

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20
September 4, '11

"THE WEEK IN FAITH"

LABOR DAY.

IT'S A STRANGE HOLIDAY, ISN'T IT?

NAME ANY OTHER HOLIDAY AND THERE IS SOMETHING ASSOCIATED WITH IT.

THE MAIN RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS – EASTER & CHRISTMAS – CONJURE UP SO MANY THOUGHTS THAT IT WOULD BE NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO NAME THEM ALL.

FOR MOST OTHER HOLIDAYS, THERE ARE A FEW THINGS THAT AUTOMATICALLY COME TO MIND.

MEMORIAL DAY MAKES US THINK OF PICNICS & THE INDIANAPOLIS 500.

INDEPENDENCE DAY IS THE DAY FOR FIREWORKS – AND PROBABLY MORE PICNICS.

THANKSGIVING MAKES US THINK OF TURKEY & FOOTBALL.

BUT LABOR DAY IS AN ODD ONE.

PARADOXICALLY, THE ONLY THING THAT SEPARATES IT FROM ANY OTHER DAY IS THAT WE DON'T DO THE THING FOR WHICH IT IS NAMED – LABOR!

MORE THAN LIKELY, NO ONE WILL WISH YOU "HAPPY LABOR DAY" TOMORROW & I'M PRETTY SURE YOU DIDN'T PUT UP ANY LABOR DAY DECORATIONS AT YOUR HOUSE.

EVEN HALLMARK & THE FLORISTS HAVEN'T FIGURED OUT A WAY TO CAPITALIZE ON LABOR DAY BECAUSE I'M SURE YOU DIDN'T SEND OR RECEIVE ANY LABOR DAY CARDS OR FLOWERS.

ITS HISTORY IN THIS COUNTRY EXTENDS BACK TO 1894, DURING A TIME OF GREAT STRIFE BETWEEN LABOR UNIONS & BUSINESS.

IN THE CHURCH, LABOR DAY CAN SERVE AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CELEBRATE THE WORTH OF WORK & THE VALUE OF WHAT TAKES PLACE DURING "THE WEEK IN FAITH."

IT'S REALLY WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN THE TIME YOU WALK OUT OF HERE ON SUNDAY MORNING & THE TIME YOU RETURN NEXT WEEK THAT YOUR FAITH IS PUT INTO ACTION.

AND, FOR MANY OF YOU, SO MUCH OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IS SPENT IN WORK, IN LABOR, IN TOIL, IN YOUR CAREER, YOUR PROFESSION.

WILLIAM FAULKNER WROTE ABOUT THIS, SAYING, "*YOU CAN'T EAT FOR EIGHT HOURS A DAY NOR DRINK FOR EIGHT HOURS A DAY – ALL YOU CAN DO FOR EIGHT HOURS IS WORK.*"

THE WORK WE DO IS VITALLY IMPORTANT TO WHO WE ARE AS PEOPLE OF FAITH.

THE BIBLE IS FILLED WITH PASSAGES THAT PRAISE THE VALUE OF WORK.

LISTEN TO THIS MORNING'S SCRIPTURE READING AS EUGENE PETERSON TRANSLATES IT IN "THE MESSAGE" –

"AFTER LOOKING AT THE WAY THINGS ARE ON THIS EARTH, HERE'S WHAT I'VE DECIDED IS THE BEST WAY TO LIVE: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, HAVE A GOOD TIME, AND MAKE THE MOST OF WHATEVER JOB YOU HAVE FOR AS LONG AS GOD GIVES YOU LIFE. AND THAT'S ABOUT IT. THAT'S THE HUMAN LOT. YES, WE SHOULD MAKE THE MOST OF

WHAT GOD GIVES, BOTH THE BOUNTY AND THE CAPACITY TO ENJOY IT, ACCEPTING WHAT'S GIVEN AND DELIGHTING IN THE WORK. IT'S GOD'S GIFT!"

"...DELIGHTING IN THE WORK THAT IS GOD'S GIFT."

WORK IS A PART OF LIFE AND, THEREFORE, A PART OF FAITH.

WHAT YOU DO FROM MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY IS OF TREMENDOUS IMPORTANCE.

IN ACTUALITY, WORK IS ONE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW THAT.

I MUST CONFESS THAT I DIDN'T EITHER, UNTIL IT WAS JUST RECENTLY POINTED OUT TO ME.

IN THE EXODUS 20 VERSION OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, WE READ, "REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY, AND KEEP IT HOLY."

THAT PART OF THE COMMANDMENT WE KNOW.

BUT THERE'S MORE TO IT.

THERE'S A SIGNIFICANT SECOND PART OF THAT COMMANDMENT.

IT READS, "SIX DAYS YOU SHALL LABOR & DO ALL YOUR WORK."

WHAT YOU DO FROM MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY IS OF TREMENDOUS IMPORTANCE AND NO MATTER WHAT LINE OF WORK YOU'RE IN, IT'S A VITAL WAY OF LIVING OUT YOUR FAITH.

WHATEVER YOU DO CAN BE DONE TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

WHATEVER YOU DO CAN BE AN EXPRESSION OF CHRISTIAN LOVE.

WHATEVER YOU DO CAN BE SEEN BY OTHERS AS A VALUABLE WITNESS FOR JESUS CHRIST.

MOST OF YOU ARE PROBABLY FAMILIAR WITH THE NAME BROTHER LAWRENCE.

YOU MAY NOT BE AWARE OF HIS STORY, THOUGH.

BROTHER LAWRENCE WAS A MONK WHO LIVED IN 17TH CENTURY FRANCE.

HE SERVED AS A COOK AT HIS MONASTERY – ONE OF THE LOWLIEST POSITIONS ONE COULD HOLD.

BUT BECAUSE OF HIS DEDICATION TO HIS WORK, BROTHER LAWRENCE HAS BECOME A MODEL OF WHAT IT MEANS TO DO EVERYTHING TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

HE SAID, "IT ISN'T NEEDFUL THAT WE SHOULD HAVE GREAT THINGS TO DO...WE CAN DO LITTLE THINGS FOR GOD. I TURN THE CAKE THAT IS FRYING ON THE PAN FOR LOVE OF HIM...IT IS ENOUGH FOR ME TO PICK UP BUT A STRAW FROM THE GROUND FOR THE LOVE OF GOD."

WHATEVER IT IS THAT YOU DO IN "THE WEEK OF FAITH," IT CAN BE DONE TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

THE GREAT WRITER DOROTHY SAYERS EXPLAINED IT WELL WHEN SHE SAID, "THE FIRST DEMAND THE CHURCH SHOULD MAKE OF A CARPENTER IS NOT THAT HE GO TO CHURCH ON SUNDAY, NOR THAT HE NOT GET DRUNK ON HIS DAY OFF, BUT RATHER THAT HE MAKE GOOD TABLES."

WHAT KIND OF TABLES ARE YOU MAKING FROM MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY?

WHEN SOMEONE LOOKS AT YOUR WORK DO THEY SEE YOU DOING YOUR VERY BEST TO THE GLORY OF GOD?

DO THEY SEE YOU AS A WORTHY WITNESS FOR JESUS CHRIST?

THERE WAS AN ATTORNEY WHO WAS ACTIVE IN HIS CHURCH.

SEVERAL CASES CAME TO HIS LAW FIRM THAT INVOLVED GAMBLING, STRIP CLUBS & CASINOS.

HE SEEMED TO BE ASSIGNED TO ALL OF THEM.

WHEN HE ASKED WHAT WAS GOING ON, ONE OF THE SENIOR PARTNERS SAID, *“YOU KNOW, THERE’S A LOT OF SHADY TRANSACTIONS & HUGE TEMPTATIONS WHEN YOU DEAL IN THIS ARENA. BRIBE MONEY FLOWS FREELY. WE KNOW THAT YOU’RE INCORRUPTIBLE, SO YOU’RE THE ONE WE TRUST WITH THESE CASES.”*

THAT ATTORNEY IS BUILDING SOME MIGHTY GOOD TABLES.

I DON’T KNOW IF YOU ARE AWARE OF THIS, BUT EXACTLY ONE YEAR AGO – ON THIS DAY – LABOR DAY SUNDAY – I HAD TO DO SOMETHING THAT WAS AS DIFFICULT AS ANYTHING I HAVE EVER DONE IN MY MINISTRY.

I HAD TO ANNOUNCE THE DEATH OF DON HARRIS EARLIER THAT MORNING.

I TOLD SOMEONE THIS WEEK THAT LITERALLY A DAY HASN’T GONE BY WHEN I HAVEN’T THOUGHT OF DON.

I THINK IT’S A GOOD DAY TO BE TALKING ABOUT “THE WEEK IN FAITH” BECAUSE DON HARRIS PERSONIFIED WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE THE CHRISTIAN FAITH OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF THE CHURCH.

HE TOOK HIS FAITH TO WORK WITH HIM EVERY DAY.

HE TOOK IT WITH HIM INTO HIS HOME & HE TOOK IT WITH HIM INTO THE COMMUNITY.

HE DIDN’T GET SIDETRACKED BY POLITICS OR HIJACKED BY THEOLOGY.

HE DIDN’T OBSESS OVER POWER & WEALTH WAS SIMPLY A BLESSING TO BE USED TO BLESS OTHERS.

WHAT HE DID, HE DID TO THE BEST OF HIS ABILITY & TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

WHEN WE GIVE OUR BEST IN WHAT WE DO, WE NEVER KNOW WHAT THE OUTCOME WILL BE OR WHAT IMPACT IT MIGHT HAVE ON SOMEONE ELSE.

I READ A FASCINATING STORY RECENTLY ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF A YOUNG MAN IN WORLD WAR II.

IN HIS OWN WORDS, THIS IS A TRUE STORY TOLD BY A MAN NAMED ELGIN STAPLES.

“IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1942. I WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD AND A SIGNALMAN 3RD CLASS ON THE USS ASTORIA STATIONED IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC.

ONE HOT NIGHT IN AUGUST, WE FOUND OURSELVES SKIRMISHING WITH THE JAPANESE FOR CONTROL OF GUADALCANAL, GEARING UP FOR THE BLOODY BATTLE THAT SOON FOLLOWED.

I WAS MAKING MY WAY TOWARDS A GUN TURRET, WHEN SUDDENLY THE DECK DISAPPEARED. MY LEGS WINDMILLED BENEATH ME AS I REALIZED THAT AN EXPLOSION HAD BLASTED ME OFF THE DECK. MY SHOCK WAS IMMEDIATELY REPLACED BY A STOMACH-CLENCHING FEAR AS I FELL LIKE A STONE - 30 FEET INTO THE DARK, SHARK-INFESTED WATER BELOW.

I IMMEDIATELY INFLATED MY LIFE BELT, WEAK WITH RELIEF THAT I’D SOMEHOW REMEMBERED TO PUT IT ON.

FOUR AGONIZING HOURS PASSED THIS WAY. IT WAS GETTING LIGHT WHEN I SAW A SHIP - AN AMERICAN DESTROYER - APPROACHING. THE SAILORS ON BOARD THREW ME A LINE AND HAULED ME ABOARD.

BACK ONBOARD THE ASTORIA, IT BECAME CLEAR OUR VESSEL WAS DAMAGED BEYOND HELP.

THE SHIP WAS TAKING ON WATER AND FINALLY, AROUND 1200 HOURS, THE ASTORIA BEGAN TO ROLL AND GO UNDER.

THE LAST THING I WANTED TO DO WAS TO GO INTO THAT WATER AGAIN, BUT I KNEW I HAD TO. FILLED WITH DREAD, I JUMPED OFF THE HIGH SIDE OF THE SINKING SHIP AND BEGAN SWIMMING. ALTHOUGH I STILL HAD MY LIFE BELT ON, IT COULDN'T BE INFLATED A SECOND TIME. LUCKILY, I WAS SOON PICKED UP BY ANOTHER DESTROYER AND TRANSFERRED TO THE USS JACKSON.

THE ONE THING I FOUND I DIDN'T WANT TO GIVE UP WAS MY LIFE BELT. I HUNG ONTO THE KHAAKI CLOTH-COVERED RUBBER BELT, STUDYING IT SOMETIMES AS I SAT AROUND ON THE MARINE SHIP.

THE LABEL ON THE BELT SAID IT HAD BEEN MANUFACTURED BY FIRESTONE TIRE AND RUBBER COMPANY OF AKRON, OHIO, WHICH WAS MY HOMETOWN.

I DECIDED TO KEEP THE BELT AS A SOUVENIR, A REMINDER OF HOW LUCKY I'D BEEN.

WHEN I FINALLY TOOK MY 30-DAY LEAVE, I WENT HOME TO MY FAMILY IN OHIO. AFTER A QUIETLY EMOTIONAL WELCOME, I SAT WITH MY MOTHER IN OUR KITCHEN, TELLING HER ABOUT MY RECENT ORDEAL AND HEARING WHAT HAD HAPPENED AT HOME SINCE I HAD GONE AWAY.

MY MOTHER INFORMED ME THAT 'TO DO HER PART,' SHE HAD GOTTEN A WARTIME JOB AT THE FIRESTONE PLANT. SURPRISED, I JUMPED UP AND GRABBING MY LIFE BELT FROM MY DUFFEL BAG, PUT IT ON THE TABLE IN FRONT OF HER.

'TAKE A LOOK AT THAT, MOM,' I SAID, 'IT WAS MADE RIGHT HERE IN AKRON, AT YOUR PLANT.'

SHE LEANED FORWARD AND TAKING THE RUBBER BELT IN HER HANDS, SHE READ THE LABEL.

SHE HAD JUST HEARD THE STORY AND KNEW THAT IN THE DARKNESS OF THAT TERRIBLE NIGHT, IT WAS THIS ONE PIECE OF RUBBER THAT HAD SAVED MY LIFE.

WHEN SHE LOOKED UP AT ME, HER MOUTH AND HER EYES WERE OPEN WIDE WITH SURPRISE. 'SON, I'M AN INSPECTOR AT FIRESTONE. THIS IS MY INSPECTOR NUMBER,' SHE SAID, HER VOICE HARDLY ABOVE A WHISPER.

WE HUGGED EACH OTHER FOR A LONG, LONG TIME, FEELING THE BOND BETWEEN US. MY MOTHER HAD PUT HER ARMS HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD TO SAVE ME.'

MORE THAN LIKELY, THE IMPACT OF WHAT YOU DO IN "THE WEEK OF FAITH" WON'T BE THAT DRAMATIC.

BUT IT'S STILL VITALLY IMPORTANT.

WHATEVER IT IS THAT YOU DO FROM MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY, DO IT ALL TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

AMEN.

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