

**Sunday Sermon**  
**September 3, 2017**  
**“All the Work of Your Hand”**  
**Isaiah 64:8, Romans 9:20-26**

Introduction:

For a significant number of my years in ministry, I have served in hurricane areas. I have met storms of many letters of the alphabet. I especially have not had good experiences with those bearing the letters H or I. So after days of viewing astounding, wrenching images of Harvey, when September popped up on the calendar and a hurricane spiral named Irma appeared in the Atlantic, I shifted into hurricane preparation. I caught up with the laundry; I got water, canned food; I filled my car with gas. My head kept saying, “You are not on the coast now,” but my emotions kept saying, “This is the work of September. This is what you do Labor Day weekend.”

Ah, Labor Day, originally a day set aside to pay tribute to the contribution of organized labor to the common good. But now we use it to recognize all who work, those who work for monetary compensation, those who are retired from being compensated and have to do their work for free, and those who have never been paid for the work that they do.

Some folks say Labor Day is the most hypocritical of all our holidays, because if we are really thankful about labor and it being a blessing, then we should go to work on Labor Day to show our appreciation rather than take the day off.

I.

Turns out I am working tomorrow, along with Robert Smith. We are helping with the funeral here, and we do it willingly, gladly.

I like to work, and we can tell Robert does. I believe what John Calvin taught: that men and women live to “glorify God,” and the chief way to do that is in our day-to-day work. To be a servant of God, Calvin said, is to exhibit the qualities of diligence, industriousness, and responsibility.

I believe what Martin Luther said: that even a dairy maid can milk her cows to the glory of God.

I believe what the Benedictine monks taught: that to work is to pray.

I believe what John Wesley taught: that one should earn all one can, save all one can, and give all one can.

And I believe in Lovshin's Law: that most of the good things in this world are done by tired people.

But I know that when the focus of our work shifts from glorifying God to trying to accumulate benefits and be self-made, and when we start identifying who we are by what we do rather than in whose image we are made, we lose the meaning

God intends for our work.

You have probably heard of the Protestant work ethic, championed by Martin Luther. Five hundred years ago this fall, he challenged the monastic order of priests and monks by saying that not just their work but all work is divinely ordained. You do not have to be a monk or a priest to serve God, he said. God did not simply create the world and then quit, Luther said. God keeps creating, and God invites us to join in that creative work. In fact, it is our calling as Christians.

II.

So today is part one of a two-Sunday emphasis setting the theme for this church year, a theme about what it means to be the work from and reworked “In the Potter’s Hands.”

Listen to these words by St. Irenaeus, theologian of the 2nd century:

It is not thou that shapest God;  
 It is God that shapest thee.  
 If then thou art the work of God,  
 Await the hand of the Artist  
 Who does all things in due season.  
 Offer God thy heart soft and tractable  
 And keep the form in which the Artist  
 Has fashioned thee.  
 Let thy clay be moist, lest thou grow hard  
 And lose the imprint of God’s finger.

Let thy clay be moist, lest thou grow hard and lose the imprint of God’s finger. That happens to us, you know. We become tough clay, hardened, resistance to change. We do not listen to other viewpoints; we do not let go of beliefs even when God is trying to show us new understanding. When we say “That is just who I am, and I am not going to change,” we deny who is the potter and who is the clay. And we run the risk of losing God’s imprint. So how is the clay of your life, capable of being reshaped, reworked by the potter, or dry and hardened?

III.

Next Sunday my cousin, Sid Luck, will be with us in Sunday school and worship. Sid is a master potter. He will be turning pottery and teaching about us as we look at what it means to be made by the Potter’s Hand.

I like to watch Sid teach, particularly when he teaches children. I have seen him give a child a lump of clay to throw on the wheel. He lets the child work the clay as the wheel turns. And when the child becomes frustrated because the clay does not do right and nothing recognizable emerges, Sid takes the hands of the child and gently shows how to shape the clay.

And he teaches them a lesson. He tells them that no mistake, at this point, is

irreversible or unredeemable. If they apply a little too much pressure and the side caves in, so what? They can start again.

Sid says sometimes he starts out to make a bowl and ends up making a platter or a vase. He may start over many times. He just keeps working with the clay until a shape and a function evolve. “Await the hand of the Artist,” Irenaeus said, “who does all things in due season.”

#### IV.

Over in the New Testament, the apostle Paul asks, “Do you believe that you get to choose what God will make of you? No, it is God who chooses. Just as the potter chooses what will become of a lump of clay.”

We think we can be self-made. But it is God who is the potter, and God is not done with any of us yet, no matter how young or how old. God is continually remolding, reforming us; God’s creative Spirit at work in us throughout our entire life, even at the end. Can we grasp how just extraordinary, how truly remarkable that is?

God is reworking us, changing anger into forgiveness, hatred into compassion, hoarding into generosity, meanness into kindness, racism/bigotry/prejudice into understanding. So we can be the people God intends us to be.

#### Conclusion:

Perhaps you have come into this weekend feeling dried out, hardened from so many things. Seeing the images from Texas and worrying about the people. Worrying about the weather and another storm. Worrying about our nation, our differences and divisions. Maybe worrying about our economy and your finances. Or maybe about your family or your health.

Or maybe just weary from the change from a summer to a fall schedule, knowing the schedule of the next three months will build in momentum until it reaches a fast-paced December.

Take this with you into the fall: What we put in the offering plate is not the only thing we give to God. We live and work to the glory of God.

And the good news is God is continually reforming, remaking, remolding us into useful vessels for that work.

We are the clay; God is the potter. We are all the work of God’s hand. May it be so for each of us.