone,  
And hearts creative bridge the human rift.  
We would be building; Master, let thy plan  
Reveal the life that God would give to man.*

*Teach us to build; upon the solid rock  
We set the dream that hardens into deed,  
Ribbed with the steel that time and change doth mock,  
The unfailing purpose of our noblest creed.*

*Teach us to build; O Master, lend us sight  
To see the towers gleaming in the light.*