

What Good Is It? *James 2:1-10, 14-17*

Norwalk Christian Church, September 6, 2015, Proper 18, 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Happy Labor Day Weekend! Don't you love three-day weekends? Especially this one. One last weekend to indulge the festivities of summer, to dip in the pool, take the boat out, travel to see relatives, fire up the grill. This is a weekend to play, to eat--to enjoy life.

And yet...and yet...it's not. At least, not originally. Labor Day was begun in this country, not as a gift from the federal government to all you swimmers and boaters out there. Labor Day, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, "is a creation of the labor movement and is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country."¹

Ironically, and really, sadly, those who work the hardest in our country, who this holiday was created to celebrate, are now some of the least likely to even have the day off.

Sometimes we take these three-day weekends for granted. For those who have the day off, you didn't have to go to our boss and beg for Monday off, so you can celebrate the American Laborer on the lake. We didn't have to organize the PTO to petition for school to be closed on Monday. For most of our lives--or for all our lives--Labor Day was settled. You will get a Labor Day weekend. School will be closed. It's already on the calendar--every calendar, every year. But this is not the way things always were.

I was reminded of this, this past Thursday. Our church hosted our monthly gathering of Disciples Clergy in the Des Moines Area. We had almost 30 pastors, retired and active duty, here, eating Villagio's, and catching up with one another after a busy summer of ministry. We had a guest speaker, Liz Hall. Liz is an organizer with AMOS, which stands for "A Mid-Iowan Organizing Strategy". AMOS pulls together congregations of multiple faiths and denominations, as well as civic and other community organizations, to work for the good of families in the Des Moines Area. I told you a few weeks ago about my time organizing with Jeremiah in New Orleans. AMOS is a sister-organization to the one I worked for.

I'm excited that Liz will also be our guest next preacher next Sunday in both services. Marti and I will still be here...we won't be enjoying a 3-day weekend. :-) But we will be blessed by Liz.

Back to Thursday. Liz began by asking us how families in our churches were doing. We went around the room, talking about families that are struggling to make ends meet. Two working parents, one working single parent, yet they still can't afford housing and child care. We talked about families that may have enough financial resources, but they

¹ <http://www.dol.gov/laborday/history-results.htm?results=true#survey>

are stretched so thin, from soccer to football to dance to scouts to so much more--all good things, yet doing so much that they hardly have time to share a meal together.

We went on for a while...you get us clergy talking about anything, and it's hard to shut us up...but after a while, Liz asked us this question: who created the family?

And we just looked blankly at her. Well, God, right? The answer has to be God. And, yes, the answer is God. But the modern family we know today, with two parents and 2.5 kids and a pet, the family that has time to work and play and can send its children to school and then to great afterschool activities, the family that can go to college and get decent paying jobs, and take time off for a vacation...this kind of family is a modern invention. It was willed into existence, fought for. It did not always exist.

Before all the successes of the labor movements that happened in the early part of last century, the average American worker might work 12, 14, 16, 18 hours a day or more, with no benefits, no hope of retirement, and no time off. Childhood as we know it was nonexistent, for children were workers, too, not learners and players. The weekend was nonexistent, much less a three-day weekend.

But then, people of faith stood up and demanded that things change. Inspired by the Sabbath from the 10 commandments, they fought for a federal minimum wage and demanded what we now call a "weekend", so that families could earn enough in 6 days, so they could take the 7th day off as a sabbath to rest and worship as a family. They fought for salaries big enough so that only one parent had to work while the other could stay home with their children. They demanded that we protect children, not force them to work, so kids could go to school and enjoy play.

This fight for the family, led by people of faith--this is what Labor Day is all about.

In our text from James today, I can almost imagine James at the front of a picket line, demanding for higher wages and child labor laws. Or, maybe not. James might instead be in the pulpit of a church, calling for followers of Christ to leave *their* church buildings and stand in solidarity with those who are suffering.

After hearing read these words from the book of James, we don't have to ask, "I wonder how James felt?" James tells us, straight up, that favoritism and segregation of any kind has no place in communities of faith. In Christ, there is no rich or poor, yet in James' church, they were favoring the rich, well-dressed over the poor beggar. Those with position and power were getting all the best seats--in the worship gathering, but also at the church potluck and on the church board.

And what does James have to say about that? If you show partiality, you commit sin. Period. Partiality has no place in Christ's church.

And James doesn't leave it there. He starts meddling. Because he knows how we church folk sometimes are--especially we clergy-types. We love to talk about pressures facing families, and even pray for those who are suffering. Get us real fired up, and we may even post something about it on Facebook!

But "What good is it, my brothers and sisters," James says, "if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"

I'll admit. James would never make it long as a pastor. He doesn't know how to put the message softly, how to be pastoral.

But maybe we don't need it put softly. Did you know that almost 3 and a half million workers in the United States make at or less than the Federal Minimum Wage? Anyone know what the minimum wage is today? \$7.25.

The average salary in Iowa right now is around \$50,000. But if you were a full-time, minimum wage worker, you would earn \$15,080 a year, and with no health insurance or paid leave or retirement. It's almost impossible for one person to live on that, let alone a single parent. Even with two family members working two full-time, minimum wage jobs, there's not enough to pay rent and afford child care.

That's just one piece of it. We could go on, about the difficulties of affording college, which is almost necessary in order to open up the possibility of better paying jobs. We could talk about the decrease in the US of high-paying manufacturing jobs that used to be the backbone of our economy. We could talk about how, when you take into account inflation, wages have remained almost stagnant in our country since the 70s, while the cost of housing, food and other necessities continue to rise. And we could talk about the high amount of debt that most families carry, making their expendable income incredibly small, no matter their salary.

We could talk about all of this...but these are not things we talk much about, especially not in church. Yet James is imploring us to do so, this morning. Because people are suffering. Families are suffering.

Here's the situation in Norwalk. For the working poor, there are four safety nets: Basic governmental assistance, like food stamps and medicaid. Then there's Red Rock Community Action Program in Indianola, yet they're have more demand than funds. Norwalk Schools do so much to help families, even while funds for social work in schools are cut. And then there's the Norwalk Ministerial Association, of which all our churches participate.

Weekly clients at the Norwalk Food Pantry continues to increase, and they have a hard time keeping shelves fully stocked. We got word last week that our Ministerial

Association fund was at an all-time low, but it's not for lack of giving--we've raised more money than most years, yet we are giving out more than ever. We're now are limiting our assistance to only \$100/per person, which won't even pay a past due electricity bill.

The people in Norwalk needing help the most are not homeless or jobless. They're working families who cannot seem to make enough to make ends meet. What good is it, if we give people food, yet they still don't have enough money to live?

At the end of Liz' presentation to us on Thursday, she said, "I don't mean to depress you." And, honestly, it is, all, pretty depressing. We need some good news!

That's when Liz told us about how leaders from churches around the Des Moines area, working with AMOS, created three years ago a program called Project Iowa. After hearing these stories of families struggling, they knew they could not keep on saying, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill." They had to put their faith into action.

So they organized those looking for jobs. Then they talked to major employers in the area to find out what jobs were available, and what kind of workers and skills they needed to fill those jobs. Then they found training for the workers they organized, and offered them wrap around services, such as support groups and help with clothing, childcare and transportation.

And the results are amazing. Every graduate of Project Iowa receives an interview for a job that pays a family-wage. And almost everyone ends up getting a job, and staying in that good job. Families are being pulled out of poverty, no longer having to rely on assistance programs.

And it got me asking, why aren't we doing this here, in Norwalk and Warren County? Working families in Norwalk should not have to rely on the Food Pantry to feed their families.

That's what James is calling us to this morning, to pay attention to how people in our community are suffering. To not just offer blessings and prayer, but to work alongside of them to help pull families out of poverty. And the history of Labor Day reminds us that people of faith have done this before.

I hope you'll be here next Sunday to hear more from our guest preacher Liz Hall, and begin dreaming with me how we might better fight for families here in Norwalk and Warren County.

May God bless us as we put our faith to work. Amen.