

FAITH WITHOUT GOODLY (GODLY) LABOR IS DEAD

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Damascus United Methodist Church

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – September 6, 2009

The New Testament book of James is a straight-on confrontation with those who would reduce the Gospel of Jesus Christ with clichés like “Jesus is the answer!” “Believe in God!” “Follow me to church!” “Christians also make great claims but are often guilty of belying them with their actions. Professing to trust in God and be God’s people, they cling tightly to the world and its values. Possessing all the right answers, they contradict the gospel with their lives.” (Introduction to the book of James in the *Life Application Study Bible*, p. 2243) So begins the introduction to the book of James in the *Life Application Bible* based on the *New International Version* of the Good Book. The writer continues. “With energetic style and crisp, well-chosen words, James confronts this conflict head-on. It is not enough to talk the Christian faith, he says, we must live it. ‘What good is it my (sisters) and brothers, if a (person) claims to have faith, but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him (or her)?’ (2:14) The proof of the reality of our faith is a changed life. Genuine faith will inevitably produce good deeds. This is the central theme of James’ letter, around which he supplies practical advice on living the Christian life.” (*Life Application Study Bible*; p. 2243)

Today’s epistle lesson is the heart of the book of James where we find that unbeatable verse of truth, James 2: 17. “Faith without works is dead.” Shall we say it together? On this Labor Day Sunday, 2009, I would like us to think about this verse, and the other lectionary readings under the banner, *Faith without Goodly, Godly Labor Is Dead*.

When we examine Proverbs 22 and the brief selected verses for this day, we get the pithy, everyday wisdom that we need, like a child that has gone back to school. The KISS principle reigns, (you know, “Keep it simple, stupid). “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” (Proverbs 22: 1) We can say to our children, and therefore to ourselves, “Don’t do anything that would make people associate badness or wrongness with your name. If anyone talks about you, you can be wounded or ostracized. You can’t buy your reputation back. All the money in the world couldn’t buy your reputation back. So, take care to keep yourself above reproach.” Or, “Being in good favor with others allows you to grow in so many ways. Doing things that make people think ill of you, even if you get something you want for

the moment, only drives a wedge between you and the other, and the other may be your very best friend. So, conduct yourself in such way that people look at you with a trusting, appreciative spirit, for real friendship is not bought with money, but with a smile." Certainly, these proverbial simplicities have something to do with the "goodly, godly labor" we are talking about this morning.

Let's look at the more fierce proverb that follows. "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fall." (Proverbs 22: 8) A more moderate version might be. "Whoever sows sin reaps weeds, and bullying anger sputters into nothing." (*The Message; Eugene Peterson, p. 1138*) The message is clear. When we do things that violate right relationships, they come horrendously back to us, and they bite us like a snake. And be it known as well, that undue and inappropriate anger falls meaninglessly to the ground. May I add, "as it should." The next benevolent proverb speaks directly to "goodly labor," for it speaks of God's divine dispensation. "Generous hands are blessed hands because they give bread to the poor." (*The Message; p. 1138*) The power of that simple postulate "deserves its place on our refrigerator door, need I say more."

And the final proverb in this reading, becomes an indictment, perhaps even a curse for those who neglect its imperative. "Don't walk on the poor just because they're poor, and don't use your position to crush the weak. Because God will come to their defense; the life you took, he'll take from you and give back to them." (*The Message: p. 1138*) Such justice on the part of our Creator is threatening, but far more instructive than anything said so far as to how we maintain "goodly and godly labors." We must not step on the poor, the poor in spirit, the humble, the less educated, the less gifted, the less empowered.

Psalm 125, which is not in our hymnal, (and may I thank Charles Deering at this time for his writing of a sung response for this day), is a godly gem. A psalm of protection from Yahweh for his Jerusalem, the words ask God in verse 4, to "Do good with those who are good, to those who are upright in heart." Let's perfectly understand that the word "good" is the adjective for the word God, and therefore, means, of the same nature and intention of God, and yes behavior of God. What that translates for us, is that we can be God-bearers. We can act like God, act for God, act with God, if God is truly in us. That's why the psalmist pleads, "Do good with those who are good."

We move to James, the home base in many ways for our thoughts and discussion, about "goodly and godly labor." The extended reading from James, the second chapter, is, as we acknowledged at the beginning of this homily, is James' practical advice on acting out the Christian faith, which James insists is required to even speak of faith. His first insistence is that goodly action must be without one ounce of favoritism. More appeal to the gold ringed, fine clothed woman or man, and any slight to the poor persons in shabby clothes, is not tolerable in God's eyes. Escorting the better off or the more appealing to the valued pew can not be the disposition. Neither can the back spot in the

balcony be the place for the different or the less comfortably accepted persons. In fact that kind of judgmentalism must dissipate completely in the body of Christ. Furthermore, James would have us understand that God has a predilection or special regard for the poor. Therefore, to honor the rich at the expense of the poor is an abomination and against the law of liberty which regards mercy for the poor as a primary obligation. And James inserts the always set-it-straight questions for the way the world works. In verse 6b, he asks, “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong (meaning Jesus Christ)?” (*New International Version*; p. 2249) In our culture as in first century Christianity, the manipulation of the poor, and maybe even the not so poor, goes on by the rich, and James pleads for the end of that kind of godless behavior. He also commands that we act as those who are going to be judged by the law that brings freedom, a law that invites mercy more than judgment.

These admonishing points prepare for the verse we took upon ourselves earlier, but not before a most poignant situation proposal. Here it is. “You come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, ‘Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!’ and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup- where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?” (*The Message*; p. 2204) Isn’t it? Can we not agree as one people in Christ in this room at this hour, that faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, “Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That’s just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands!” (*The Message*; p. 2204)

No, in the same fashion that St. Paul makes response in Romans 8. We are keenly aware the “Faith without goodly, godly labor is dead!”

What kind of labor are we talking about? Now we can turn to St. Mark’s Gospel, chapter 7, and see our Master’s conduct in the midst of his labors. Jesus has retreated to the region of Tyre to get away, and find rest. Exhausted no doubt by the multitudes seeking his gifts, and particularly his healing, he seeks a retreat. A Syrophenician woman with a daughter possessed by an unclean spirit, frantically makes her way to Jesus, bowing and in the same breath begging for release in her daughter. Jesus, probably tired of all those who simply wanted his healing art, especially those from another persuasion, responds perhaps disgruntledly, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (This remark may have been a disparaging response for those who might have attempted to use Jesus for their own selfish needs.) But the woman in great humility said, “Sir, even the dogs under the table

eat the children's crumbs." Jesus is compelled by her heart, and speaks with the love of his *abba* Father, "For saying that, you may go- the demon has left your daughter." And it was so.

In the second healing account, Jesus has returned to Decapolis, near the Sea of Galilee. A deaf and speech impedimental man is brought by his friends to Jesus with the plea for healing. Jesus took him aside in private and with what we might see as crude anointing: "fingers in his ears and a finger with spittle on his tongue," and an ancient word "Ephphatha" meaning "be opened," Jesus did the goodly and godly thing in this most primitive setting. The man heard and spoke plainly.

Here our Lord did the labor of love even in the midst of exhaustion and the demands of crowds. Here our Lord responded to human need even in the throes of people using and possibly abusing what he could do. Here our Lord was always wearing the garment of the *abba* Father's love for the poor. Here our Lord never failed to demonstrate the law of love that always held mercy above judgment.

Where are we? We're here so we may be empowered to put our faith into goodly, godly, labor. We recognize that faith without works leads us to death. And so we are seeking Christ's loving presence and healing strength to go and do what He commands us to do. May God bless us as we labor to be faithful in his temple, in his marketplace, and in his vineyard. Amen.