22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time “What does success mean to you?”

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Since 1894, our country has celebrated the first Monday of September as Labor Day, a day of gratitude to celebrate the workers of our country. The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of work in this way, “By means of his labor man participates in the work of creation. Work united to Christ can be redemptive.” (CCC 2460) I find that insight beautiful and it interesting that, even though our Country has a holiday once a year to celebrate to value of human labor, our reverence for the third commandment to honor the Sabbath gives Christians a Labor Day every week! What a gift it is to have a moral duty to rest one day a week with God and family.

As we think about our job or vocation this Labor Day, I think it is helpful to reflect on how our work celebrates our talents, enables us to pay our bills, to give us the ability to care for our family and to be charitable in our community. On the other hand, I think we can sometimes fall into the trap around Labor Day of judging our successes by things we have rather than who we are. I think the Gospel challenges us to ask ourselves this Labor Day: As I take this opportunity to pause from work, how do I define success? How do I define a "successful" life?

And so I turned to my dictionary. Success is defined by Oxford American Dictionary as, "a favorable outcome, doing what was desired or attempted, the attainment of wealth or fame or position." It seems like a reasonable and simple definition. Upon reflection, however, I started thinking how can we judge success in this manner unless we have a basis for comparison? We cannot define the word “success” unless we can point to something that is clearly not “success” for the word to have any meaning. If the Seahawks win, it means another team will lose (any argument there)? Companies do not succeed without besting their competition. Employees do not get hired without other applicants being turned down. A political party does not win an election without the other political party losing. On the other hand, areas in the world suffering from catastrophe, such as what we are seeing in Texas, do not recover unless enough people are willing to give, which means voluntarily losing resources. Programs in the community that require volunteers, such as we have here at the parish, do not thrive unless parishioners sacrifice enough their own personal time to make it happen. Winners, losers, givers and receivers, we all know that is how the secular world works. I find it interesting, however, with how we as a people define “success” in life and how this definition measures up with the Gospel.

Remember last week, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" This is the most fundamental question we can ask in the Spirit life: who is Jesus for me? Peter shined like the prince of apostles he is by answering correctly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." This week we discover that after Peter’s bright and shiny moment, he simultaneously answered incorrectly. He got the words right, but he didn’t know what Jesus’ role as Messiah meant and what being successful as Messiah entails in
Jesus’ mind. This makes the word “success” a bit more complicated than what we get from the dictionary.

And so, how does Jesus define success? Jesus defines success this way, "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." How about that for a reflection for Labor Day? There are so many people who can view their occupations as a cross to carry and not every kid here is excited about going back to school. On the other hand, I think it is good to recognize that our dictionaries and Jesus define success differently, don't they? The dictionary I think requires a basis of comparison for success, namely someone else’s failure. Jesus defines success with denying ourselves and carrying a cross, something viewed upon by his society as mark of true failure.

And so, as we approach Labor Day, it is appropriate to ask ourselves, how do I define success? How do you define success? In our society, you won’t see the value of denying ourselves celebrated very often. In our society, people who have bigger homes, better cars, better clothes, the latest video game system, are seen as somehow more successful. Again, there is that temptation to evaluate our successes by the things we have rather than who we are. This Labor Day, we are invited to define success by the measure we interpret Jesus’ words to his disciples today, "whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."