

## WORKING FAITH

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

David B. Keller

September 6, 2015

TEXT: James 2:14, 17 “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith and do not have works? . . . Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

PURPOSE: To call us to live a faith in God that is realized in works of love and service.

---

Here we are on Labor Day weekend, the unofficial end to summer which unofficially began back on Memorial Day. Both are national holidays, officially honoring our war dead and our workers. Although these days, they seem to have more to do with recreation and sales. Isn't it fun to think of all the money New Hampshire is getting this weekend from all those folks coming to us from away?

Labor Day was first observed in the 1880's. For a long time, it provided opportunities for organized labor to parade in a show of unity and strength. But with our work force less organized, and with the influence of unions declining, even that is not such a big deal anymore. That said, I think it remains appropriate, especially during this pandemic for us to use the weekend to show appreciation and respect for workers, especially workers whose work directly benefits all of us.

One summer during my college days, I worked in a factory that made hamburger and hot dog rolls. It was a rough and tumble place. It introduced me to the seedier side of society. We worked especially long hours running thousands of packs of rolls on the days before Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day. I still remember how we wondered if the people eating their hot dogs and hamburgers had any idea what we put up with for them to have nice fresh buns.

But beyond the bakers, think about people whose work the pandemic taught us to regard as 'essential.' Think about the people in healthcare – the folks working today and tomorrow in hospitals and nursing homes, and who literally risked their lives to care for people during this pandemic. Think about people serving in public safety and law enforcement. Okay, Lindy works for state government, so I do have considerable extra sympathy for government workers, but think about all the people working in so many aspects of public service. In the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, the author says that “it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” (Ecc. 3:13) There's lots of toil that isn't all that pleasant, but any kind of work becomes much more tolerable when it's respected and appreciated. On this weekend, I say that expressing our appreciation is a very good thing for all of us to do.

The passage from the Letter of James assigned for today talks about work. To

be precise, it talks about ‘works’, by which the author means deeds which prove that a person is a person of faith. The question for James, and certainly still for us is, how can you tell that a person has faith apart from the person’s actions? I once served a church which was financially supported by a few families who were bigwigs in that community’s construction industry. Those folk came to worship most Sundays, when they weren’t at their lake houses or their beach houses. They could be counted on to be on the official board that ran that church. By those measures, we might think of them as good Christian people. But a person who worked for one of their companies started coming to our church. He told me how badly they treated their contract workers, and how they looked for ways to hide the cheap materials they used in their construction. I remember him saying to me that their behavior was not the way he thought a follower of Jesus ought to behave.

In that church, I had a confirmation class made up of four of the children from the bigwig families, and one child who was the son of a mother on welfare and a no-good no-show father. That young man was really committed to the process of confirmation. The other kids, while very nice, saw confirmation as a social accomplishment. When it came time for a post-confirmation party, one of the bigwig parents arranged for it to be held in an exclusive club in town where the poor family was like a fish out of water. James wrote: “has not God chosen the poor of the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you?” (James 2:5,6) I can’t say I even want to remember how I preached on that passage in that church.

James is insistent: faith apart from works is dead. Apart from what we do, there is no way for our faith to be attested. And the works which count most, as far as James is concerned, are works which show care and respect for people who are poor or vulnerable. Even the demons, James wrote, believe in God. What matters is what kind of behavior our belief produces. This passage provides multiple options for snappy sermon titles. Try, ‘A Faith that Works.’ Or, ‘Faith Works.’ Or, ‘Faith at Work.’ I settled on ‘Working Faith.’ There’s two ways to apply that phrase. It can speak to a faith which is fully functioning, as in, my faith is working properly. Or, it can have to do with using my faith, as in, I am working my faith.

How do we know if our faith is working properly? The same way we find out if anything is working properly. Before I ride my bicycle, I check the tire pressure, the chain lubrication, and the brakes. I make sure my repair kit is stocked and on board. Faith needs similar attention. That’s part of what happens with regular personal prayer time. Personal prayer affords us a graced opportunity to examine ourselves. In the merciful presence of God, we are free to ask, are our attitudes consistent with the love of Jesus? Are we shifting our desire away from what we want

and towards what God wants? In situations which provoke anxiety or frustration, can we find our way to trust, to composure, to being open to unexpected outcomes? Is our compassion growing, allowing our heart to be affected by the plight of people in distress? Coming together in worship allows for another kind of checkup. Worship in community connects us to other people who also are seeking a working faith. When we sing the hymns, pray the prayers, and hear the scriptures, we are receiving essential nutrition that keeps our faith working.

Which gets to the second understanding of working faith. The things we do to ensure that our faith is working properly lead right into ways to put our faith to work. Right here in worship, we take up an offering. We do that in worship because we understand giving to be a work of faith. Giving is a way of practicing trust that God will take care of us. Do I really believe that God will make sure I have what I need? The way I demonstrate that belief is by giving away some of what I have.

But the point of all this is for faith to be working in life. Personal prayer and participation in a faith community are designed to enable us to be what Jesus called, “the light of the world.” “Let your light shine before others,” he said, (Matthew 5:16) “So that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

In a few weeks, we will receive our denomination’s Neighbors In Need offering. The offering funds efforts in the United States where faith is working. Here’s one story of a program Neighbors In Need has supported which I found particularly compelling. In 1964, the Rev. Donald Stuart resigned from serving a parish in Lincoln, Nebraska, to be the founding staff person of the San Francisco Night Ministry. In that ministry, pastors walk the streets of San Francisco at night seeking to minister to homeless people, to runaway youth, to hustlers and prostitutes and drug addicts. Talk about being in a place where you want faith to be put to work, and indeed, where you want it to be fully functioning! Even today, seven years after Rev. Stuart died, the Night Ministry continues its mission, which is simply to be “The presence of the Church in the City at Night.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the pastors in the ministry, Rev. Rev. Thom Longino reports, “Many nights I start my nightly walk by going to a Burger King near our home base of operations. I have gotten to know several of the guys who panhandle there. There is

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.elmhurst.edu/news/rev-donald-stuart-48-founder-san-franciscos-night-ministry-dies-91/>

one in particular, “Mason,” with whom I have had extensive conversations – sometimes over coffee and donuts, but mostly standing there while he panhandles at the drive-thru.” Rev. Thom further adds, “Mason panhandles for money to pay bills, and to have money for food. Since I have known Mason, he has gone from sleeping on the streets and sometimes on friends’ floors, to having his own room in a residential hotel. Mason has also started to think about what he wants to do for money that isn’t panhandling. Mason is thinking of gardening or working as an in-home health aide. I do not claim responsibility for this. However, Mason has said that our on-going conversations have often been the impetus for his thinking about his future. I am just being faithful to the call God has put on my life to love, talk and walk with our sisters and brothers.”<sup>2</sup>

Along with this pastoral outreach, the Night Ministry offers outside worship services, especially on special church days of the year like Ash Wednesday and Christmas. As I wandered through what I could find about the Night Ministry, I thought, what kind of faith does it take to walk the streets of an American city at night, and to make a point of connecting with people at the margins of our society? Well, I thought, it takes a working faith. It takes a faith which examines itself on a regular basis, a faith which is fully connected with a God-centered, supportive community. And, it takes a faith which dares to work, which dares to act on its values. It takes a faith which is constantly learning not to judge people, a faith which trusts that God will use what we offer even if we don’t get to see the fruit of our labor. It takes a faith which really believes Jesus walks with us, especially when we are walking with the least of his brothers and sisters.

Now, I suppose a night ministry in Newbury would be pretty boring. The point is not for us to duplicate someone’s else’s working faith. The point is for us to discover the joy of our faith coming alive by figuring out how God wants us to work our faith. What I am sure of is this: we only experience the full vitality of faith when we put it to work. Faith is not holding to a set of beliefs. Faith is trust in God made real in humble, compassionate action. God knows that what the world needs most is working faith. So let’s check to be sure our faith is working, and then, let’s put our faith to work, so that our light shines, and people give glory to our Father in heaven, who is the source and the reason for the faith we work.

---

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.ucc.org/nin\\_stories](http://www.ucc.org/nin_stories); see also the Night Ministry’s Web site, <http://sfnightministry.org/>