

“Faith in Action”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**James 1: 17-27**

It’s Labor Day Weekend. The American Summer is officially at its conclusion. This will be the last hurrah for many families to get out of town, to go camping, or to see relatives while everyone has a three-day weekend. The number of cars on the highways this weekend will be unimaginable, as everyone tries to go everywhere in a very short period of time.

As its name implies, Labor Day recalls the labor and work we all do as a part of life. For many, tomorrow is an extra day of rest from hard, stressful, exhausting work that occupies the majority of their lives. From the most skilled artisan to the minimum-wage worker at the fast-food restaurant; from the highest-paid CEO to the janitor in that CEO’s skyscraper; from the fifth-generation professional whose family immigrated to America 250 years ago, to the Hispanic landscaper whose family immigrated to America two months ago – no matter who we are, we are all laborers. Some of us are paid, others work without monetary compensation: parents who keep their children at home, retirees who volunteer time and talents to help others. And some will not even get to rest tomorrow from their labors, as they will provide services and protection for the community which must be done 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

What is work? For many, work is a negative word. It is associated with drudgery, mundane routines, and weariness. There are so many people who are unhappy with their work, yet they feel they cannot change jobs for fear of loss of benefits or not being able to meet family obligations. In this country, work is a means by which to meet material needs: earn money to have housing, food, clothing, medical care, etc. It is a means to an end, but it is not necessarily a satisfying means to achieve our desired end.

This is obviously not how everyone feels about their work, because for many it is something which brings excitement and fulfillment into their lives. That certainly is the perspective of Christian vocation. God has given all of us unique and special gifts which need to be used for the common good. Part of this life journey we’re all on is determining how we are to use those gifts from God to make a positive contribution to the communal whole. For some, this happens early on in life, and they spend a lifetime in one field. For others, it may take a change mid-way through life to see how the same gifts they have been using in one profession might be used differently in another which

would provide them more fulfillment. Still for others, it takes a lifetime of changing jobs and professions to see how their natural abilities may be used to impact others. No matter which category we may fall into, we are all called by God to “work” in some form or another.

The writer of the Letter of James was very much interested in work and vocation, primarily as an expression of one’s faith in God and Jesus Christ. James wishes to stress the importance between believing and living one’s faith. He uses the phrase, “Be doers of the Word” to emphasize this point. To believe in God through Jesus Christ is more than sitting and hearing the Word of God. To believe in God through Jesus Christ is to hear that Word of love, mercy, and forgiveness, and then, in the famous language of Nike, to “just do it.”

The writer uses the analogy of looking at oneself in a mirror as being similar to being only hearers of the Word. Think about it: most of us have a general impression of what we look like, but we only notice specific qualities about our appearance when we look at ourselves in a mirror. However, those things will disappear from our memories as soon as we walk away, and we have to look again and again in mirrors to remember what we look like. The same is true of anyone who only hears the Word but does not live accordingly. If you don’t live by the Word, you will forget the Word, and it will not stay with you when you are not looking in that mirror. But, if you “look into the perfect law, the law of liberty,” it enables you to “live with what you see and to live out what you believe” (*Texts for Preaching, Yr. B.*, 491). James concludes by stating that anyone who claims to be religious, but does not live according to his or her beliefs, then “their religion is worthless.” If you want to be pure and undefiled before God, you must live out your faith in your work, your vocation, your family life, your church life, your leisure life – for that is when we are truly blessed by our doing.

Many of us struggle with being “doers of the Word.” It is not always easy to carry your faith into your job, your workplace, your daily lives. Within these walls, we all know one another and believe in the same God. But when we leave this place, the safety net is removed. Situations in the workplace can challenge our values and beliefs simply because they are outside of these walls, and how we respond to those situations says much about the depth of our faith and whether we are merely hearers or are truly doers. It’s not an easy call, but no one said being a disciple was supposed to be easy.

Friday morning, I heard former President Jimmy Carter interviewed on WFYI here in Indianapolis. He was in northern Indiana this week, where he and David Letterman helped launch a Habitat for Humanity building blitz in Mishawaka. Hundreds of volunteers this week have helped to build or renovate over forty homes for people needing affordable housing. President Carter has been a long-time supporter and volunteer with Habitat for Humanity, and at the age of 93 he was

out hammering away this week. When asked why this work has been so important to him and his wife, Rosalynn, he said it gives them a chance to put their faith into action, to show the world what God intends for us to be and do as disciples of Christ.

How are we called to put our faith into action? Is it a singular event that spurs us? Is it a daily inspiration to show others what we believe? Are we merely hearers of the Word, or are we also doers of the Word?

Images can be deeply powerful and evocative. They can both inspire and disturb. They can bring back memories of the past, and can help us reach into the future with hopes and dreams. Images can be deeply powerful and evocative.

(show picture of Nazi graffiti on synagogue) This is not an image from another state or country in our world. This image was not colorized from Germany in the 1930s. This image was taken a month ago only four miles from where I live. It was an act of hate and terror against the Jewish Congregation Shaarey Tefilla in Carmel. This image is repulsive and repugnant, and it should cause us to be angry, unsettled, and disturbed.

(show picture of Dachau) That is because that image recalls what took place in this location and so many others like it. Twenty years ago, Debbie and I visited the concentration camp at Dachau, Germany, not far from Munich. Despite it being a beautiful, spring day, it was an experience that was deeply troubling and unsettling. To see the gas chambers. To see the railroad cars. To know that so many innocent people were tortured and executed – solely because of their faith. It made all that I had read and studied from history vividly real. It showed in stark reality how evil can take hold in this world. It is why we need to go to places like Dachau or Auschwitz or the National Holocaust Museum and understand why these images are not to be discounted or glossed over: for we must never forget what had happened in our past, so we may never see those acts repeated in our future.

(show picture of “Never Again”) And we must have the courage to stand up, to put our faith into action, and to say, “Never again will this take place.”

(show pictures of gathering at Congregation Shaarey Tefilla) Two days after their building had been defaced, the people of Congregation Shaarey Tefilla opened their doors and invited the community to come. And the community came, and came, and came. Over one thousand people filled the worship and gathering space of the synagogue – people from all faiths and backgrounds and ages and races. Rabbi Benjamin Sendrow said that evening: “Those who love God hate evil. There is no better way than to fight evil with arms linked as a community. All those responsible have done is awakened the sleeping giant of love and acceptance and mutual respect. This gathering is who

we are.” Whatever faith we professed or believed, those of us gathered there that night were all Jewish, were all the victims of a hate crime, were all broken and hurt. And with one voice in our presence, we said, “Never again.”

(show pictures of worship in the park and community picnic)  
When we put our faith in action, we become this giant of love that has been awakened to change the world. It may take us out of our comfort zone, and we may not feel totally at ease when we help a stranger, or welcome someone new, or take our faith outside the walls of this building. But when we recognize that believing in God and God’s Son, Jesus Christ, is not just what we say but also what we do, then, as James reminds us, “we will be blessed in our doing.” If we remain afraid to show the love of Christ to others, for fear of rejection or insult, then our faith will never grow beyond these walls, and in fact, will likely wither and die inside these walls. However, if we take a step - any size step - to put our faith into action, consider how much God might grow that faith when we encounter that person who does not yet know who God is?

“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.” Let us put our faith into action, so that no one will doubt what we believe.

Thanks be to God. Amen.