

Pentecost 15, 9.5.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

“Believe and Work”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Labor Day weekend marks the end of summer and tomorrow, Labor Day, is a national holiday recognizing the achievements and work of all who labor for this nation. The first Labor Day celebration occurred in New York City on 5 September 1882, and in 1894 President Grover Cleveland created this holiday by signing a bill into law that Congress had passed.

Though Labor Day weekend has become synonymous with the end of summer and the start of the cultural fall schedule, it is appropriate to pause and remember the labors of many on behalf of all, both here and abroad. Those who produce grains and care for livestock; those who harvest, pack and distribute foods that reach our tables; those who care for the sick and the dying in hospitals and hospices; those who serve and protect the public in the police and fire departments; those who teach in schools and universities at every level; those who distribute and market goods and services of every kind; those who mine and drill minerals and petroleum; those who manufacture products of every kind; those who design and build; those who serve domestically and abroad in the armed services; those who serve at every level of government, and many others.

Yet, imagine with me if we were not the recipients of the labors of so many. Imagine how perilous and uncertain our lives would be. Each one of us labors for others, while also benefiting from the labors of many. So as we observe Labor Day, it is perhaps serendipitous that the readings in the lectionary are also about the connection between faith and work, between believing and laboring as Christians for others in this world.

There are really two things going on in today’s readings. The first is the link between faith and work. The Letter of James says quite simply, “*So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*” What James meant is expressed in verses 14-16, “*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?*”

James is quite rightly telling us that faith is given to us for the purpose of being active in labors of love for others. Another way to say it is that our faith is to bear the fruit of good works for others.

The second thing we notice in today’s readings is the nature of Christ’s body the church; there is

no social hierarchy of believers for all are one in Christ. The rich and the poor are all sisters and brothers of one another and of Jesus. Again, James make this very clear, reminding us that God has chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom. James even calls Jesus' command, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" – "the royal law."

In other words, Christian life is about living out the grace of faith through good works for one's neighbor. Of course, we have heard this all before, and yet we also know how hard it is in the rough and tumble of daily life to move from faith to works of love for others. We know how hard it is to treat others without discrimination or distinction. All of us have fallen short of the royal law of Christ's love and all of us continually need the grace of faith. Today we realize that faith and work are inseparably linked, and as Christ's body, we are sisters and brothers together in mission.

It would be remiss of me to ignore Martin Luther when preaching on this text from James. It is true that Luther referred to James as a "straw epistle" because God saves by grace through faith without any need of works that justify us. Luther was focused solely on God's free gift of grace that is received through faith. What is crucial for us to remember is that Luther lived in a medieval age in which works were thought to be even more important than faith is. So Luther rightly opposed the idea that one could earn salvation through works alone.

What made Luther such a revolutionary was his rediscovery of the gospel that we are made righteous by God's free gift of grace through faith. God's free gift of grace creates faith in each of us, grace that forgives and frees us from sin so that we can live and work for others. What James is describing in today's reading is not works that will save us, rather works that flow outward from the saving grace of faith.

Words I first encountered as a young man have continued to speak to me: "Pray as if everything depended upon God; work as if everything depended upon you." Now these words are attributed to both St. Augustine and also to Ignatius de Loyola. I have never been able to track down the original source of these words, but they have stayed with me over the years. "Pray as if everything depended upon God; work as if everything depended upon you" – describes the connection between faith and work. We bring everything to God in prayer, believing that a just and loving God searches our hearts, loves and forgives us. It is faith active in us that drives us to work, to share our time, talent and treasure, not for our own ends or purposes, but because God has need of our labors.

A moment ago, I asked you to imagine a society in which people did not cooperate or work together using their skills and vocations for a common good. So also I invite you to consider what

the church would be like if it did not have Jesus' command to move from faith in him to love of neighbor. What if Jesus never came down from the mountaintop of the transfiguration to preach, heal and accept others? What if Jesus stayed on the mountaintop with his disciples, never climbing back down to our everyday? What if Jesus was never sacrificed for the whole world on the cross? You see, Jesus' own life is the example *par excellence* of moving from faith and obedience to work and service for others.

Jesus' resurrection moved the disciples from fear to faith and from faith into new ways of working in the world. Jesus met Peter by the seashore, asking him, "*Do you love me more than these?*" It is a question Jesus also asks each of us. "Do you love me more than anything else in this world?" What do you love and place first in you life? Peter answered Jesus, "*Yes, Lord, you know I love you.*" Jesus replied to Peter, "*Feed my sheep*" thus giving him new work and a new identity.

In this encounter of Jesus and Peter on the seashore, Jesus moved his disciples from believing in and loving Jesus into people who love and care for others. This is what James is after in today's lesson; we cannot say we love our neighbor and wish them well if they remain hungry and naked. We cannot say, "*Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,*" if we do not help their daily needs.

Imagine a church that did not care for the poor, the sick, the stranger, the refugee, the imprisoned, for the weak, the discriminated, and the vulnerable. Imagine a church without a social conscience empowered by Jesus' command to care for "the least of these," to "feed my sheep," and to go to all people with Good News that seeks to care for their spiritual and physical needs. This metaphor of the church as Christ's body is very powerful. In a moment in the Eucharist, we will be fed with Christ own body. Christ feeds us spiritually and physically at this table, empowering our hands and voices to care for others.

Today's gospel reading is a wonderful reminder of how Jesus worked at the foot of the mountain, because that is where humanity lives. In meeting the Syrophenician woman, we also meet ourselves, because she was also a gentile. Jesus had traveled into the land of foreigners, a foretaste of his church's mission to all people in the world – to gentiles and foreigners like us. Jesus is always going beyond humanly created borders and boundaries to create new human community around his table. The church gathered around crumbs of grace is a visible sign of new community in Christ.

Jesus' fame had spread even to the gentile communities outside of Galilee. This woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter. Their conversation is well known, and yet the Syrophenician woman, not to be deterred, responded to Jesus saying that even the gentiles received the crumbs of grace that

fell from God's table. In the Syrophenician woman, we also see ourselves, because we too are fed from the Lord's table, and commanded to feed others from Christ's table of grace. Jesus recognized her faith and responded by healing her daughter.

Jesus, always on the move, returned from the region of Tyre to the Decapolis, and healed a deaf man with a speech impediment. The man's physical healing was also a spiritual healing because he could now both hear the good news as well as proclaim it plainly.

Yet imagine with me again if Jesus had simply stayed on the mountaintop and waited for mystics and seekers to come looking for him. The Jesus we know does not wait for us, but goes out into the world looking for us, going beyond all divisions and borders to meet us. In Jesus, we see the babe whose parents carried him as refugees fleeing the unjust rule of King Herod. Jesus knew life beyond the borders of Israel; he had suffered need and knew the needs of both Jew and Gentile. In Jesus, we see the compassion and grace of God that is the very center of our life as Christ's body, the church.

Isaiah's words today are also ours: "*Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.*" Jesus fulfills the words of Psalm 146: "*The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow.*" In the person of Jesus we see modeled before us the work he entrusts to us his body, the church.

This weekend as we remember the labors of many, we also remember that Christ first labors with grace in each of us. At the end of today's gospel, people zealously proclaimed what Jesus had done for them. They were astounded beyond measure, and told others. This is also what we are called to do; we are to zealously proclaim and work for Christ in this world.

Faith is given to us for a purpose. Faith is not simply a mountaintop experience removed from the world; faith is the living strength and courage to work with Jesus in this world *for others*. Imagine St. Mark's without a Soup Kitchen, without Room in the Inn, without collections of food for Loaves and Fishes, or without our current school supplies drive for children in need. Imagine if St. Mark's did not welcome the stranger and work with Refugee Support Services, or if this church did not care for the weak and discriminated in our community. Jesus gives us faith to work in this world, so that through believing and working, the God's grace might create new human community in this world.

Believe and work. Your life, your hands, and your voices matter. Christ needs you. Believe and work for Christ. Amen.