

### **“Doing God’s Work”**

“So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Labour Day had many special meanings for me when I was a child:

- It was the last weekend of the Flemington Fair, our New Jersey version of the CNE.
- It was the weekend of the Laustsen Family Picnic at my Aunt Alice and Uncle Norman’s cottage at Culver Lake.
- It was the weekend of the Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon.
- And sadly, it meant that summer was coming to a close and that the first day of school was only a few days away.

Labour Day still marks the unofficial last long weekend of summer (even though summer will continue for a few more weeks). It is the last opportunity for many families to get away before school begins and we settle back into our regular routines. It’s also the time when many congregations are gearing up for their fall programs, including the beginning of Sunday school and the restarting of many meetings and regular events. Even though we may be mourning the end of summer, in many ways Labour Day invites us to return to all that our everyday lives offer to us throughout the other three seasons of the year.

As we enjoy this final long weekend of the summer, it’s good for us to consider the origins of this holiday and its continuing meaning. Labour Day (which is observed in both Canada and the USA) was first celebrated in New York City on September 5, 1882 as a “workingman’s holiday,” and its continual celebration “*constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country.*” (US Department of Labor). The day both celebrates the contributions made by working men and women to the growth and prosperity of our nations as well as the sacrifices made by those who fought for decent wages, fair and safe working conditions, and equal access and opportunity to gainful employment for all persons. It was this “*vital force of labor [that] added materially to the highest standard of living and the greatest production the world has ever known and has brought us closer to the realization of our tradition ideals of economic and political democracy.*”

As our nations continue to honour those who labour on our behalf, Christians also honour the dignity and worth of all who labour in various tasks that are beneficial to our communities and nations. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes declares that “*there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot*” (3:22), while Paul encourages the Thessalonians to “*aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one.*” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). The Third Commandment instructs the people of God to devote themselves to their labours even as they keep the Sabbath day holy unto the Lord: “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work ...*” (Exodus 20:9-10). In his commissioning of the Twelve, Jesus sets the standard to fair wages for those who labour: “*Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.*” (Matthew 10:9-10) – even as he encourages his followers to remember that it is not through their own labours that they can earn what the Lord gives to all people freely: “*Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.*” (John 6:27). As Paul teaches the Corinthians, “*the one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.*” (1 Corinthians 3:8).

In today's second lesson from the letter of James, the apostle also addresses the importance of work in the lives of Christians; but this teaching goes far beyond our everyday labours to address the centrality of work in the life of faith. This letter is considered one of the "General Epistles" of the New Testament, addressed to *"the twelve tribes in the dispersion,"* Christians who have been exiled from their homes and living as refugees in foreign lands. Instead of addressing specific issues (as Paul does in several of his letters), James deals with more general teachings that are relevant to people of faith in many different circumstances. At the heart of the teaching of this letter is a call for God's people to live with integrity, to make certain that the manner in which they live is a reflection of the faith that they believe and confess:

- "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they are like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing." – 1:22-25.

The apostle's teaching concerning the necessity of translating convictions into action continues in the letter's second chapter, in which he calls to account the "assembly" (*synagoge*) that welcomes a richly attired person into its midst with every mark of worldly honour, while a shabbily-dressed person is treated with scorn and degradation: *"For if a person with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?"* (2:2-4). The community's behavior betrays the message by which it claims to live: that *"God [has] chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him"* (2:5). In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches that *"blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:3), and declares *"woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation"* (Luke 6:24). The assembly meets as a community of faith, but it acts according to the ancient world's measure of values in which the rich and powerful are shown honour in hopes of gaining favours from them in return.

- "James is making himself quite clear: Christians, both individually *and* collectively, have a moral responsibility to the poor. We have a responsibility not to mistreat and dishonor the poor. And, we have a responsibility to make sure that the poor have their basic needs met, needs that include, at baseline, clothing and food. As far as James is concerned, the validity of a community's Christian identity (James 2:1) rests on its treatment of the poor." – Margaret Aymer.

James calls his readers to remember Jesus' teaching on the greatest of the commandments, which calls us to both *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Matthew 22:37-39). "Love of neighbor" is not a vague or undefined ideal; Jesus' teaching quotes the Torah commandment which clearly states how such love is to be made real in our dealings with others:

- "You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." – Leviticus 19:15-18).

If the assembly practices discrimination toward those who come into their midst, they do not *"really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture"* (2:8). The person who claims to live by the law of love but practices this discrimination that the law forbids has broken the law of love entirely; for such a person, *"judgment will be*

*without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*" (2:13). James uses the same equation as the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer: *"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."* Judgment is without mercy for those who are merciless. On the basis of this very specific application of the law of love, the community will be judged by God.

- "We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny these petitions on our account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to good gladly to those who sin against us." – *Small Catechism*.

It is in the context of this teaching of making one's faith visible in the manner in which a Christian lives in their daily lives that James asks the question *"what good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?"* (2:14). The apostle questions how faith that is professed in words but not manifested in deeds can be authentic; actions reveal the attitude of faith and make it alive:

- "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love." – Galatians 5:6.
- "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a sister or brother in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." – 1 John 3:17-18.

Martin Luther would have agreed with James in stressing that the manner in which we live our lives must be a reflection of the faith that is ours in Jesus Christ. As Christ has given himself freely to us, we in turn must give ourselves freely to our neighbor:

- "I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary in my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ." – *Freedom of a Christian*.

But Luther had serious problems with the letter of James, to the point where it is said that he dismissed it as the "epistle of straw." Statements such as *"Can faith save you?"* and *"faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead"* seem to contradict the central teaching of the Lutheran tradition that *"a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."* (Romans 3:28). Luther's objection to the sale of indulgences is based on his belief that grace is a free gift of God that does not depend on any works we do to gain God's favour or to earn forgiveness, for *"any Christian whatsoever, who is truly repentant, enjoys plenary remission from penalty and guilt, and this is given him without letters of indulgence."* (*Ninety-Five Theses* #36). To suggest that faith alone cannot save a person appears to contradict the central Lutheran teaching of *sola fide*, that it is "by faith alone" that we are saved. James' teaching so offended Luther that he proposed taking the book out of the Bible:

- "We should throw the Epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn't amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ. Not once does it mention Christ, except at the beginning... He wrote not a word about the suffering and resurrection of Christ, although this is what all the apostles preached about. Besides, there's no order or method in the epistle. Now he discusses clothing and then he writes about wrath and is constantly shifting from one to the other. He presents a comparison: 'As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.' [James 2:26]. O Mary, mother of God! What a terrible comparison that is! James compares faith with the body when he should rather have compared faith with the soul! The ancients recognized this, too, and therefore they didn't acknowledge this letter as one of the catholic epistles." – *Table Talk*, 1542.

But in spite of Luther's objections, Lutherans (and all other Christians) kept the letter of James in the New Testament and recognize the validity of this apostle's teaching. James is not proposing that we return to a system in which we strive to earn God's forgiveness and our own salvation, for we continue to believe and teach that *"we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us."* (Augsburg Confession). But what the apostle is challenging us to consider is how can Christian faith be truly authentic if it cannot be seen in visible works, in the manner in which one lives every day as a child of God? How can we say we love God with our words and not evidence that love with our works? How can we say "we believe" and then live as if that belief has no impact on our opinions and actions? When James asks *"can faith save you?"* he is not questioning the power of faith in Jesus Christ; what he is calling into question is a faith that is superficial, that is expressed in mere words but does not impact our every thought, word and deed in fulfilling Jesus' commandment to *"love one another as I have loved you"*; for the true witness to the authenticity of our faith in Jesus Christ will be when *"everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:34-35). Martin Luther King Jr. points to Jesus as the principle example of how faith was made active in love, of how his followers can translate this love into action:

- *"... it is a marvelous expression of Jesus' ability to match words with actions. One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. A persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves. On the one hand, we proudly profess certain sublime and noble principles, but on the other hand, we sadly practice the very antithesis of these principles... This strange dichotomy, this agonizing gulf between the ought and the is, represents the tragic theme of man's earthly pilgrimage. But in the life of Jesus we find that the gulf is bridged. Never in history was there a more sublime example of the consistency of word and deed."* – "Love in Action," *Strength to Love*.

As we observe Labour Day this weekend, we are called to consider our labours and Christians, the work that God has called us to do *"while it is day, before that night comes when no one can work."* For Peter, the work that Christ set before him was to *"feed my sheep"* (John 21:17), to be entrusted with caring for the ones Jesus loves as the Good Shepherd. For the apostles, their labours were to be as *"witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8). For the Church of Jesus Christ in all generations, it is our work to be faithful to the mission our Lord continues to set before us: *"to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all without reserve and spread God's liberating word."* The proof that we really are who we claim to be – the Church of Jesus Christ – is authenticated not only in the words we preach and teach, but in the manner in which we live and work together as the embodiment of God's gracious love. On this Labour Day weekend, we Lutherans proclaim that *"with our hands, we do God's work of restoring and reconciling communities in Jesus' name throughout the world."* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, [www.ecla.org](http://www.ecla.org)).

Labour Day continues to mean many things to us: it is the end of the summer season, the beginning of a new school year, a time to return to our regular schedules after a summer break. But as we honour those who labour to build and serve our communities, we are also reminded of the labours that are the sign and proof of the authenticity of our faith. A faith that is real is an authentic faith that is the light that all can see shining before them, the proof that is witnessed by all when *"they will know we are Christians by our love."* Amen.