



## **CELEBRATION OF VOCATIONS (LABOR DAY)**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**Sunday, September 6, 2009**

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#### **Introduction**

Our lectionary positions the scriptural lesson found in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 in that portion of our calendar year that has been set aside to give special honor to work and workers.

#### **I. Etymology: Vocation**

Historically, the term “vocation” evolved from the Latin *vocationem*, or vocation, meaning “a calling.” The sense of vocation as “one’s occupation or profession” dates from 1553.<sup>1</sup> “Labor, toil,” circa 1250, is from the Old French *travail*, “suffering or painful effort, trouble;” originally from the Latin *tripaliare*, “to torture” or *tripalium* (in L.L. *trepalium*) “instrument of torture.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **II. Quotes and a Song about Work**

There is no royal flower-strewn path to success. And if there is, I have not found it, for if I have accomplished anything in life it is because, I have been willing to work hard.

Madam C. J. Walker<sup>3</sup>

People might not get all they work for in this world, but they must certainly work for all they get.

Frederick Douglas<sup>4</sup>

The determined worker always wins, especially when there ain't no work.  
African American Proverb

### **To the Work!**

To the work! To the work! We are servants of God,  
Let us follow the path that our Master has trod;  
With the might of his power our strength to renew,  
Let us do by his grace what he calls us to do.

Work for him by his grace;  
Work thru him for his praise;  
Work with him all the days;  
And work in him in many ways.

To the work! To the work! Let the hungry be fed;  
To the fountain of life let the thirsty be led;  
In the cross and its vict'ry our glory shall be,  
While we herald the tidings, "Salvation is free!"

To the work! To the work! In the strength of the Lord,  
By the pow'r of his name, with the light of his Word,  
All the slaves of the darkness of Satan set free  
And his riches of grace in his glory we'll see.<sup>5</sup>

### **III. Historical Notes Concerning Labor Day**

“As the Industrial Revolution took hold, the average American in the late 1800s worked 12-hour days, seven days a week in order to make a basic living. Children were also working, as they provided cheap labor to employers and laws against child labor were seldom enforced. Workers began to form unions that called for improvements in their working conditions and poor wages. So great was their need and such was their success that on Tuesday September 5, 1882, 10,000 workers marched from city hall to Union Square in New York City, holding the first Labor Day parade. Participants took an unpaid day-off to honor their contribution as the workers to the building of their country; as well as to move front and center the numerous concerns they had with their employers. As

years passed, more states began to hold these parades celebrating workers and the importance of labor.

The congressional designation of the official holiday was triggered by the very public brutal and bloody 1894 Pullman Palace Car Company riot in Chicago May 11, 1894. Workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company went out on strike protesting wage cuts and the firing of their union leaders. They were joined by the American Railroad Union that called for a boycott of all Pullman Railway Cars. 50,000 workers went out on strike and rail traffic out of Chicago stopped. On July 4, President Grover Cleveland sent in troops and with violence and a lot of bloodshed the strike and boycott collapsed; and the union leaders were jailed. The public nature of this crisis resulted in Congress designating the first Monday in September as Labor Day in 1894, twelve years after the 1882 Labor Day parade in New York City.”<sup>6</sup>

#### **IV. Honoring Work**

In our scripture for this offering, the author of 2 Thessalonians reminded the young Christian community of Thessalonica to remember the example he had set when he worked among them. At the same time the disciples worked teaching and preaching, they also assumed responsibility for their own needs and participated in providing for their families and communities. Becoming a follower of the Christ never exempted anyone from the necessity to do regular life sustaining labor.

This offering on vocation presents us a special opportunity to honor the complexity of work as it has been expressed in the African American legacy in this land. There is “forced labor,” the work we were forced to do as slaves, work we are often still forced to do as convict labor within the prison industrial complex. There was often partnered with that the work in which we engaged to change the conditions within which we worked and lived. It is a more complex story than the one often celebrated during Labor Day, it is important to keep the distinction before us.

Labor Day certainly marks a transformative organizing effort to change the quality of work and workers within the society. At great sacrifice, organized labor successfully struggled to have a seat at the table that determined the wages, the hours of labor, the safety of the work place, and support for health and retirement needs. For African Americans, labor union initiatives were often racist and exclusive to white men, and we found ourselves fighting to be counted within the efforts to improve the quality of work.

#### **V. Bessie Jones: 20th Century African American Cultural Transmitter**

I learned the song “Juba” from Bessie Jones, singer, healer, midwife, storyteller, a walking reservoir of African American southern based oral culture and traditions. She was born in Southwest Georgia, and moved to St. Simons Island off the coast of Brunswick after she married. This song was taught to her as a child by a man she called her grandfather, who had been sold from Virginia to the slave auctions at Americus, Georgia. He not only taught her songs and their meanings, but he took her into the woods

and taught her how to identify and find the plants that could be used for healing the body. Bessie Jones passed the practice of “patting Juba” and its meaning to me.

Juba! Juba!  
Juba this and Juba that  
Juba killed the yellow cat  
Bent over double trouble Juba

Sift the meal, give me the husk  
Cook the bread, give me the crust  
Eat the meat, give me the skin  
That’s where my mama’s trouble begin...  
Juba!

Juba is an African word and usually refers to a dark, bad, or negative energy. In this song, Juba also covers the word “gibba” which comes from the word “giblets.” For slaves, gibba were the least valued parts of any food stuffs. Today, if we think about poultry, gibba would not only be the giblets, but the heart, liver, neck and tail of the chicken, turkey, or goose. During slavery, it also covered the pig and included its snout, tongue, heart, liver, intestines, ears, head, etc. The song says, you give me a little of this and a little of that, but if you had to take what you give to me, it would kill you. In the song, the “yellow cat” is the white man.

Bent over double-trouble – Juba! To be black in the United States meant to be born in double trouble—Juba. The Africans who were brought here had to take on the responsibility to do enough of the tasks demanded by the slave owners for immediate survival and still do enough of the tasks demanded by that knowingness they held within that they were more than slave working machines.

Bessie Jones talked about this song as a way of saying that we understood that we were not born to be slaves. We understood that our treatment by the slave owners was wrong. That the food and clothing and necessities of life we received from those who said we were their property was based on a system that was unjust. Even though we carried out the work upon which the system stood and we represented the wealth of the plantation owner, we were given the least valued of all that was available as food, shelter, clothing, health—bent over double trouble juba.

We worked to stay alive to change the way we had to work. To get out of double trouble, one has to work on more than one level. There is the work you do, because through that effort you support yourself and your family’s basic needs for survival and development. Then there is the transformative work you do to change the way you live and work.

## **VI. Venture Smith Works to Free Himself and His Family**

Venture Smith, born Broteer Furro in the 1720s the son of a West African prince, was captured at the age of six by slave traders. He worked as a slave in Long Island and

eastern Connecticut. Smith was a big man, over 6 feet tall, and strong. He endured extreme hardship, worked all day with additional tasks in the evening. He was sold several times and eventually paid for his freedom through his labor more than three times by the age of thirty-one. First, he purchased himself and then his oldest son, and together they worked at numerous jobs fishing and farming. After a time, he was able to purchase his wife and their other children. We know his story because it was taken down by Elisha Niles, a schoolteacher and Revolutionary war veteran, and published in 1798. The title of the book is A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself.

### **An Excerpt:**

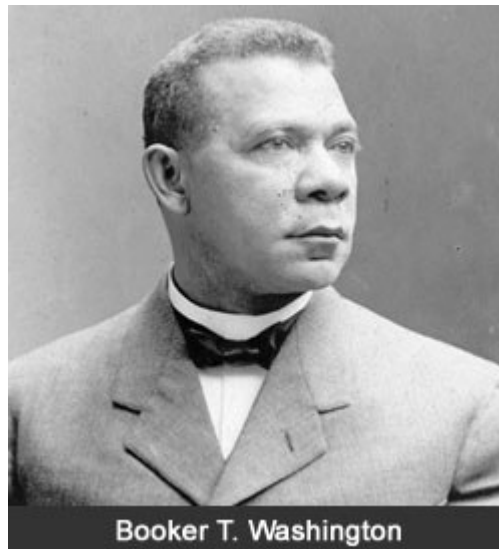
*The first of the time of living at my master's own place, I was pretty much employed in the house at carding wool and other household business. In this situation I continued for some years, after which my master put me to work out of doors. After many proofs of my faithfulness and honesty, my master began to put great confidence in me. My behavior to him had as yet been submissive and obedient. I then began to have hard tasks imposed on me. Some of these were to pound four bushels of ears of corn every night in a barrel for the poultry, or be rigorously punished. At other seasons of the year I had to card wool until a very late hour. These tasks I had to perform when I was about nine years old.*

*Sometime after I had another difficulty and oppression which was greater than any I had ever experienced since I came into this country. This was to serve two masters. James Mumford, my master's son, when his father had gone from home in the morning, and given me a stint to perform that day, would order me to do this and that business different from what my master directed me. One day in particular, the authority which my master's son had set up, had like to have produced melancholy effects. For my master having set me off my business to perform that day and then left me to perform it, his son came up to me in the course of the day, big with authority, and commanded me very arrogantly to quit my present business and go directly about what he should order me. I replied to him that my master had given me so much to perform that day, and that I must therefore faithfully complete it in that time. He then broke out into a great rage, snatched a pitchfork and went to lay me over the head therewith; but I as soon got another and defended myself with it, or otherwise he might have murdered me in his outrage. He immediately called some people who were within hearing at work for him, and ordered them to take his hair rope and come and bind me with it. They all tried to bind me but in vain, tho' there were three assistants in number. My upstart master then desisted, put his pocket handkerchief before his eyes and went home with a design to tell his mother of the struggle with young VENTURE. He told her that their young VENTURE had become so stubborn that he could not control him, and asked her what he should do with him.*

*In the mean time I recovered my temper, voluntarily caused myself to be bound by the same men who tried in vain before, and carried before my young master,*

*that he might do what he pleased with me. He took me to a gallows made for the purpose of hanging cattle on, and suspended me on it. Afterwards he ordered one of his hands to go to the peach orchard and cut him three dozen of whips to punish me with. These were brought to him, and that was all that was done with them, as I was released and went to work after hanging on the gallows about an hour.<sup>7</sup>*

## VII. Booker Taliaferro Washington and Work



This day devoted to the celebration of vocation provides an important opportunity to look at the work of Booker Taliaferro Washington. He was born a slave and, after emancipation and gaining an education, founded a school and became one of the strongest black leaders of the late 19th and early years of the 20th century.

There is a tension in accounts of his contribution, rightly so, because of the ideological compromise he laid out in 1895 which suggested that African Americans could provide the labor needed by the country to meet the industrial transformation of that period, and that we could do it and not challenge political and social race separation. Tuskegee Institute was created out of Washington's lived experience. His goal was focused on transforming the conditions that millions of black workers, though free, continued to experience extreme conditions of poverty and remained vulnerable to exploitations in all aspects of their lives.

Washington focused the work of Tuskegee on training a cadre of leaders he called agents, who would return to their communities and change the lives of the masses of their people. In 1896, Washington wrote about the impact that one trained agent could have in communities by helping farmers use science in farming to save money, purchase land and build their own homes and free themselves of the vicious of reconstruction which replaced slavery in the South:

*What are the cardinal needs among the seven millions of colored people in the South, most of whom are to be found on the plantations? Roughly, these needs may be stated as food, clothing, shelter, education, proper habits, and a settlement of race relations.*

*The seven millions of colored people of the South cannot be reached directly by any missionary agency, but they can be reached by sending out among them strong selected young men and women, with the proper training of head, hand, and heart, who will live among these masses and show them how to lift themselves up.*

*The problem that the Tuskegee Institute keeps before itself constantly is how to prepare these leaders. From the outset, in connection with religious and academic training, it has emphasized industrial or hand training as a means of finding the way out of present conditions.*

*Having been fortified at Tuskegee by education of mind, skill of hand, Christian character, ideas of thrift, economy, and push, and a spirit of independence, the student is sent out to become a centre of influence and light in showing the masses of our people in the Black Belt of the South how to lift themselves up. How can this be done? I give but one or two examples. Ten years ago a young colored man came to the Institute from one of the large plantation districts; he studied in the class-room a portion of the time, and received practical and theoretical training on the farm the remainder of the time. Having finished his course at Tuskegee, he returned to his plantation home, which was in a county where the colored people outnumber the whites six to one, as is true of many of the counties in the Black Belt of the South. He found the Negroes in debt. Ever since the war they had been mortgaging their crops for the food on which to live while the crops were growing. The majority of them were living from hand to mouth on rented land, in small, one-room log cabins, and attempting to pay a rate of interest on their advances that ranged from fifteen to forty per cent per annum.*

*The school had been caught in a wreck of a log cabin, with no apparatus, and had never been in session longer than three months out of twelve. With as many as eight or ten persons of all ages and conditions and of both sexes huddled together in one cabin year after year, and with a minister whose only aim was to work upon the emotions of the people, one can imagine something of the moral and religious state of the community.*

*But the remedy. The rank and file of the race, especially those on the Southern plantations, work hard, but the trouble is, what they earn gets away from them in high rents, crop mortgages, whiskey, snuff, cheap jewelry, and the like. The young man just referred to had been trained at Tuskegee, as most of our graduates are, to meet just this condition of things. He took the three months' public school as a nucleus for his work. Then he organized the older people into a club, or conference, that held meetings every week. In these meetings he taught the people*

*in a plain, simple manner how to save their money, how to farm in a better way, how to sacrifice,--to live on bread and potatoes, if need be, till they could get out of debt, and begin the buying of lands.*

*Soon a large proportion of the people were in condition to make contracts for the buying of homes (land is very cheap in the South), and to live without mortgaging their crops. Not only this: under the guidance and leadership of this teacher, the first year that he was among them they learned how, by contributions in money and labor, to build a neat, comfortable schoolhouse that replaced the wreck of a log cabin formerly used. The following year the weekly meetings were continued, and two months were added to the original three months of school. The next year two more months were added. The improvement has gone on, until now these people have every year an eight months' school.*

*I wish my readers could have the chance that I have had of going into this community. I wish they could look into the faces of the people and see them beaming with hope and delight. I wish they could see the two or three room cottages that have taken the place of the usual one-room cabin, the well-cultivated farms, and the religious life of the people that now means something more than the name. The teacher has a good cottage and a well-kept farm that serve as models.*

*In a word, a complete revolution has been wrought in the industrial, educational, and religious life of this whole community by reason of the fact that they have had this leader, this guide and object-lesson, to show them how to take the money and effort that had hitherto been scattered to the wind in mortgages and high rents, in whiskey and gewgaws, and concentrate them in the direction of their own uplifting. One community on its feet presents an object-lesson for the adjoining communities, and soon improvements show themselves in other places.<sup>8</sup>*

## **VIII. Ella Josephine Baker-Organizer**

For most of her life, Ella Baker held jobs as an organizer and administrator in progressive movements. When she talked about her work, she stated, “I have always worked with people. I have been working with people since I was six years old. How did that happen? My mother worked with people.”

The child saw her mother work all the time around the house, taking care of her family; she also saw her working with others in the community to get through difficult times and to take advantage of opportunities to create a better life. During the Depression, she worked helping to form co-ops so that poor people could buy products in bulk for lower prices. During the 1940s, she was an organizer for the NAACP, bringing new members and new chapters into the organization from the South. Baker was the initial executive director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a leader in the YWCA, and an advisor to SNCC. In most instances, Baker’s work to earn a living was also the work she did as an organizer to fight racism, injustice and exploitation in this



country. It was also a way to teach others how to come together to achieve the right to voice their positions on any issue affecting their lives and not have their employment status, liberty or their lives in jeopardy because of it.<sup>9</sup>

### **I'm Working On the Building**

(Traditional Gospel Quartet Song)

I'm working on the building  
It's a true foundation  
I'm holding up the blood-stained  
banner for my Lord  
Well I never get tired, tired, tired of working on the building  
I'm going up to heaven to get my reward

### **Notes**

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