

# “Labor of Love”

*Deuteronomy 26:2, Mark 10:43-45, Hebrews 12:1 & Romans 12:1-8*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Eternal Spirit, you flow through the ages from the pages of Scripture, healing with your comfort, transforming with your challenge and inspiring those who hear to love extravagantly. Open our hearts and minds to perceive your Word. We pray in the name of the Living Word. Amen.

Today we celebrate all who labor to expand love, joy, and peace. Scripture commands us 28 times to give the first portion of our labor to God. **Deuteronomy 26:2 NRSV “You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for Gods name.”** In giving the first portion of the income from our labor, one acknowledges that everything we have received is a gift from God and belongs to God.

In Colonial America, and the early years of the United States of America, when a town was forming one of the first buildings built was a church to give gratitude for the land, praise God, and to seek God’s blessings upon the town. The church was also the meeting place for citizens to discuss issues and make plans. Everyone was responsible for helping build and maintain the church which was typically located in the center of the town.

A dream born in the hearts of nine charter members became reality on October 18, 1887, at the home of Henry Castle, the founder of North Saint Paul, as they organized North Presbyterian Church. In 1889, a church building was erected 24 feet by 30 feet with a steeple. It had kerosene lamps and a little heat from a single stove. Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church donated the bell. The first worship service in the new building was November 24, 1889, a thanksgiving service. Six years later in 1895, the first Sunday School was organized. Over the first 20 years, 17 members joined expanding membership to twenty-six members in 1907. In 1942, a ruling elder purchased a home for \$6,000 and donated it to be the first manse, a home for the pastor. The first confirmation classes happened in 1947, resulting in two new members. In 1950, church membership had grown to 252 members with a budget of \$5,300 of which \$2,800 was the pastor’s salary.

The first worship service in this sanctuary was September 21, 1958. The only fixed seating was the theatre seats in the choir loft which came from the old building. There was one office/ pastor study the room behind the choir loft upstairs. The rest of the seating was borrowed folding chairs from the mortuary. Many people stood. The building cost \$153,381. The Christian Education wing was added in 1963. The Sermon on the Mount picture was painted in 1964. Around that time, stained windows were designed and installed. The mortgage was paid in full on March 27, 1986. However, funds were soon borrowed again to add Meisenheimer Hall, the kitchen, and Fireside room which was completed November 23, 1986. The space was first used to host the community Thanksgiving service.

Since I was called to serve with you in 2005, you have added a worship space in Meisenheimer Hall, expanded the entrance, replaced the roof over the entire building, replaced every furnace, upgraded every light fixture, added a garage, refurbished the bathrooms, installed streaming equipment, and upgraded all the flooring. You are now in a worship space with new lighting, sound system, flooring, hearing assistance devices, and media booth. Soon we will have new pew cushions and the completion of the media booth. You have partnered with El Shadai New Hope ministries. You are streaming worship. People are joining you every week for worship in countries around the world.

Last century Carl Howie wrote: “To be a Presbyterian is to be busy doing God’s will and serving human need out of gratitude for God’s goodness in Christ. It is to live with confident trust in God and to believe that life, whatever its difficulties, is an adventure with God. To be Presbyterian is to be freed for service and to be liberated for new, redemptive relationships with others. Presbyterians live in hope and dare to believe that their lives are significant because God has given them significance. We move toward the future, not knowing what it holds but knowing that we go with God and that is enough to know.”

It is an honor for me to be in this space. I am filled with wonder and gratitude to celebrate the sacrifice, service, generosity, and labor of all who have given their first fruits so we can worship here today. Let us give thanks for all that has come from the shared dream of nine people, 135 years ago. We celebrate the worship services, baptisms, marriages, confirmations, funerals, and holy communions that have happened here. We celebrate the generous giving of money, the generous giving of service, the generous giving of time, the generous giving of labor.

We celebrate the abundant mission that has flowed out of here to our local community and the world. This is a holy space for lives have been transformed here, grace experienced and love expands from here.

Jonathan Edwards said, “The obligation of every generation is to understand what God is doing and then to do it together with God!” We are celebrating everyone who has partnered with God to love. We are celebrating you, with your unique goodness and service that reveals a facet of God’s love, an aspect of the very image of God.

The gospel of Mark proclaims: **Mark 10:43-45 “Whoever would be great among you must be a servant. Jesus came to serve and give his life a ransom for many.”** Hebrews proclaims: **Hebrews 12:1 NLT “Since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.”** You have an eternal cloud of witnesses cheering for you wherever you go. In this space we have an eternal cloud of witnesses cheering for us, people who have constructed, cleaned, and maintained this space. People who have listened, comforted, and supported another in this space. People who have learned and taught, come to know Christ and show Christ in this space. People who have prayed, preached, and given musical gifts in this space. People who put on their best to worship and people who felt comfortable being casual. People who received gracious hospitality regardless of condition, status, and wealth. People who expressed their worship in banners, food, and bulletins in this space. People who have celebrated spectacular joys and people who were carried through devastating tragedy in this space. People who dreamed of a world where all have food, clothing, education, housing, and health care in this space and then gave to people around the world to fulfill a portion of that dream. People who came to be comforted and challenged in this space. People who gathered to be grateful, to serve, to rejoice, to love, to discover what God is doing in their midst and then joined God in doing God’s will. Let us take a minute of silence to perceive some of the cloud of witnesses here and thank them.

One of the ways to transform your mind, and to expand your love, is to be grateful for those who have sacrificed, served, and given so you can worship here and to be grateful for those who enhance your daily life. Inspired by the giving of others let us join together in serving one another and the world. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: **Romans 12:1-3 NRSV “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”** **Romans 12:1-8 MSG “So here is what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Do not become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You will be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. I am speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it is important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what God does for us, not by what we are and what we do for God. In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we are talking about is Christ’s body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of Christ’s body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we would not amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let us just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we are not. If you preach, just preach God’s Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, do not take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you do not get bossy; if you are put in charge, do not manipulate; if you are called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, do not let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.”**

Our labor flows from God’s labor that has created a cosmos where goodness, joy and love are ever expanding. Each of us is to labor in a way that honors God, which expands love, joy, and peace. Wesley Taylor prays: “Lord, If I must sweep the sidewalks, Or clean the bathroom, Or wash the dishes, Or shampoo the dog, Or empty the garbage, Or wash the windows, Or do the laundry, Or scrub the spot off the carpet, Or pull up the weeds, Or anything else I do not want to do, Let me do it for the glory of God.” All of us do some work that we do not care to do. Hopefully, some of your work is at the intersection of joyful labor and a need of another.

If you are a comedian, then labor in a way that joy is expanded. George Carlin asks: “If FedEx and UPS were to merge, would they be called FED UP? Do Lipton Tea employees take coffee breaks? If lawyers are disbarred and pastors defrocked, doesn't it follow that electricians can be delighted, musicians denoted, cowboys deranged, models deposed, tree surgeons debarked and dry cleaners depressed?”

The Apostle Paul urges us to be transformed and be a transformer. In the electrical field a transformer transfers electric energy from one circuit to another, and often that transfer involves a change in voltage, current or phase. We are called to receive God's energy and transform God's energy into forms that serve, enliven, and electrify people. Sometimes I explain the role of a pastor as an extension cord, to be plugged into God the source of all life, goodness, and love and welcome others to plug into the pastor so God's grace can flow through the pastor into the life of another. We have a fancy church word for this, incarnate, to embody God's grace. All are equal, the one who prays, the one who cleans, the one who gives a penny, the one who repairs a pew, the one who sings, the one who listens and on and on. Here at North Presbyterian Church, we are surrounded by people who have labored for 135 years. Now it is our turn to carry on their legacy and labor for future generations.

As we celebrate Labor Day let us be grateful for those who labor to expand love. Let us ponder how we are partnering with God in fulfilling God's perfect plan for the world and each person. Let us contemplate how we can contribute our unique gifts to our community, working in harmony, to bring heaven to earth. Let us be grateful for those who have served, are serving, and will serve God, through North Presbyterian Church. Amen