

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Romans 12:9-21
Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
August 31, 2008
Labor Day Weekend

“Outdo One Another”

Are you a Christian?! If you are, be Genuine! Hate what is Evil! Hold fast to what is good! Outdo one another in showing honor! Live in Harmony with one another. Extend hospitality to strangers. That's what being a Christian is all about. The Apostle Paul is saying that, if you are dealing with a Christian there should be no question that you are dealing with a person of Honor. If this were the situation with the husband and wife who were stopped by the police officer, things might have gone a bit smoother.

A police officer stepped up to the driver's window of the speeding car he had just pulled over. “What's the problem officer?” asked the driver. “You were going at least 75 in a 55 zone,” said the officer. “No, sir. I was going 65.” “Oh, Harry. You were doing 80 miles an hour,” said the man's wife in the seat next to him. The man gave her a dirty look.

“I'm also going to have to give you a ticket for your broken tail light,” said the officer. “Broken tail light? I didn't know I had a broken tail light!” exclaimed the man. “Oh Harry, you've known about that tail light for weeks,” said the wife, who got another dirty look from her husband.

“I'm also going to give you a citation for not wearing your seat belt,” said the officer. “Oh, but I just took it off when you were walking up to the car,” protested the man. “Harry, you never wear your seat belt!” said the wife. Exasperated, the man turned to his wife and yelled, “Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you!” The police officer turned to the woman and asked, “Ma'am, does your husband talk to you this way all the time?” “Oh No, sir,” she said. “Only when he's drunk.”

Be Genuine - hate evil - do good - show honor. That is not what the man in our story was showing. Then again, let's give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he wasn't a Christian. We know that a Christian would never lie to get out of a speeding ticket.

When people know you're a Christian they tend to place certain expectations on your behavior. There have been times when I have overheard two people arguing, and ultimately one throws out that trump card and says, “And you call yourself a *Christian!*?”

Be Genuine - hate evil - do good - show honor. When you call yourself a Christian, people have a certain picture in mind. They expect you to be Genuine, hate evil, do good, and outdo each other in showing honor. That's the picture people have of a Christian. And when you don't fit that picture there are problems.

There was a family who had a hobby of putting together jigsaw puzzles. The father regularly brought home puzzles of greater and greater difficulty. One night he presented his family with a puzzle of over one thousand pieces. Immediately they tackled it. After an hour, however, the family was frustrated. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't get the puzzle started. Then the father discovered that he had accidentally switched the box top with the top from another puzzle. The picture they were looking at wasn't the puzzle they were working on.

Do we fit the picture? Do we fit the picture of a Christian? Be Genuine, hate evil, do good, outdo one another in showing honor. Do we look like the Christian we claim to be? Paul says we should "outdo one another in showing honor." Too often in the Church, I hear people say, "I go to church more than they do" or "I give at least what other people do." According to Paul we should outdo one another in showing faithfulness. Our goal should be to exceed what others do, not to just do at least what they do.

If we are going to identify ourselves as Christians there are going to be expectations. What do we think of the person who has a "Honk if you love Jesus" bumper sticker when then they cut you off on the highway or they park in the handicapped space and are not handicapped? When a person wears a cross as jewelry. Is it just a nice decoration or is it a mark of identification that this person is genuine, hates evil, does good and shows honor?

One thing they use to ask on job applications that they are not allowed to ask anymore was "Religious Affiliation". They wanted to know if you were active in a church. The expectation might have been if you were, you would be someone who is genuine, hates evil, does good and shows honor. But people felt that was too invasive - too personal. To have their boss know that they are a Christian. Is that something we'd want to hide? Or is it something that should be obvious by our actions?

This is Labor day weekend. Labor Day - a day to honor the everyday worker. And although they may not ask it on a job application, would our boss know we were Christian based on our work ethic? We should be able to go to the Christian Auto mechanic and not wonder if they are trying to replace a perfectly good part in order to make extra money. The Christian Trash Collector would have picked up that box that fell out of our trash can when he pulled it to the truck to dump it. The Christian customer would tell the Bank Clerk or the Store Cashier when they got more money back than they should have. And there should be no question that the Christian teacher is there with the child's best interest at heart. On the factory assembly line, the Christian worker is not the one who would say "That's not MY job".

Yes, this is Labor day weekend, a time when we want to honor all workers. And yes, there are Non-Christian workers who are honorable in their work because they want to be. But for us, the Christian worker, we are genuine, hate evil, do good and Outdo each other in showing honor because that is what we are compelled to do. It's human nature to say, "Why

do we have to do it if no one else does?" Because we are different from the "other" people.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus says: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Now Cross-Carrying isn't always an unpleasant thing. Even the Apostle Paul found satisfaction in some of his toughest sacrifices. That part about "if your enemies are hungry - feed them and if they are thirsty - give them something to drink." We'd like to think Paul would do that because it is what is expected of him as a Christian. But even Paul admits that by being nice to your enemies "It's like heaping burning coals on their heads." If you are nice to someone who has wronged you it makes it tougher for them to dislike you. If we are going to say we are Christian, if we are going to be Genuine, hate evil, do good and show honor, then things like revenge, gossip, cheating and lying are not part of the game plan.

Unlike many other people we should find joy in our work. A Christian worker doesn't have to be bored. Christopher Wren, who designed St. Paul's Cathedral in London (one of the world's most beautiful buildings), wrote about the reactions of construction workers who were asked what they were doing. Those workers who were bored and tired responded by saying, "I'm laying bricks" or "I'm carrying stones." But one worker, who was mixing cement, seemed cheerful and enthusiastic about his work. When he was asked what he was doing, he replied, "I'm building a magnificent cathedral."

Surveys have found that most people dislike their work. They don't look forward to going to work; instead they are bored with it and tired of it. They dream of winning the state lottery so they never have to work another day in their lives. God didn't create us to be bored and unfulfilled by our work. God created us to serve him in everything we do, including our work. God wants us to enjoy our work because our work is what brings glory to God. It's one way we worship God.

Paul wrote that we should be happy in our work because we are not working for men, but for God. Paul also wrote, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." If you look at your work merely as something you do to make a few bucks and survive, you won't be happy in your work. On the other hand, if you decide to glorify God in your work, you will not only be happy as you work, but you'll realize that God will be with you in your work. Two people can be doing the same job - one can be happy while the other is miserable. It depends on your outlook.

A Toll Booth worker name Tim Timmons shares this: He says: If you've ever gone through a toll booth, you know that your relationship to the person in the booth is not the most intimate you'll ever have. It's one of life's frequent nonencounters. You hand over some money; you might get change; you drive off.

I've been through every one of the 17 toll booths on the Oakland-San Francisco Bay

Bridge on thousands of occasions and never had an exchange worth remembering with anybody. Late one morning, headed for lunch in San Francisco, I drove toward one of the booths. I heard loud, lively music. It sounded like a party or a Michael Jackson concert. I looked around. No other cars with their windows open. No sound trucks. I looked at the toll booth. Inside it, the man was dancing. "What are you doing?" I asked. "I'm having a party," he said. "What about the rest of these people?" I looked over at other booths; nothing moving there. "They're not invited." I had a dozen other questions for him, but somebody in a big hurry to get somewhere started punching his horn behind me, and I drove off. But I made a note to myself: find this guy again. Something in his eye says there's magic in his toll booth.

Months later I did find him again, still with the loud music, still having a party. Again I asked, "What are you doing?" He said, "I remember you from the last time. I'm still dancing. I'm having the same party." I said, "Look. What about the rest of the people?" He said, "Stop. What do those look like to you?" He pointed down the row of toll booths. "They look like toll booths," I said. "No imagination!" he said. "Okay, I give up. What do they look like to you?" He said, "Vertical coffins." "What are you talking about?" "I can prove it. At 8:30 every morning, live people get in. Then they die for eight hours. At 4:30, like Lazarus from the dead, they reemerge and go home. For eight hours, their brains are on hold, dead on the job. Going through the motions."

I was amazed. This guy had developed a philosophy, about his job. I couldn't help asking the next question: "Why is it different for you? You're having a good time." He looked at me. "I knew you were going to ask that," he paused. "I'm going to be a dancer someday." He pointed to the administration building. "My bosses are in there, and they're paying for my training." Sixteen people dead on the job, and the 17th, in the same environment figures out a way to live and enjoy his job. That man was having a party where most people wouldn't last three days.

He and I had lunch later, and he said, "I don't understand why anybody would think my job is boring. I have a corner office, glass on all sides. I can see the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, the Berkeley hills. Half of the Western world comes here on vacation. And I just stroll in every day and practice dancing.." This Toll Collector's story helps us put things into perspective. If we look at our work with a new perspective we can view our work, and doing the best job we can, as just another way of giving Praise to the Lord.

The closing hymn for today's service is very appropriate for Labor day. "Earth and All Stars" tells us that whether you are a Construction Worker - a Teacher - a Scientist - an Athlete - a Musician - or anyone - if the work you do is being done to the Glory of God - then you are singing Praises to God. Let's give thanks this Labor Day not because we have a job, but because IN our jobs - we can Praise God! Amen!