



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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## LIVE LONG AND PROSPER

THE VERY REV. DR. STEVEN L. THOMASON

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 24, 2017

JONAH 3:10-4:11; PSALM 145:1-8; PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30; MATTHEW 20:1-16



“Live long and prosper.”  
“Live long and prosper.”

for God, El Shaddai, and Shekinah, God’s  
spiritual presence, and shalom, God’s peace.<sup>ii</sup>

Leonard Nimoy first spoke those words as Spock on an episode in the original television series Star Trek that aired fifty years ago this month, but years later, in his autobiography, he revealed the origins of this gesture.

He recalls as a child his grandfather taking him to the synagogue where he saw the rabbi make a double-handed gesture while offering a blessing in God’s name. In the Hebrew alphabet, three upstrokes at angles represents the letter “Shin” which binds together a name



Live long and prosper is meant to be a blessing, echoing the shalom aloykum, and saalam alaykum...and by extension, our offering the peace of Christ to one another a few minutes from now. And the open palm is a universal gesture of peace.

But what does it mean to prosper? What does it mean to enjoy prosperity?

Sadly, the term as often used in our modern American culture has come to mean an accumulation of wealth or acquiring material goods, but it is more appropriately meant to describe human flourishing, which comes as an expression of life filled with joy and meaning and purpose. Indeed, we speak of enjoying prosperity—it evokes joy.

Theologian Matthew Fox contends that to experience this prosperity, we must distinguish between jobs we hold and work. A job may pay the bills, may even make you a lot of money, but it will not bring the prosperous sense of joy and meaning unless it is work. A job is transactional, paid to do a task or provide a service—nothing wrong with that in and of itself, but it will not nourish our spirit unless we translate meaning and purpose onto the job, which is when it becomes work.

We were created to work on behalf of something larger than ourselves. We can even speak of everything in the universe working—planets, stars, animals, plants—everything works in the course of connection that serves a purpose in the whole. Everything is at work

being what it is created to be. Humans are no different.

Unemployment is a human invention tied to lack of job, not work. In this way, it is a justice issue—it is incongruent with the design of creation and its inclination toward prosperous joy.

Even in childhood or retirement, we can speak of the work that brings joy—we play hard, we work at our hobbies, we work as volunteers, we can enjoy the satisfying exhaustion of physical labor in the garden or on the mountain climb. In the monastic tradition, the invitation is to find meaning even in the drudgery of dish washing or sweeping or other menial tasks. Work becomes a spiritual discipline.

Some of the laborers in this parable we just heard Jesus tell couldn't quite see that they'd been invited into deeply meaningful work—the work of harvesting in the vineyard—proverbially the work of God's kingdom, or creations consummate design—they couldn't see their place in that because they saw it as a job, a transaction of money exchanged for performing the task.

Again, nothing wrong with that, but they stifled any potential joy when their envy demanded that their world be built upon a myth of scarcity, that if others were paid the same even while doing less.

We all can go there in a heartbeat. I've been known to calculate how much a baseball

pitcher makes per pitch when he's paid \$25 million a year. One pitch brings him as much as I earn in six months. That's not fair!

As a family doctor, when a plumber charged more for an hour's work to fix my kitchen sink than I earned in an hour practicing medicine, with all my professional education under my belt, I would sneer as I paid the bill. But in truth, I never felt I was underpaid as a doctor. Not once. It just wasn't fair that he got paid as much.

It's hard not to go to that dark place when it comes to money and the power we give over to it.

But then Jesus comes along and invites us to let that green-eyed myth of scarcity go, untie the lease that tethers us to it, and relax our grips into an open palmed sense of peace and joy and meaning and purpose.

Jesus speaks a lot about money, more than anything else really, because he knows just how much power it can have in our lives. He speaks of letting go our tight grip on it, to be free. That is our work. That is our path to living long and prosper, if by living long we are speaking of eternal life to be experienced right here and now, as union with the spiritual shalom, salaam of God's design for all creation. If by prospering, we are speaking of our own flourishing and that of others who benefit from our work.

Of course, we must all earn a living, but our work is to keep a loose hold on the money and

all it represents for us, as laborers in the vineyard.

I'm mindful that these are troubled times, what with devastating storms, earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars pricking our ears about every day. I'm mindful that a half century ago, when Leonard Nimoy landed on that blessing, this nation and the world were in troubled times also.

We need more blessings in the world, as antidotes to the bellicose energies that abound, and I believe the Church, and specifically this community of Saint Mark's Cathedral, are primed to lead the way. You could say the Church was created for times such as this. The work we are about in this place is seated on that firm conviction.

We launch our annual appeal for financial commitments today, to support the work this community, this church, does in God's name. I believe wholeheartedly it is our work to support this community of which we are a part, it is our work, not our job, not a duty, and when we see it in that light, we find it to be deeply meaningful, a source of great joy, and an inspiring center of connection. I invite you into it once more with renewed resolve. Know that I am recommitting to that today also.

I am utterly convinced we were created to give, to steward what we have as gifts meant to be shared, not in some transactional quid pro quo, but because in giving we find connection, we find meaning, we find joy, and ultimately,

it is the path along which we find God in our lives.

I pray you: Let the envious heart of competition and comparison over money melt away;

I pray you: let the gripping fear of scarcity be released from your life;

I pray you: be open to the work into which God is inviting you in these troubled times, and know that you need not engage it alone. You are welcome here. We are glad you are here, and this church is the richer for your presence.

For you, I give thanks to God.

**Matthew 20: 1-16** [*Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*]



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

*Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!*

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<sup>i</sup> Astronaut on the International Space Station offering the Vulcan blessing to Planet Earth the day following Leonard Nimoy's death.

<sup>ii</sup> The mosaic is from a synagogue in Enschede in the Netherlands. It is believed that the spiritual presence of God (Shekinah) slips through the split fingers to touch us.