

Come, Labor On

James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 5th September 2021

Several weeks ago, we explored the importance of rest, of sabbath.¹ On this Labor Day weekend, it seems fitting to talk about work and the relationship between faith and work.² One of well-known texts that explores this relationship is the letter of James. The reformer Martin Luther (1485-1546) famously referred to James as “the epistle of straw.” Luther had such a strong dislike for the book of James that he wanted it removed from the New Testament canon. This was because of its apparent emphasis on works and compared to Paul’s letters, it’s noticeable silence about grace. The Reformation set up a false dichotomy between faith and works, from which we continue to suffer. It’s unfortunate because we have come to think of Paul as the theologian of grace who said nothing about the importance of works. This is ridiculous. Works matter to Paul, how we live and spend our lives matter to Paul. As Paul claimed in many places, God is working out something through us—salvation, redemption, justice—and calls us to help, to join in. Doesn’t Paul say to the Philippians, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12)? To be “in Christ,” Paul believed, means we are co-workers with the “work” of God in the world (1 Cor. 3:9). When we experience the grace of God we begin to realize what God is doing in us and through us. Paul writes to the Philippians, “I am confident that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

In this sense, what we have in James, in fact, resonates with Paul. Paul would agree with James that faith without works is dead. Faith alone—that is, sterile belief, hollow affirmations of theological ideas through intellectual assent, passively accepting the beliefs of your family or community or nation because that’s how you were raised—doesn’t count for much unless your faith is flowing from grace and is then enacted, embodied, lived out in concrete, tangible ways. When we reduce the Christian life to ideas and beliefs, we think it’s good enough to simply say, “I believe in God” or “I believe Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior,” and stop there. Then we can go about living with little or no evidence that such confessions have made any difference. This is called *functional atheism*.

The great African-American mystic and theologian Howard Thurman (1899-1981) said something similar, “The real atheist is not necessarily the [one] who denies the existence of God but rather the [one] who, day after day, and week

after week, subscribes to a faith in God with [one's] lips while acting on the vital assumption that there is no God.”³

Faith vs. works? It’s a false dichotomy. We are not saved by the work that we do, we are saved by grace. We know this. However the experience of that grace throws us into the world, moves our feet and arms and bodies and hearts and minds. The church has always known that faith and works go together. People of faith know that God has work for us to do. Important work. We are being called, we are being summoned, always, to do something. If you’re still breathing then you are being summoned to do something, to act. For God has a job for you to do.

What is that job? Before we determine what that job (or jobs) might be perhaps it’s helpful to reflect upon our historical and personal relationship to work itself. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) famously said, “Love and work” –*Liebe und Arbeit* – “are the cornerstones of our humanness.” Love and work. They go together, from the beginning of time. The book of Genesis tells that work, human toil, is the price that we pay for sin. Some see work as a curse—or at least that’s one way to view the Genesis story, not the only way (Gen. 3:14-19).

Contrast this view with the words emblazoned in steel over the gate of the so-called “labor camp,” known as Auschwitz. You can still see the words today: ARBEIT MACHT FREI. Work makes you free. A powerful image of Nazi irony and cruelty.

Does work make you free? Can it lead to liberation and freedom? Sometimes. Certainly not always. It depends upon the work that you do. Sometimes our work, our career, our professional goals are more like idols, callous gods that we serve that always demand more from us—*more, more, and more*—and whatever we give, whatever we produce for these gods is never, ever enough.

Our relationship to work has changed considerably over the past two hundred years. An agricultural-based economy came to an end with the industrial revolution as more people moved to cities, migrated to manufacturing centers, like Baltimore, to work in the mills, to work in factories run by machines and human labor and in foundries where machines and humans together forged steel and iron. Cheap human labor was essential for industrialists. The same is true today. Labor became capital. Your labor, the sweat of your brow, didn’t belong to you it belonged to your boss who was making money off of your labor. Making money, lots of money off of your time. Making money, lots of money, more money than anyone could possibly need or use in a lifetime, off of your time, off of your *life*.

And the working conditions were appalling as we know. At the end of the nineteen century the average American worked twelve-hour days, six days a week. Despite restrictions in some states, children young as five or six worked in the mills, factories, and mines. The work was dehumanizing. Protests, strikes, riots were common. Workers had no rights; they had no advocates. Upton Sinclair's (1878-1968) novel *The Jungle* (1906) about the meatpacking/processing experience in Chicago in the nineteenth century tells us how bad it was. I read that novel when I was in college and that book seriously disturbed me. That book opened my eyes in so many ways. Thanks to Labor Unions—the people who brought you weekends—things began to change. Labor Day became a federal holiday in 1894. Many of the trades-unionists, guild members, and reformers were faithful, devoted Christians, we don't often hear this part of the [labor movement](#).⁴ It was because of their commitment to the gospel, because they believed that God is working to bring about the kingdom in this world that people pushed for change in the workplace, that they became concerned about the plight of the poor, the welfare of the toiling poor. Labor Unions are just as important today, advocating workers' rights, fair employment practices, and equality in the face of sexism and racism.

Our relation to work has changed and is changing. In the labor market, in both the U. S. and Europe, we are witnessing what is being called [The Great Resignation](#), as the pandemic recedes, millions of workers are saying "I quit."⁵ Many are retiring early, including a lot of pastors in the PCUSA and in other denominations. After working from home for eighteen months during the pandemic, watching so much change all around us, surrounded by loss, suffering, and death, many are reevaluating how they want to live their lives, how they spend their time. Do you really want to commute an hour (or more) each way to work? And will it be safe when you get there? And now we're facing labor shortages. Those that worked in low wage jobs are leaving for better pay in other sectors. Those that have the means are stepping away from work altogether as they recalibrate their lives and determine where they really want to spend their time, how they wish to use their days, toward what end? But you don't have to be wealthy to ask yourself these questions. The pandemic allowed more time for many (certainly not for all) to think about what we really want. What's important and what isn't? What do you value more and now value less? What matters most and what matters least? Toward what are you being called?

And with these questions we're thrown upon the frontier of theology and faith. To be a follower of Jesus means that Jesus has called you and is calling you to do something unique that only you can do; to be someone only you can be. We call this *vocation*, from the Latin *vocatus*, to call. And the one doing the calling is

God. When we say that God has a job for us to do, we're saying that everyone has a vocation. A vocation or calling is not reserved only for religious professionals; it isn't reserved for the special few whose jobs reflect their passions and interests. The Reformed theological tradition has always insisted upon the centrality of vocation in the Christian life. *Everyone* is called by virtue of one's baptism. If you're baptized, then you have a calling. No exceptions. Jesus has a job for you to do.

All of this can sound, well, exotic, idealistic. I know, we know, there are people who are just thankful to have a job—any job—to have enough money to pay the rent and put food on the table. I know, we know, that not every job is seen as a calling. Some jobs are just jobs, there's nothing special about them. Some jobs are killing us. Some people go to work just to pay the bills so that when they come home, they can focus on the things that really give them life. Consider T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). Early in his career, Eliot worked as a bank teller in London during the day and then went home in the evening to do what he loved to do more than anything else, write poetry. For some, for many, work is drudgery, something you get through to get beyond it, to get to retirement. I'm reminded of something that Billy Graham once said, "I don't find anybody in the Bible that retired." For some, many, when they chose their careers early in life, they followed the money or listened to the expectations of their parents or peers and never bothered to listen their hearts or to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to their hearts. For some, for many, following one's heart sounds like a luxury, something that rich people say, people who have options, choices. For some, for many, work has no meaning, no purpose. Perhaps that's true for you. Consider what this does to the human spirit over time, year after year of meaningless work, work without purpose, work that contributes nothing to one's well-being. Consider how this impacts relationships, families, children. Toiling in work that does little to advance the kingdom, which has little to do with the Spirit's unfolding work in history. How can we afford *not* to listen to our hearts and to the Spirit?

This brings us back to vocation. This is our vocation—to listen to the Spirit, to listen to our hearts, to listen to the depths of the soul, not the anxious call of the ego, but for what the Spirit is saying to our hearts—a listening that leads to labor, to work, living faithfully, joyfully, passionately in response the depths of God's grace and vision for our lives and the world. "Our vocation," Thomas Merton (1915-1968) said, "is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny."⁶

We are co-worker with God. We never work alone. But grace comes first. God extends the call and then our hearts begin to open. With hearts open to the work of God in us our hearts open more and more and then our hearts *break* with compassion for those in need, as the letter of James describes, hearts that break for your neighbor, for “the least of these,” whomever crosses the threshold of our lives. When we experience God’s grace, God’s mercy, we find something stirring within us, we find ourselves having a desire to engage in what Dorothy Day (1897-1980) called “works of mercy.” Founder of the [Catholic Worker Movement](#) in Manhattan, Day said, “The corporal works of mercy are to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to ransom the captive, to harbor the harborless, to visit the sick, and to bury the dead.”⁷

Works of mercy. Work as blessing, not burden. Work as gratitude for God’s grace. Work as the means through which God loves and redeems a broken world. There’s work to be done. There’s a God to be served. There’s a world to be loved.

As we consider our vocation and think about work and career and profession, however we spend our days, here’s a question to help focus your attention: *What is my work in service to or to whom?*

The meaning of our lives, as well as the life of the world, rests upon how we answer.



*Detroit Industry Murals (1932-1933) by Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886-1957),
Detroit Institute of Arts.*

¹ See the sermon from August 8, 2021: Come Away and Rest, <https://catonsvillepres.org/sermons/come-away-and-rest/>.

² The sermon title is taken from the hymn “Come, Labor On,” written by Jane Laurie Borthwick (1859) and music by Thomas Tertius Noble (1919). The hymn tune is known as ORA LABORA, which echoes the Benedictine motto, Ora et Labora, “Prayer and work.”

³ From an unpublished essay “Barren or Fruitful?” Cited in Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, eds. Walker Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 27.

⁴ Adon Taft, “Labor Day and the union’s forgotten religious roots,” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/labor-day-and-the-unions-forgotten-religious-roots/2013/08/29/4e0c8f52-10e7-11e3-a2b3-5e107edf9897_story.html. See theologian Walter

Rauschenbusch’s (1861-1918) classic text *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913). See also Heath W. Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵ Andrea Hsu, “As the Pandemic Recedes, Millions of Workers are Saying, ‘I Quit,’ NPR, June 24, 2021.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Dimensions Paperbooks, 2007).

⁷ Dorothy Day, *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, ed. Roberts Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).