

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford  
September 2, 2018 Labor Day Weekend  
Texts: James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 21-23  
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Grievances against the government and big money made the summer seem even hotter. People frustrated because they could not earn a living wage no matter how hard they tried, no matter how many hours they worked, took to the streets to demand justice. In some cities, vandalism broke out as the people's anger intensified. Across the country 30 people were killed by law enforcement that summer.

The year was 1894. Appalled by the abuse of power that led to the deaths of striking railroad workers, reconciliation with the labor movement became a national priority and President Grover Cleveland declared Labor Day a national holiday that September.

From there the labor movement went on, eventually securing benefits and rights that many of us, in both white collar and blue collar jobs take for granted today; weekends off, vacations, holidays, workers compensation, disability and health insurance. But what, you might ask, does Labor Day have to do with our faith?

If he were with us today, I believe Jesus' brother James would say that Labor Day has everything to do with our faith. James was one of the pillars of the ancient church. From the portion of his letter which was read today, "Be do-ers of the word and not merely hearers." James railed against faith that was too passive and encouraged action on behalf of those who suffered. "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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

The social gospel movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century took passages such as these in the letter of James to heart. They applied Christian ethics to the issues of their day. They worked to alleviate social problems such as economic inequality, racial tensions, slums, pollution, child labor, and inadequate labor unions. They practiced what they prayed, Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. It was this movement which brought forth the saying, "What would Jesus do?"

Labor Day reflects the prophetic concern for justice. Scripture consistently affirms the rights of laborers. In Luke 10, "For laborers deserve their wages." Economics matters in the biblical tradition. What people eat and where they live is a spiritual as well as an economic and political issue. Disparity of income and power is a recurring biblical concern: the plight of widows, the poor and the immigrant are continually lifted up. In the psalm we are reminded that "God cares for the stranger; God sustains the orphan and widow." In the epistle of James, the prejudice which favors the rich over the poor is condemned. In our gospel today, Jesus

chides those who miss the point of the confession of their faith –or their baptismal covenant- Those who might follow the letter of the law, but miss the heart of the matter. Who are blind to the ‘disconnect’ between the values they profess and the way they actually behave toward others.

How does our faith inform our actions? How do we bring what we affirm on Sunday morning into all that we think and do: into our places of work and into our response to the needs of the world?

What we do when we leave this building on Sunday morning matters to God. Our actions on Monday through Saturday matter to God. Our labors matter to God. In 2018, no less than during the slavery in the Egypt of the Pharaohs, God hears the cries of God’s people. In the twenty first century, no less than the first century, the mistreatment of the foreigner, the abuse of power and authority, and the oppression of workers and the poor grieves the heart of God.

Yes, Labor Day is more than a day off marking the end of summer. On Labor Day we give thanks and recognize the importance of the work of human hands. We recognize the contributions that average workers have made to the well being of our country. We lift up all occupations and affirm the importance and dignity of all kinds of labor. We give thanks for all who have put their faith to work on behalf of the vulnerable.

Labor Day is also a time for considering those things which we can do, in response to God’s grace, to bring God’s kingdom, God’s vision for the world into being; not just on Sunday mornings, but every day of our lives. Giving and working so that our neighbors have food and clothing at Loaves and Fishes and the Food Pantry of North Branford is as much a part of our faith as our Sunday liturgy. Making sandwiches for Chapel on the Green or making prayer shawls to give to those who are sick or home bound is as important as our daily prayer practices.

It is why we are working to update our kitchen as well as our sanctuary, so that we can continue to use all of Zion’s spaces for the glory of God and for the well being of all God’s people. Our works of love cannot be separated from our faith. They are the reflection of how our faith has transformed our hearts and our lives.

Let us pray. Loving God, inspire and strengthen us to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord. Amen.