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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost  
October 19, 2008

**1 Thessalonians 1.1-10**  
Matthew 22.15-22

### Labor Of Love

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

—1 Thessalonians 1.2-3

Even though I'm from the west coast, I think I have a little bit of New England puritan in my soul. I've always been drawn toward the appeal of Christian *duty*. Though I don't always respond as I should, I want my faith to *engage* me, to *ask something* of me, to make *demands* on my life. When I sit in the pew, as I did a couple of weeks ago at Memorial Church in Harvard, I want to be challenged—maybe even roughed up a bit by the gospel.

I get inspired when I think of the tough old farmers and settlers who worked and sacrificed to build this church and who, no doubt, made darn sure their children attended and learned the basics of the faith. I worry about the future of Christianity when I see the rather striking self-absorption of my own generation—often asking, “What’s in it for me,” and “How does this church ‘meet my needs’” before looking around and asking, “What needs to be done,” or “How can I help?”

The language of duty and obligation seems odd in our culture. I heard recently that the average American sees 350,000 television commercials by the age of 21. We are bombarded with consumerist messages of need and want. Rarely are we asked to give. My own simmering hunger for the message of duty and service causes me to love hymns that many of my contemporaries find old-fashioned to the point of being laughable. This morning's middle hymn is an excellent example. John Bunyan, the great puritan (and author of *Pilgrim's Progress*) pens a wonderful poem of Christian delight in the pilgrimage of duty:

He who would valiant be  
(I'm modern enough to add: She who would valiant be)  
'Gainst all disaster,  
Let him in constancy  
Follow the Master  
There's no discouragement  
Shall make him once relent  
His first avowed intent  
To be a pilgrim     (*Pilgrim Hymnal*, 371)

Such steadfastness and resolve seems especially well-suited to this season. As we consider our annual giving to the church, I believe with all my heart that we can do better than we're doing, that we consistently fail to push ourselves as hard as we ought, that our chronic search for bargain-brand discipleship does harm to our souls. Sometimes I think that if I could just line us up with our pledge cards and march around the room to the tune of "He Who Would Valiant Be" we could double the mission and ministry of our church!

In this frame of mind, I turn to the New Testament, to the Epistle Lesson appointed for this Sunday in the midst of "Stewardship Season." And, *fortunately*, I find that that the Apostle Paul is addressing precisely my concern. But, *unfortunately*, he points out that I've got it all wrong—or at least mostly wrong. Praising the Thessalonians for their devotion and dedication, he writes:

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

—1 Thessalonians 1.2-3

Being a Christian, according to Paul, is not about grimly accepting our duty and marching to the steady beat of responsibility. There's duty, all right, but it is a different kind of duty. The Christian life is a labor of love.

Paul's words to the church fairly bristle with the language of love and gratitude and joy: "labor of love...steadfastness of hope...beloved by God...you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit." (verses 3-6) The plodding faithfulness of John Bunyan's hymn captures *part* of the story, but not all of it. It misses the delight. It marches, but it doesn't dance. Our Christian living and our Christian giving are expressions of overflowing love—something that we can't help but do if we really hear the gospel.

Once in a while, we see this love in human form. When a woman cares tenderly for her partner of decades, now ill and nearing death. The work can be difficult and tiring—bathing and feeding, repeated questions from the absent short term memory...day after day. But it isn't a grim duty. It is a labor of love. When a parent cleans up after a small child with the stomach flu. Not fun, to be sure—but it *is* different when you love the one who has made the mess. Making a special gift for a sweetheart—many tedious hours at a workbench can be pure pleasure when the face of the beloved is held in the mind's eye. For those with loving spirits, life affords many opportunities for joyful service.

In Jesus Christ we are given a call to conversion. We are asked to change our lives. We are expected to become more compassionate, more generous, more thoughtful than we were before we heard the gospel. It is a tough change. It takes work. It takes support from brothers and sisters and Christ. But most of all, it is a labor of love—the grateful response of hearts touched by a love that overshadows even the duty it evokes.