

# Labor Day

September 6, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Ecclesiasticus 38:27–32; Psalm 107:1–9; Matthew 6:19–24*

When I served at Saint Luke’s in Baton Rouge, I learned that Independence Day became an annual commemoration in Vicksburg, Mississippi, only after World War II. This town surrendered to the Union Army on July 4, 1863.<sup>1</sup> In seminary, I remember being surprised when I learned that 1789 and the 1892 American Prayer Books made no provision for a commemoration of Independence Day. I suspect something similar was at work with the introduction of Labor Day to the Prayer Book.

In his *Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, Massey Shepherd wrote, “The Proposed Book of 1786 contained ‘A Form of Prayer and Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the inestimable Blessings of Religious and Civil Liberty’ to be used on July 4th.”<sup>2</sup> The first Prayer Book did not include it. In 1786, the Reverend William White was rector of Christ and St. Peter’s Church in Philadelphia. In 1787, he and Samuel Prevoost, rector of Trinity Church in New York, would travel to England to become, respectively, the bishop of Pennsylvania and the bishop of New York. Unlike Samuel Seabury, Connecticut’s first bishop, White and Prevoost supported American independence.

In his memoirs, Bishop White explained why he opposed the commemoration. He wrote, “The greater majority of the [Anglican] clergy could not have used the service, without subjecting themselves to ridicule and censure.”<sup>3</sup>

I learned on the United States Department of Labor website, “The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mississippiconfederates.wordpress.com/2018/03/14/vicksburg-and-the-4th-of-july/>, (accessed 6 September 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 263.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

York City, in accordance with the plans of the Central Labor Union. The Central Labor Union held its second Labor Day holiday just a year later, on September 5, 1883. By 1894, 23 more states had adopted the holiday, and on June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed a law making the first Monday in September of each year a national holiday.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1928, in addition to adding Independence Day to the calendar and removing the word “obey” from a woman’s marital vow, there was a collect titled “For Every Man in his Work.” I suspect that a Labor Day commemoration was controversial in the 1920s. Though canceled for this year, the West Indian Day Parade is held on Labor Day in Brooklyn. I’m sure there have been Labor Day parades in Manhattan on a Saturday since I came to New York in 1999, but the internet was no help in sorting it out.

I want to read that collect new to the 1928 book. I think it could have been labeled as the collect for Labor Day:

*Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who declares thy glory and showest forth thy handiwork in the heavens and in the earth; Deliver us, we beseech thee, in our several callings, from the service of mammon, that we may do the work which thou givest us to do, in truth, in beauty, and in righteousness with singleness of heart as thy servants, and to the benefit of our fellow men: for the sake of him who came among us as one that serveth, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*<sup>5</sup>

Sadly, the new versions of this collect in both traditional and contemporary versions omit the petition that God “deliver us . . . in our several calling, from the service of mammon.”<sup>6</sup>

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/general/laborday/history>, (accessed 6 September 2021).

<sup>5</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 44.

<sup>6</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 44.