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James 1:17-27

## EVERYDAY FAITHFULNESS

Labor Day arrives bringing with it some mixed emotions--at least for me. Its arrival marks the end of summer--that delightful season of cook-outs and vacations and an abundance of daylight. It is sad to see that season end. And yet, Labor Day also signals a season of newness: the new academic year for students, the new program year for churches, a season that whether you are school aged or not still feels more industrious and purpose-filled as compared to the relaxed nature of summertime. And that seems appropriate that this new season of industrious activity is ushered in with Labor Day--a day to honor those who work. Besides being a day for barbeques, besides being the last gasp of summer vacation for students and teachers, Labor Day is fundamentally about honoring all the workers of our land and the benefits our society receives from their efforts.

As Christians, we have a broader understanding of work than merely what a person does to receive a paycheck. Work for Christians is everything we do in our lives on behalf of God. Even what we are doing here at this very moment, even our worship, is thought of as our spiritual work for the very word we use to describe all the prayers and songs and scriptures in our service, the word *liturgy*, literally means *the work of the people*. Praising God, praying for one another, reading and contemplating the scriptures is our spiritual work. But our work is not merely confined to what we do here in the sanctuary on Sundays. As Christians, we dedicate our lives to the work of following in Christ's footsteps-- loving, forgiving, sharing, praying, worshipping, extending compassion and justice. This is the work of our lives.

One of the central themes in the Letter of James, one of our readings today, is this topic of putting our faith into action, of putting our faith to work. James writes to congregations of early Christians, "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of examples in history and in our current news of Christians and their institutions that have *not* been doers of the word of God. Most of us can no doubt name people we have known or Christian organizations and their leaders who heard the word of God, even professed the word of God, but who failed to *do* the word of God. Nobody likes hypocrites, especially pious ones. And such hypocrisy has brought about untold injury and harm.

We could make a list a mile long of Christians throughout history and in our present day who have failed to do the word of God and there would still be more names yet to add to that list. And while it is important and necessary to confess the failures of Christianity and to try to learn from them, that is not what I want to focus on today. Rather, today I would like us to spend some time reflecting on those people who actually *do* the word of God, examples of Christian faithfulness that inspire us. We all need positive models of faith that is put into action. In a world with so much hurt, so much suffering, so much corruption and cruelty, good models of faith in practice offer us hope. Without them, we can so easily grow hopeless or cynical--neither of which is a faithful or healthy way to go through life. Today, I invite us to recall those people who are indeed living out God's word, people are laboring to bring about love, justice, and compassion.

So I want you to consider today, who do you admire as a "doer" of the Christian faith? Whose witness of faith has inspired you by what they do, how they forgive, how they tend to

neighbors, how they stand up for others, how they share their money and possessions, how they use their time? Who is the person who when you are faced with a particular dilemma or challenge in life and faith, you ask yourself, "What would so-and-so do?" I want you to think of one or two people who might fit that description for you. I am not talking about perfect people. I am inviting you to think about ordinary people, who live out an everyday kind of faithfulness. I want you not only to think of the person but think through why you admire them and the way they live out their faith. In what way is this person a "doer" of the faith and not merely a "hearer"?

And next I would like you to gather with one another in groups of two or three and share with one another about the "doers" of the faith who inspire you. Be sure not only to name them but please share in what ways have you witnessed these people putting their faith into action.

*(time for sharing with one another)*

The writer of the letter of James reminds us that real religion is not about just words or beliefs. Real religion is put into action, is lived out. James even names two very specific ways that real religion is acted out. He writes that a religion that is pure and undefiled before God is where people take care of orphans and widows in their distress. Back in biblical times, these two groups, orphans and widows, were among the most vulnerable of all people. And so James makes it clear that being a doer of God's word involves caring for society's most vulnerable people, whoever they may be in our day and time. I would just bet that many of the doers of the faith we have named here today in our small groups, are likely to be individuals who have shown compassion and care for the vulnerable. There are so many wonderful ways people show care and compassion for the vulnerable: they can offer legal aid, they can be teachers, they can be

doctors or nurses, they can cook a meal for the sick, they can drive someone to an appointment, they can tutor a new immigrant in English, they can write a letter to Congress, they can give their money to charities, they can march in protest to injustice. There are endless ways to be a "doer" of the faith on behalf of others. Each act of everyday faithfulness--of care, of forgiveness, of generosity, of kindness--each act brings the gift of hope to others. Our world is not just a place of darkness and cruelty and selfishness. Rather, through these acts of faith God can be seen and known and felt. Goodness lives. And we all find a kind of hope.

Outside the parking lot entrance to the church we have installed a receptacle for people who smoke to deposit their cigarette butts so that they won't litter the church property with their discarded butts. However, there are some individuals in the neighborhood who will pull the insert out of the receptacle and dump the contents on the ground as they search for used cigarette butts they can take and finish smoking. As you may imagine, when they do this, it leaves a big mess of ash and cigarette butts everywhere--the very mess we were trying to avoid by having the receptacle in the first place. One day I drove into the church parking lot just in time to witness a woman dumping the insert on the ground and begin picking through the butts. Ah ha! I had caught one of the culprits in the act. I jumped out of my car and marched over to the woman. "I hope you are going to pick up every one of those butts!" I barked at her. She jumped up, clearly startled. And then she began yelling, "You get away from me, you woman!" She turned and fled across the parking lot, still yelling at me. As I turned to leave, I thought to myself, "I probably could have handled that better." And thinking more about the encounter, I thought, "I *really* could have handled that better." I thought about how the woman must have felt having me just run up and bark at her that way, and how many other people she may encounter in her daily rounds who bark at her and make her feel unwelcome. And I thought about the kind of life

circumstances that would lead this woman to look for used cigarette butts to smoke. I thought about *my* role models of faith and how they would have handled that situation. And I thought about Jesus, and what Jesus would have done. And I knew I came up short. James tells us, "Be doers of the word, not merely hearers."

In a short while we will come to the communion table where we will remember our ultimate role model of faith, Jesus. At the communion table we are reminded of how Christ put his faith into action, especially for the vulnerable, which in some way or another is all of us. Here at this table, we are inspired by his example of love and grace and service and sacrifice. Here at this table we are shown what it means to be a doer of the word of God. Here at this table we receive grace for when we fail to do the word of God and we are given the strength to try again. And here at this table we are given hope that in the midst of this dark world, there is indeed the light of God's goodness.