

An employee goes to see his supervisor. "Boss," he says, "we're doing some heavy housecleaning at home tomorrow, and my wife needs me to help with the attic and the garage, moving and hauling stuff." "Sorry, but we're short-handed," the boss replies. "I can't give you the day off." "Thanks, boss," says the employee. "I knew I could count on you!"

This is Labor Day Weekend, so today we honor those whose activities make the world keep going. These activities go beyond what we do to earn money, although that is often part of the reason we work. Martin Luther is credited with saying it's the people who cobble shoes, care for children and do a variety of necessary jobs that keep the world together. Work is part of the God-woven fabric of life.

Luther's doctrine of work, or vocation, is to love and serve our neighbors. Our work does not save us. God has already done that work. And since it is done, God doesn't need our work. But our neighbor does.

I just finished the book, *Them*, by Senator Ben Sasse from Nebraska. Raised in a Lutheran home, he says it is necessary for us to embrace the holy calling of what we do to love and serve our neighbor as foundational in a healthy community. These works of loving and serving give us—and our neighbors—dignity and purpose. And they point to God, who loves and serves so that we might do the same. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes "We live for the praise of God's glory." It is in what we do and say that our neighbors get a glimpse of what makes God so special—the intentional focus on others. We've been exploring the characteristics of the kingdom of God over the past several weeks. We hear Jesus say that small becomes large in this kingdom. In other words, our small acts have a big impact on bring about the realization that God's kingdom is all around us.

We've seen Jesus demonstrate that the kingdom is for everyone—even those we might not normally see or interact with. God's love is for people who approach life from different perspectives. And we need each other in order to see the vast extent of God's grace. This means that we experience that grace primarily in relationships, in community.

Remember when Jesus was asked what the greatest command was. The response, "You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, soul and strength. The second is love your neighbor as yourself." This horizontal dimension of love is fueled by the vertical dimension. John wrote to the churches, "We love, because God first loved us."

So today it is no surprise that Jesus teaches the disciples that their work includes reconciliation with one another, and he gives them a standard operating procedure to handle the inevitable differences that pop up in human relationships.

Standard operating procedures are common, even if we don't call them by that name. They are simply a series of actions that one goes through to accomplish a task. They are standard, regularly followed steps that insure nothing is missed and predictable

outcomes are achieved. For example, in the kitchen a standard operating procedure is called a recipe. You don't have to follow it exactly sometimes, but deviations from it might result in unexpected results. In other words, if you leave out one step or one component, your cake may fall, your Jello never set, your steak overcook.

S. O. P.s also show up in farming. You plow before you plant. You spray at a certain time and you always hope you can harvest before the snow starts flying. Occasionally you have to adjust a little, but you better not plan to harvest beans in May, or plant corn in August. The result will be less than effective.

And handling interpersonal problems in the church have an S. O. P., too. Jesus says start by going face-to-face-, one-on-one, and see if you can work the situation out. That means you don't go to a friend and tell them you're mad at someone. You go straight to the person. That's really the only way you're going to solve the problem.

If that doesn't work, THEN you bring a friend or two. They can listen to the conversation and help you both consider the other person's perspective and hopefully come to an agreement. It's best if you don't expect them to take sides, but to mediate, to expand both person's understanding of the other.

Now suppose one of the people in the situation is particularly set on their point of view. They're stubborn. If the problem is significant enough, Jesus tells the church to get involved. That is pretty serious. It means that the conflict is affecting how the community sees the functioning of the church. It impedes the community's faith in God. If that doesn't solve the problem and restore the relationship, then the church has to decide who is not living kingdom principles. They are excluded until an agreement can be reached and the relationship restored.

Did you catch Ezekiel's words about our responsibility to help people get beyond their self-centered ways and live into God's kingdom. God said to the prophet, "if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life."

The restoration of relationships, with each other and between the individual and God is the important, the vital labor of the church. Remember, start small—in God's kingdom, that is how BIG comes about. The loving act of seeking reconciliation between two people brings forth the fruit of the kingdom—it affects more than just the two people involved.

And there is nobody outside God's desire for grace and restoration. John 3:16 is important, but we also have to remember John 3:17 "For God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn it, but rather that it might be saved through him." Forgiveness is offered to all.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we thank you for the essential tasks you do in daily life to keep the wheels of community going—teaching, farming, shopkeeping, governing, child rearing, and so many other ways you make life happen. And we encourage you to keep the Standard Operating Procedure of restoring relationships in that labor. Former Nebraska Synod Bishop David deFreese always said, “Conflict is inevitable. Combat is optional.” Let’s live in peace.