



The Central Pulpit

CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Labor Day

James 2:1-17

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Growing up in New Jersey, Labor Day weekend was the time for back-to-school shopping, the time to buy new pencils and new books, perhaps even a new backpack. It was the time for new clothes and new hopes for a good school year. Down here in the south, where students have been back to school for a month already, Labor Day is the last real family vacation time until Christmas. So it is throughout this nation. From sea to shining sea, barbeque grills are fired up one more time in celebration of “the last weekend of summer,” never mind the equinox. Even Atlanta seems to celebrate Labor Day as a high holy weekend. While most of Central Presbyterian Church slips away for a church retreat at Montreat, Metro Atlanta bursts at the seams with college football, DragonCon, Black Gay Pride, Drive Invasion, the Decatur Book Festival and a host of other celebrations.

Overwhelmed as we are by parades and sales at the mall, bites of barbeque and the last of the sweet corn, rarely do we stop to remember why we celebrate Labor Day at all. We take, the five-day work week and the eight-hour day as an inalienable right, even if we work longer than that ourselves. We of the privileged class rarely remember those who died in American sweatshops, like the women of the Triangle Shirt factory of New York City; nor do we consider those who toil right now in sweatshops, nationally and internationally. Every year, Labor Day calls to us, pleading with us to remember who fought against unfair labor laws and practices so that we would not have to do so. Every year Labor Day challenges us to rededicate ourselves, to struggle alongside those laboring under unjust practices until all earn fair wages for an honest day’s work. But even on *this* Labor Day, in the worst recession of our generation, we are too easily distracted by flash and festival. We forget so easily the gift that we have been given, the cost of that gift in struggle, even in lives, and our responsibility to take care of that gift so that we never have to fight those fights again. When we smell the grill warming up, it is just too easy to ignore the whisper in the suddenly cooler winds portending autumn and winter: Don’t you remember? It’s Labor Day.

The author of the epistle of James knows something human short-sightedness, about human amnesia born out of distraction. Scholars argue whether his is a community contemporary with Paul of Tarsus, or one much later in the history of the Christian Church. However, indisputably, James’ community, like ours, is living with distraction, distraction by flash and distraction by festival.

For James’ community, it would have been easy to be distracted by flash. At that time, the rich made up fewer than five percent of the population. Everyone was poor, to some extent, living from week to week, if not day-to-day. It was no accident that one of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer was for daily bread; for most people of that era, *daily bread* was not assured. Imagine, then, the stir that would have gone around the little Christian community if a man, with gold-ringed fingers and shining, luxurious

clothes entered the worship space, a space that was most certainly someone's home. Can you just hear the whispering? "Do you *know* who that *is*? Can you *believe* he has come to worship with *us*? God must really love *him* to have blessed him with so much money." Of *course* the host would bend over backwards to offer him the best seat, the choicest spot in the gathering, the best view of what was going on. And if, on the same day, one of the millions of the destitute poor made it to worship, certainly she would be *allowed* to stay, but who would *inconvenience* themselves to find *her* a space to sit or make sure that *she* felt welcome? Indeed, who would even notice that she was there, distracted as they were with the presence of a gold-fingered, lavishly dressed rich man.

Like a cold breeze on a warm Labor Day, James shakes his community out of its distraction by flash and wealth. Don't you remember, says James? These rich people that you are fawning over today are the same rich people that are taking you to court tomorrow? Don't you remember that they are oppressing you right now? Don't you remember that you are called to live differently, by the royal law to love your all your neighbors as yourself, not just the rich ones but also the destitute ones that you want to ignore? Don't you remember the struggle, what it cost for us to be able to gather together? Beloved sisters and brothers, don't be distracted. It's Labor Day.

Sisters and brothers, I confess that it is easy to get distracted in a city like Atlanta. The flash of downtown, the gold of Buckhead, the lavish clothes of exclusive boutiques, the wealth of the southeast of the United States can stop you at every turn, spinning on the rims of the hip-hop elite, sewn into the tastefully underdone but lavish designer wear of old money. At Central, there is the added distraction of renown. You can't throw a ball in this sanctuary on most Sundays without hitting someone renowned in academics, ministry, psychology, law, finance, government, the arts or health care. With so many distractions, is it any wonder that many of us don't know the names of many of the destitute that worship with us and eat with us every Sunday? Is it any wonder that, if we are honest, some of us avoid even wishing a good morning to the poor just outside of our door as we pass them hurrying to our cars on our way out of downtown, never mind helping them in the Outreach Center, staying overnight with them in the Night Shelter that will open a few weeks from now, or welcoming them into worship as Carolyn Clarke used to do, by calling them sister and brother? Do we hear James challenging us over the centuries, like a suddenly cool breeze at an end of summer barbeque: Sisters, brothers, beloved ones, don't be distracted. Remember the cost. Remember the struggle. It's Labor Day!

If James' community was distracted by flash, it was also distracted by festival, the festival of the weekly gathering of the church. It is a time for wishing each other well, for friendliness and laughter. In such a community which was no doubt illicit, just *gathering*, just *seeing* one another's face, just being able to *worship* together added to the festival. But it seems that, for James's community, the festival of worship was the point. So, at the end of the festival of worship, they wished each other well and went home, high, happy, and utterly oblivious to the needs of the community. James' community was distracted by festival, so distracted that they failed to see their sisters' and brothers' basic needs for food and clothing. They were so caught up were in wishing shalom upon each other, a wish for well-being, that they were too distracted to see the need right in front of their faces.

Sisters and brothers, I confess that this is an easy season of the year in which to get distracted. With all the festal busyness of a new academic year, of new engagements and weddings to plan, and a new season of church life leading into festival seasons of the winter, it is easy to get distracted and to miss the needs right in front of our face. We can wish good luck to a new self-employed brother or sister, and never consider the impact of our silence or inaction on health care on her ability to care for herself or her employees. We can wish fellow worshippers a good week, never knowing if they'll be sleeping inside or outside this week, or whether they need our help to get to a safe place so they can stay drug-free one more day. We value privacy—our own and that of our sisters and brothers—so much that we pretend not to notice the black eye that seems to keep reappearing, or the unexplained weight loss. We pass the peace, wave good bye, and talk amongst ourselves in the car on the way home, waving off our concerns quickly

because it was another wonderful day at Central. Do we hear, insistent as the first bright red leaf on the maple tree, the admonition of James calling to us over the ages: beloved in Christ do not be distracted. Remember the cost. Remember the struggle. It's Labor Day.

James refuses to relent because the distraction is dangerous, indeed deadly, to our life of faith. Here is where so many misunderstand James' urgent appeal. James is not calling us to earn our salvation, as though by our own merits we could upend the human propensity for being inhumane, that self-centered, easily distracted state that John Calvin once called "total depravity." Rather, James is calling us to keep our faith alive, to live out our faith lest it die from paralysis. To keep our faith alive, we cannot be distracted by flash *or* festival. To keep our faith alive, we must remember the cost, the struggle, all of what brings us to *this* Labor Day.

For, siblings in Christ, every Lord's Day, every Sunday, is Labor Day in the Christian church. It is on the Lord's Day that we remember the LABOR that brought us to this place. Today and every Lord's Day, we remember the labor of a Jewish man, human just as we are, unjustly tried, beaten, and nailed naked and screaming out to a Roman cross under a Palestinian sky. Today and every Lord's Day, we remember how he labored for the destitute that we never see, healed the sick for whom we cannot seem to afford health care, ate with outcasts that we refuse to acknowledge, and stood against the cooptation of the rich, even the leaders of the people of faith like me and you, by the occupying forces of Rome. Today and every Lord's Day, we remember that the one who created heaven and earth, who became incarnate and yet remained God, labored reversing creation itself for the resurrection of that one man that we might all be freed from the power of death to the promise of eternal life. Today, and every Lord's day, we remember that man as our Sovereign, Savior and Messiah, and give thanks for the blessings that we receive freely and undeservedly from his labor: faith, salvation, eternal life through these waters of baptism.

We are beneficiaries of *this* cost. We are beneficiaries of *this* struggle. Indeed, it is Labor Day. But, we stand in *danger*. We stand in *danger* of turning our weekly commemoration of Labor Day into nothing more than a gathering of friends to sing songs we like and hear a decent message preached. We stand in *danger* of turning our weekly commemoration of Labor Day into nothing more than a place to network among people we know and respect. We stand in *danger* of turning our weekly commemoration of Labor Day into nothing more significant or life-changing than our annual, national celebration of Labor Day—a day that has no impact on how we live our lives, spend our money or speak truth to power; a day good only for sharing a meal with friends.

Friends, this table is far more than a meal with friends. As the Passover feast, it was a commemoration of God's labor to set a people free. As the supper of our Lord, it is the commemoration of God's labor to set ALL people free, and God's passionate love for the ENTIRE world. As part of our weekly commemoration of Labor Day, it is a call to action, to a faith marked by labor not stagnation. For here, as we break bread and remember, we hear again the words of the royal law: love your neighbors as yourself. Here, as we bless the cup and remember, we hear again our Lord's admonition: whatever you do to those you *think* are the least of these, you do it to me. Here as we take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we share in the call to live as though Christ's labor makes a difference in how we live our lives, how we spend our money, and how we speak truth to power. We share in a call to labor so that our freely given faith may not be seen as dead.

In memory of God's great labor, raising Christ from the dead and exalting him above every name, let us come to the table. In honor of Christ who labored among us as Joshua, son of Joseph the carpenter, who walked and ate with the poor and outcast, let us hear once again the call to stand up for all who labor and are heavy laden, to whom Christ offers rest. Empowered by that same Holy Spirit that labored over chaos and that inspired us through the waters of our baptism, let us rededicate ourselves this Labor Day to a living faith. For our brother James calls to us still. Remember the cost. Remember the struggle. It's Labor Day.

