Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, 7-14

In our opening prayer today, we asked God, the giver of all good things, to graft, increase, nourish and bring forth within us the fruit of good works. Rather fitting for a Labor Day weekend, don’t you think? God’s labor is a blessing to each of us, wherever we are on our journey of faith. God’s labor on our behalf began before creation and will continue beyond our imaginings. God’s labor is a model for what our labor is to be, a blessing on all creation.

Each of the readings this morning tease out what our labors look like, what they should be focused upon, what the hoped for results will be.

In the first reading this morning the prophet Jeremiah reminds Israel of all the ways that God labored for them. God brought the Israelites out from the land of Egypt, a land of forced labor. God led them in the wilderness, a land of drought and deep darkness. God brought them into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. But as life got easier for the Israelites, they fell into a state of group amnesia. They no longer clearly remembered how they got from point A to point B. They began to pat themselves on the back, as if they were their own saviors. As Jeremiah observed, they went after worthless things and became worthless themselves. They exchanged their glory as God’s chosen people for things that did not benefit them in the long run. They rejected the God of their salvation as they came to believe that all their prosperity was the fruit of their own labors.

Times haven’t changed much since then, have they? Are we all not guilty of sometimes turning away from God’s open arms and relying on our own devices? Do we not allow ourselves to sometimes go after what is the latest-greatest electronic device or current fad, rather than what has real value? Do we not occasionally forget that “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee?”

The prophecy from Jeremiah this morning seemingly provides only accusations against a wayward people without any consolation. And yet if we listen closely, we do hear God say “my children,” not once, but twice. Even when the Israelites turned from God, God did not turn from them. Even when the Israelites abandoned the poor and the widow and the orphan, God did not abandon them. Even when the Israelites worshiped other gods, be it Baal or money or power, their God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, and Rachel, and Leah and Rebecca remained in covenant with them. This God of the covenant continued to call them, “my children” no matter how rebellious they became.

As we labor on in this 21st Century, let us remember that their God is our God too. Let us remember that our God is a god who promises to be in relationship with us, regardless of the number of times we go astray. Let us remember that our God is a god who loves the heavens yet lusts after us, we who are created in God’s own image and likeness. And in our remembering, let us “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

Today’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews continues to explain how we are to live our lives as faith-filled followers of Jesus - what our labor as disciples should look like. Love and hospitality, compassion and faithfulness and generosity – these are the hallmarks of God’s faithful people, these are the good works that do bear fruit, these are the actions that we should celebrate this Labor Day weekend. Some of these actions are easy to accomplish right now, today. Some of these good works involve significant attention over time. Some of these hallmarks will only be identified with us at our funerals. All of these labors are the ancient, unchanging, universally recognized good works for living each day as a child of God, as a committed disciple of Jesus, as one sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. All of these labors are our response to that ancient, unchanging invitation from God and from God’s only son, Jesus Christ. The church and its leaders may change. The financial markets and our own financial fortunes may change. The political world around us will always be changing. But “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” And because Jesus doesn’t change, neither does the labor of love that he has called us to.1 AND we recommit ourselves to this labor of love every time we proclaim our baptismal covenant: to continue in the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to take part in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers, to persevere in resisting evil, to repent and return to the Lord, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, o strive for justice and peace among all people, to respect the dignity of every human being. These are the ways in which all will know that we are Jesus’ disciples.

Today’s Gospel story is probably familiar to many of us. When you are invited to a banquet, do not take the place of honor on your own initiative, wait for it to be offered. If that happens, be grateful; if it doesn’t happen, be humble. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the lame, the blind…you may find yourself entertaining angels. In this story, Jesus was teaching his disciples - and us - that humility should be our guide and hospitality our trademark, that our lives should to be focused on serving others, that we should not let rules overtrump love.

I was recently reflecting about what hospitality might look like here at St. John’s, on a Sunday morning, how the quality of our souls and the quantity of our lives might be expanded, and how that might affect our guests. What might we do to enhance a guest’s first experience here? How could we adjust our Sunday morning habits, good in and of themselves, to be even more welcoming to others? What might we do to better focus on a guest’s needs, rather than on what is customary to us? These are things I think we should ponder individually and as a community, in light of today’s Gospel.

All three readings this morning call us to move beyond ourselves, to be attuned to the needs of others, to be as gracious as our God is gracious. They describe rather clearly how we are to act as God’s children, how we are to live in mutual love, how we are to “continually offer a sacrifice of praise to our God.” Even the smallest of acts, performed with humility and hospitality, can transform the lives of all. May our Labor Day weekend be filled with such God-like actions.

1. http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php