

FAITH AND LABORS

More than a thousand years ago, a Chinese Zen master wrote a simple poem:

Magical power,
Marvelous action!
Chopping wood,
Carrying water.

With typical Zen economy of words, it celebrates the wonder and grace of work, beginning with the simplest and the most fundamental tasks that one can perform--the cutting of wood, the carrying of water.

There is significance to our work that we may overlook. While admittedly the stuff of myriad responsibility and varied daily routine, work relates us to our spiritual roots. There is more than goes on in taking our trash to the curb or mowing our lawns or running the vacuum cleaner than simply moving waste, cutting grass, or sucking up dust and crumbs. While such things are of practical value, of course, there is something of symbolical significance which is accomplished when such mundane things are mindfully attended to.

It is a short step from the poetry of the Zen master to the theology of James. In this morning's reading, he asks, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? . . . Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2.14,17).

Apt words for an occasion such as the Sunday just before "Labor Day," don't you think?

For Christians, trusting in God and accepting the right precepts are, to be sure, important matters. However, mere trust and belief are regarded as insufficient or incomplete if there are no actions, no specific behaviors, backing them up. Anyone at all can "talk the talk," as they say.

For all of Spirit's unsubstantial and wispy nature, God, it seems, is a very concrete thinker. Where this faith-stuff is concerned, God is assured that we really do "get it" when there is the evidence of our loftiest thoughts and noblest feelings being enfolded in the world, in a grand variety of real and practical ways.

In other words, if there are no real life fruits emerging from one's spiritual life, then there is to be some suspicion about the vitality or the credibility of that spirituality. If there are no works following naturally from our touted faith, then as far as God can see, we don't "get it" at all.

"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food," declares James, "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?" (2.15-16). Powerful words, especially with all the images burned into our awareness over recent days of hurricane Harvey's legacy in Southeast Texas and all along the Gulf Coast. If we are the people of God, then we are a people, not just of sympathy here, but of some measure of active response.

James argues, "Religion that is undefiled and pure before God . . . is this: To care for orphans and widows in their distress . . ." (1.27). It sounds more than a little like the prophet Micah, who declares: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6.8). It's all very down-to-earth, very practical, very concrete.

There is a positively unavoidable correlation between our faith and our labors. It's about, well, chopping wood

and carrying water, “walking the walk.”

The story is told of a man who dies and finds himself in a beautiful place, surrounded by every conceivable comfort.

A white-jacketed servant-type comes to him and says, “You may have anything you choose--any food, any pleasure, any kind of entertainment.”

Needless to say, the recently-departed fellow is absolutely delighted, and for days he samples all the delicacies and experiences of which, on earth, he had only dreamed.

But one day he begins to grow restless and bored with all this self-indulgence. He calls his attendant to him and reports, “I’m tired of all this. I need something to do. What kind of meaningful work can you give me?”

“Oh, I apologize, sir,” the servant says, sadly shaking his head. “That’s the one thing we cannot give you here. There is no work for you.”

“That’s a fine thing!” blurts the man. “I might as well be in hell!”

Says the attendant: “I’m very sorry, sir, but where do you think you are?”

There is no life of meaning, there is no life of value, without work, without our works. And the work that we do, the works that we perform, are not just about fulfilling some abstract commandment, not even about releasing some additional goodness into the world, although our deeds certainly accomplish that.

For all their benefits, ultimately our labors are about, not just changing the world, but also changing for the better the one doing the good.

It’s just chopping wood, carrying water—and it’s much more than merely that.

So, tell me: What are you, so to speak, good for?

Where is your faith genuinely to be seen in concrete form?