

One Labor

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
September 4, 2022

1 Cor. 15:58 (NIV)

⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

James 2:14-18, 26 (CEB)

¹⁴ My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? ¹⁵ Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. ¹⁶ What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.

¹⁸ Someone might claim, "You have faith and I have action." But how can I see your faith apart from your actions? Instead, I'll show you my faith by putting it into practice in faithful action.... ²⁶ As the lifeless body is dead, so faith without actions is dead.

For years the electronic calendar on the church's software has been the calendar I've used to keep track of all my appointments: church-related and personal. Obviously, in about a month I'll no longer have access to that, so I needed to set up a new electronic calendar—one not using church software. I did that a few weeks ago.

My calendar used to be chock-full of appointments: church meetings, community activities, presbytery commitments. Alongside those would be family events, social gatherings, medical appointments, grooming appointments for Sassy the Big Dog... everything was on that calendar. Whether viewing it on the computer or on my phone, my calendar was as colorful as a dish of candy, what with all the various color-coded appointments.

The crowdedness of my calendar did ease up a bit with the arrival of the pandemic and its effect on public gatherings. But after next month, when it comes to my calendar the cupboard's pretty bare. That's neither good nor bad; it's just different. But someone has observed that "ours is a world where we seem to have construed our individual worth by reference to our busyness, as if... how busy we are is an index of our importance and goodness."¹ I may have done that sometimes—talk about how full my calendar was—but I didn't mean it as a bragging point. Indeed, I know I used to cringe when a church member would say, "I don't want to bother you because you must be so busy," and I would think, "You are my business—you're who I'm supposed to be busy with!"

On your calendar like on mine, this Monday is marked off. "Labor Day," it says. We don't really observe Labor Day in the life of the church. It's a civic holiday, not a religious one. While the church might note certain federal holidays, Labor Day is

¹ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X. Nashville: Abington Press, 2002, 994

different from, say, Memorial Day or Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Those holidays have a spiritual dimension to them as we remember sacrifice made for the common good, whether by hundreds of thousands of service men and women, or by Dr. King and the countless disciples he inspired to prod our nation to become “a more perfect union.”

But while most holidays are set aside to commemorate people of fame and achievement, Labor Day honors the average Joe and Jane. It’s an “annual celebration of the social and economic achievements of American workers...” contributing to “America’s strength, prosperity, and well-being.”² Labor Day doesn’t single out individual actions; it acknowledges the collective work of the community, the nation, through the years.

The New Testament’s Letter of James, reputed to have been written by the brother of Jesus, is a writing famous for commending labor, work, action. James argues that a true follower of Jesus would not merely offer pious words of sympathy for the poor, the diseased, the abandoned, the oppressed. James would contend that “To sit in an assembly of worship ‘in the name of Jesus’ and to [disregard] the very poor whom Jesus embraced is to confuse correct liturgy with authentic faith.”³ For James, caring for those in need is the mark of true religion.⁴

The Letter of James is the source of the familiar scriptural admonition, “Faith without works is dead,” or in a more modern translation we heard today from the Common English Bible, “...faith is dead when it doesn’t result in faithful activity.” James’ point is “that the actions reveal the attitude and make it alive.”⁵ Yes, faith requires work; faith requires action.

The reality is that not everyone can do the same kind or same amount or the same intensity of work. Just weeks ago we recalled the apostle Paul’s familiar words from 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 that “...there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”⁶

Come to think of it, acknowledging the collective work of the community the way the Labor Day holiday does... that collective effort *is* something the church honors. Think of the tasks you want to achieve as a congregation in the months ahead:

- identifying and selecting leadership for the transitional period before you;
- evaluating what pandemically-postponed programs and priorities you want to resume;
- discerning the impact you want your church to make in the community, in society and in the world, and what you’ll need to do to make that come to fruition....

That will be the result of a collective effort of the whole church, not the task of one transitional pastor, or even fifteen elders on the Session. As a congregation, your faithful commitment will be embodied by your faithful activity.

² <https://www.dol.gov/general/laborday/history>, accessed 8/23/2022

³ *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. XII. Nashville: Abington Press, 1998, 200

⁴ James 1:27; *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. XII. Nashville: Abington Press, 1998, 196

⁵ *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. XII. Nashville: Abington Press, 1998, 197

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 NRSV

In that passage from 1 Corinthians Chapter 12, St. Paul also reminds us that “...the Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.”⁷ In other words, it's different for different folks. That's true for us.

- Work schedules, family responsibilities, involvement with other charitable organizations, and civic commitments all mean that not everyone has the same amount of time or schedule flexibility to devote to tasks of ministry, service, mission outreach, and compassionate care.
- Also, some people have no problem getting around, while for others it's a challenge to get out and about.
- And of course we know that temperaments differ: some people tend to be reserved and contemplative, while others are more outgoing and impulsive.

It's this kind of diversity in experiences and abilities and interests that Paul recognized when he described the church as “a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts.”⁸

But God's Spirit draws together different parts of the body so the whole body will flourish. Maybe this will illustrate what I mean.

Every year on the night before Labor Day we travel to a Presbyterian church amid the fields of western Ohio for a festival of Welsh hymn-singing. It's in the farming community of Venedocia, about seven miles southeast of the Van Wert county seat. There in the un-air-conditioned sanctuary many out-of-towners sit, sweaty-shoulder-to-sweaty-shoulder, with the men – and women – who farm the fields that stretch to the horizon in every direction. Yes, people from near and far, different voices, different abilities come together to sing God's praise. But there's something else.

You can tell as you drive through the countryside that those farmers are proud of their work. Their barns glow with fresh paint. The lawns in front of their tidy houses are neatly mown, as is the grass growing in the strip between their fields and the county road. Each family takes pride in what they're able to do with their property.

But at harvest time, the individuality gives way. They evaluate the growth and the moisture content of their crops, then they get together, coordinate their calendars and pool their equipment so they can help one another bring in the harvest as efficiently as possible.

They come together for this crucial work in the same way that God's Spirit draws together different parts of the body so the whole church will flourish.

Let me offer another brief example of faith being demonstrated by the faithful activity of the group. The setting for this story is about as different as can be from western Ohio's farming country. A Facebook user named Gregory Locke tells of this unsettling but encouraging experience. He wrote,

I got on the subway in Manhattan tonight and found a swastika on every advertisement and every window. The train was silent as everyone stared at each other, uncomfortable and unsure what to do....

⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:7 Good News Translation

⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:12 Good News Translation

One guy got up and said, “Hand sanitizer gets rid of Sharpie. We need alcohol.” He found some tissues and got to work.

I’ve never seen so many people simultaneously reach into their bags and pockets looking for tissues and Purell™. Within about two minutes, all the Nazi symbolism was gone.⁹

Like farmers harvesting soybeans, those subway riders came together to clear the car of the cruel racist graffiti. Their faith in humanity was demonstrated by their faithful activity. That kind of faithful activity —joined in by all in some way or another — that is how Paul envisions the church working. Paul envisions a church where “all the deeds of the community, and indeed all the actions of all the individuals within it, are coordinated into a shared work and a common labor in the Lord.”¹⁰

This congregation has work ahead of it: faithful activity that embodies your faith, since as James wrote, “faith without works is dead.” And while different people will do different things in different ways and to different degrees, that’s as it should be, as Paul wrote, “the Spirit’s presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.”

To close this Labor Day sermon about laboring for the Lord’s sake, I quote the epitaph on a tombstone in Yorkshire which offers these benedictory words:

God give me work
Till my life shall end
And life
Till my work is done.¹¹

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⁹ From a Facebook post by Gregory Locke, February 6, 2017 at <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/search?keywords=Work&bookId=&topicId=&searchType=6&page=2&ip=20> accessed 8/23/2022

¹⁰ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. X. Nashville: Abington Press, 2002, 991a

¹¹ <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/search?keywords=Work&bookId=&topicId=&searchType=6>